

## **NEW FOREST NOTES SEPTEMBER 2002**

### **Opening up the Forest's private heaths**

This week the Countryside Agency is publishing its draft maps of those parts of the New Forest and its surroundings which are to be subjected to the right to roam. In the Forest itself there are likely to be few surprises. Almost all the heathland is common land and already subject to a de facto privilege of access, either by permission of the Crown or through the National Trust. A few privately owned commons remain such as that at Minstead, but these have always been open to public recreation without hindrance, so there will be no change there. In fact I can think of only two significant areas within the perambulation which the plans are likely to classify as "new" access land. The Forestry Commission's woodland is likely to be dedicated for access despite being outside the compulsion of the CROW Act. Altogether, the walker within the New Forest will notice little difference.

In the villages immediately surrounding the perambulation, things are likely to be rather different. Landowners of heathland, whether subject to common rights or not, will be compelled to permit access. How much land is opened up will therefore depend upon the Countryside Agency's interpretation of what actually constitutes heath. Several large blocks of land from Copythorne through to Redlynch are likely to be the beneficiaries, or victims, (depending upon one's point of view) of the right to roam. However, the most substantial imposition of access will probably be adjoining the Forest's south west corner in the vicinity of Bisterne Common and in the south around Roydon and Setley.

As a keen walker myself, I am greatly looking forward to exploring these formerly quiet and closed areas of land. Even where they comprise isolated pockets deep within a private estate and with no footpath access, the Countryside Agency will be able to force the affected farmers to provide access routes so that roaming can take place. All this will be thoroughly welcomed by rambling groups and access rights campaigners, but it is difficult not to feel sympathy for the farmers and landowners concerned. Not only has their land been subjected to public access with the consequent (uncompensated) loss in value – and that will be substantial in an area such as the New Forest – but they will now see their property subjected to the rain of bottles, cans and plastic and the widespread disturbance which is inseparable from public access. Anyone with a public footpath across his land will know that only too well. Quiet responsible walkers will be no trouble at all but they, unfortunately, are not the only people who will seek to exploit these secret places.

The opening up of heathland raises another interesting question which I think has yet to be resolved. For some years past, the government has been providing grants for the restoration of former heathland which had been reclaimed for agriculture. For example, a farmer at Studland told me that the government had paid his father to plough up the heath to produce agricultural land in the 1950s and that he was now being paid by the government to destroy that same agricultural land and turn it back into heath ! Those who have thus taken the government's shilling with a view to promoting conservation may now find their property

subject to the right to roam because it falls within the scope of the CROW Act. If they do (and that assumes that there is no special exemption), I imagine that this aspect of the Stewardship Grants scheme will fall to pieces immediately, at least in high property priced areas such as Southern England. Similar problems will arise over grants to restore natural downland grass, because that is another category of land to be opened up to rambling. I don't know if New Forest landowners have "restored" heathland in this way, but the practice is widespread in Dorset and affected farmers are now likely to be extremely bitter about anything to do with Stewardship and the Countryside Agency.

### **Agister's accident**

Anyone who works with livestock knows that it can be unpredictable and sometimes dangerous. The men who oversee the ponies and cattle of the New Forest (the agisters) have more reason than most to be aware of this. New Forest ponies, in their unbroken state, resent being handled and are quite prepared to express their displeasure by kicking and trampling when being manipulated in pounds during a drift (round-up). Even more uncertain is the process of catching them in the first place. This involves galloping across the Open Forest in pursuit of a quarry determined to escape. It is remarkable that so few serious injuries have resulted over the years, but last month agister Andrew Naphthine's luck ran out. On one of the first drifts of the current season he had a bad fall and, while his injuries are not life-threatening, he will be in hospital for many weeks and, presumably, subject to a long period of recuperation thereafter. For the average office worker this would be frustrating, but for someone whose whole life is outdoors working with animals it must be exceptionally difficult to bear.

Apart from the distressing personal aspects of the accident, the temporary loss of one agister will put great pressure on the remaining members of the team at one of the busiest times of the year. Whether it will be possible to continue with the full programme of drifts remains to be seen.

