

NEW FOREST NOTES SEPTEMBER 2003

The vanishing reseeded areas

Military encroachments on the New Forest during the Second World War were immense, totalling a reputed eight thousand seven hundred acres, but most of them have since melted back into the Open Forest following fairly minimal restoration. Only Beaulieu Aerodrome, where the standard of work was exceptionally poor, remains as a very permanent scar. Less extensive than these military works were the improved grazing areas (otherwise known as the reseeded areas) which were made at various times between 1940 and 1947 with a few additions in the early 1950s. In total they probably amounted to less than two thousand acres. They involved no buildings, concrete or tarmac, but they proved to have a far more lasting effect on the landscape of the Forest than the most determined efforts of the military. Some of these areas, chiefly those made in 1941 without any enclosure, quickly reverted to Open Forest vegetation, but the thousand acres cultivated between 1944 and 1947 were very different. They were enclosed against grazing stock and most of them were used to take crops for several years before being sown to grass and eventually thrown open. Such vast areas of pasture were to dominate the Forest's landscape for more than half a century. Accepted wisdom was that they were maintained by a constant inward drain of nutrients from dung, because the sweeter grasses they contained acted as magnets for the ponies and cattle which accordingly spent a disproportionate amount of time grazing upon them.

Six years ago, Colin Tubbs described the reseeded areas in his book "The New Forest" and drew attention to the rich diversity of plants which they then contained and perhaps still do contain. He describes how the original commercial grasses were superseded by natural species. By that time it seems that the reseeded areas were beloved of almost everyone except those concerned with restoring the Forest's landscape. They were favourite haunts of the visitor, often affording a safe area where the children could be turned loose to play under observation from the comfort of the family car. They provided higher quality grazing than the heaths and their rich flora was appreciated by the naturalists. They had become an accepted and apparently stable element of the Forest, but in the last few years a rapid and remarkable change has become apparent. In many parts of the Forest, a reversion to the original heather is gaining momentum, blurring the original hard edges of the grasslands and in some cases threatening to obliterate the pasture altogether. Since Colin Tubbs goes into great detail of the composition of the reseeded areas in the 1980s, but never once mentions heather, this dramatic change is clearly a very recent event.

A few weeks ago I looked at many of the reseeded areas across the south and central parts of the Forest and the picture is the same almost everywhere, differing only in the degree of heather colonisation. At Burley Rocks (otherwise Spy Holms) which only a few years ago was close-cropped unbroken grassland, the area is well on the way to total reversion to heather. Parts of Longslade and most of Yewtree Bottom are not far behind.

Only in the very heavily trampled and dog soiled areas close to car parks is there less evidence of heather colonisation. This is well demonstrated at Whitefield Moor where the grass remains little altered on the Aldridge Hill side of the road near the car park, but where heather is advancing on the less heavily used portion towards the rifle ranges.

If this trend continues, and there seems no reason why it should not, there are many people alive today who may see a reversion of the Open Forest to very like its pre-war physical form, although the tranquillity of those days is gone forever. In landscape terms this must be a very welcome development, but it does present problems for the grazier. The Commoners looked upon the reseeded areas, rightly or wrongly, as some compensation for the natural lawns ruined by forestry or by conservation requirements for the retention of scrub and flooding. It now seems that nature is trying to undermine this “bargain”, to the detriment of the grazing stock. As one of my Verderer colleagues has repeatedly pointed out to the relevant committees, ponies need more than just gorse bushes to eat and the reseeded areas gave much of that essential sweet grass supplement to their diet which the natural lawns formerly provided.

Dead animal collection service

Last month, DEFRA announced that its national dead animal collection service (for which farmers will pay a subsidised annual fee) will go ahead. At face value, that announcement was very welcome, especially as the government now shows signs of bringing the hunting ban debate to a conclusion, with the inevitable end of the “fallen stock” collection service which the hunts provide to farmers at a modest cost. I have never been quite sure why we have to use this silly euphemism “fallen stock”. Animals die, just like people, and calling the remains fallen stock does not make them any the less carcasses. Anyhow, it turned out that the devil in DEFRA’s announcement was in the small print. Horses are to be excluded from the collection service and in the equine killing fields of the New Forest’s roads, that is a disaster. The Verderers, Commoners Defence and anyone else with a voice in Forest agriculture are exerting pressure on DEFRA for a reversal of this exclusion, even if only as a local exception for the Forest and similar areas where horses are regularly slaughtered in large numbers on the roads.