### **The dying hollies**

An unexplained and disturbing blight seems to be affecting one of the Forest's most notable landscape features – its old holly clumps. These clumps which are locally called "holms" are not the most spectacular of the Forest's woods, but many of them are very ancient and have their own names – Shirley Holms, Slaughter Hollies, Thorney Hill Holms and so on. The problem is that all across the Forest these clumps are showing signs of dying, usually with the upper branches becoming denuded of leaves as a first symptom. This sort of damage often affects holly in very severe winters when it is blasted by an icy dry wind for weeks on end, but it has been many years since we last experienced such conditions. I have asked Forestry Commission officers if they have any explanation of the phenomenon, but as yet it seems that no firm conclusions have been reached. Extreme old age is one possibility, but some form of fungal attack may be responsible in places. The latter explanation seems particularly likely in cases such as Cockley Bushes near Godshill where

the devastation is particularly widespread and other trees in the wood (such as yew) seem also to have been affected. The loss of such old named clumps is particularly sad.

Fortunately the picture is not universally bleak. There is widespread evidence that pollarding helps to rejuvenate at least some of the affected trees. Pollarding is the process by which the top of the tree and most of the branches are cut off by Forestry Commission staff during the winter month – partly for conservation reasons and partly to provide additional feed for the ponies. The initial result is, admittedly, extremely ugly, but the trees benefit in the longer term. An excellent example of such successful work is in the landscape clump called Seven Holms above Broomy Bottom near Linwood. This clump was in an advanced state of deterioration, but following pollarding many of the trees seem to have recovered and put out a healthy crop of fresh green branches and leaves. The pollarding process has evidently killed one or two, but such losses have to be accepted.

Apart from the beneficial effects of pollarding, there are also new holly woods developing on the heath in various parts of the Forest. One of the most interesting is west of Dark Hat near Fritham where remarkable natural topiary resulting from pony-browsing can be seen, including numerous holly pyramids. Although some woods may disappear altogether, the future of holly on the Open Forest seems assured – global warming permitting.

### **Weakening protection of the national parks**

In July the government published a weighty volume setting out its proposals for the future of national parks and that, of course, would include the New Forest if the Countryside Agency gets its way in due course. Some of us have only recently finished wading through this rather complicated and jargon-filled document and its conclusions are far from reassuring. As usual, the crunch points arise in respect of recreation and its inevitable conflicts with the protection of beautiful and quiet environments. Those who favour the making of the New Forest into a national park have emphasized the so-called “Sandford Principle” which intends that, in governing the parks, recreation will take second place to conservation. In practice there are many examples of this principle being ignored by management, but the theory was supposed to give some crumb of comfort. Now the Sandford Principle is coming under subtle but determined attack. While declaring that its intentions are fully consistent with the principle, the government wants policies developed which are “appropriate for modern-day recreation” and “a pro-active approach to less traditional forms of recreation could re-kindle interest in the Parks among young people, women, minorities and urban constituencies – without eroding Parks’ special qualities”. In other words, a politically correct degradation of the parks’ qualities is intended, masked by a few green words. The exact nature of modern-day recreation is not spelled out, but presumably includes such delights as bungee jumping, motor-cycle scrambling and pop concerts. As to the supposed disillusionment with the parks among the listed disadvantaged minorities, that is plainly nonsense in so far as it relates to the New Forest. Visit any honeypot site on a Sunday afternoon and you will see it filled with young families – paddling in the river at Balmer Lawn or enjoying ice cream at Bolderwood or Bolton’s Bench. Women appear to comprise an appropriate proportion of the visitors to the

New Forest and weekend traffic flows (and jams) adequately demonstrate the urban origin of many visitors. As to ethnic minorities, I cannot say that I have particularly studied their numbers, but I am certainly not aware of any shortfall over their representation in the general population.

It never seems to occur to the writers of such reports as this that many of its target groups of “disadvantaged” people may actually prefer to enjoy their recreation in an urban environment, rather than being dragged into a countryside moulded and distorted to meet their supposed needs.

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