Strategic cycle routes

Earlier in the summer, when the Forest was occupied with haymaking and then with the New Forest Show, the local councils issued a “New Forest Strategic Cycle Routes” consultation document with the ridiculously short deadline of 1st August for comments. The Forest proceeded, quite rightly, to ignore the deadline and comment in its own time.

The plan seems to be the product of some rather narrow thinking because although it purports to be about establishing a network to encourage the use of cycles rather than cars, it seems to have no regard for the knock-on effects on the Forest of the inevitable increase in recreational cycling which it would produce. A few enthusiasts may cycle from Bournemouth to Southampton to work, but the majority of users will have recreation in the Forest in mind and will load bikes onto the back of the car to exploit the network. Moreover, its map

comprises a rather confused mess of what may be loosely described as strategic network routes, together with parts of the Forest's recreational tracks which clearly serve no communicating purpose.

The CPRE has rightly called for a complete study and rethink of the existing recreational network in the Forest before adding to it the so-called strategic routes. Such routes could simply ratchet up pressure on the Forest. It therefore opposes the map in principle at this stage. The Verderers' concerns are much the same in that they believe that the proposal could result in an "intensification of an existing recreational use to the detriment of the Forest's traditional character".

As to the detail of the map, it proposes few new off-road lengths within the Forest and those which it does seek are likely to be strongly resisted. A lot more on-road routes are, however, proposed and it is these which would feed extra pressure into the recreational network. Some of the routes indicated on the map (bridleways where there is a legal right to cycle) serve no strategic purpose whatever in that they comprise short dead-ends running up to the Forest. It is inconceivable that the authors of the map could suppose that cyclists will simply ride up to the Forest edge and then ride back again along the same line. Inevitably the bikes will simply set off across the heath.

The Verderers have submitted detailed comments on the map-illustrated routes, in addition to their more general concerns about recreational pressure. For residents of villages such as Linwood, already hard pressed by disruption from "recreational" routes through their communities, there is little comfort in the proposals. If the councils get their way, such tracks as Toms Lane will be upgraded to "strategic" status and presumably widely advertised as such.

Abusing the Forest

It seems to be a fixed rule that when some emergency arises in my part of the Forest, it is my local keeper's day off. So it happened last week when, riding in a remote part of Ashley Walk at 7.30 am, I became aware of a horrid thudding noise. Traced to its source half a mile away at Ashley Lodge fields, there was revealed a marquee with sound system installed, thirteen assorted tents, dogs, hippies, two trucks and a generous tide mark of bottles, cans and other litter. These revellers had presumably broken or bypassed the barriers and driven deep into the Forest the night before to indulge in their disgusting activities. By the time I reached a telephone (my local keeper is an obliging fellow who answers the phone even on his day off) three earlier complaints had already been recorded. I have not been back since to see the state of the camp site. Presumably some unfortunate Forestry Commission officer will have to clean it up. I am told that these hippies later moved on to another part of the Forest.

How out of hours emergencies are dealt with by the Forestry Commission is a matter of importance in an increasingly violent and disruptive community. The abusers (ravens, arsonists, thieves or whatever) seldom strike the Forest during office hours. The Deputy Surveyor tells me that the Commission has one officer constantly on duty, to whom

emergency calls to Queen's House are passed by an answering service. In addition, of course, there should always be some of the keepers available. In the case of my problem last week, I understand that the complaints were passed to the keeper of the neighbouring beat. The system is a great improvement on a few years ago when one could try number after number at the weekend without success. The service is for emergencies only. I imagine that an enquiry about viewing deer or arranging a school walk would be politely fended off until Monday.

Anthony Pasmore