

## **NEW FOREST NOTES SEPTEMBER 2008**

### **The Horsekeepers' Revolt**

Last month I drew attention to the National Park's proposals for tighter controls on recreational horsekeeping in the New Forest. It will be remembered that these proposals require planning permission to be sought for keeping recreational horses at a density greater than one per hectare (2.47 acres). Since last month, public disquiet at the proposals has grown substantially, culminating in a very well-attended protest meeting at the East Boldre Village Hall on the 22<sup>nd</sup> August. About two hundred people turned up at three days notice, with every seat and every piece of standing room filled. Even some of the horse societies, which I had expected to be very active in the matter more than two months ago when the plan was first published, are now also beginning to take an interest.

With such a level of unhappiness pervading the Forest community, I think it rather unlikely that the National Park will press ahead with its plans. However well-intended the plans were, the proposed methods of implementation were clearly drawn up with no understanding of livestock or, indeed, of the toughness and determination of the Forest's horse owners. If the Park now wishes to salvage anything from the wreckage of its schemes, it needs to back-track very quickly and decisively.

For a start, the Park must abandon the retrospective application of any new planning controls, because that is seen by almost everyone as unfair. Regulating future conversion of agricultural land to horsekeeping is one thing: attacking those who have already bought land and horses is quite another. At the East Boldre meeting I was moved by the words of one lady whose horsekeeping was vulnerable to the Park's intentions. She has a riding horse and a retired pony to keep it company. She said that if the Park's enforcement officers shut her down, there would be no option but to have the old pony shot to bring her within the specified grazing density. That seems to me to be very hard. The Park must therefore give an amnesty to all existing occupiers of horsekeeping land as an essential first step. Monitoring that by means of aerial photography should not be too difficult a matter.

If, having accepted this initial retreat, the Park still wishes to tackle bad management of horsekeeping land (and all but the most blinkered person must admit that such cases are not uncommon), it must be done by means of carrots and not a big stick. Grants for good fencing, hedge protection, water supply, replacement of ramshackle tin buildings with good timber shelters could, over time, achieve a great deal. There are a few individuals who would never co-operate in such improvements, but no doubt most would.

These two simple concessions (no retrospective application and no compulsion) would go far towards achieving the Park's objectives without, perhaps, driving the Forest's already very distressed riders to the point of open revolt. Of course the property market would still be turned upside-down, but that is what happens when you meddle with economics.

There are a number of subsidiary issues to be resolved – like the ridiculous prohibition of hard floors in stock shelters. Without hard floors and approach aprons (if only of hoggin or limestone) even basic hygiene and animal welfare is impossible. A hard floor, of course, has absolutely no impact on the landscape. Only someone with no experience of animals could have devised such a peculiar and damaging policy. Presumably it never occurred to them that horses produce dung and urine in large amounts.

Where do we go from here ? That really depends on the Park, but I should be surprised if it tries to ram through policies so utterly repugnant to a significant section of the Forest's community. I am left wondering why it never occurred to South Efford House to ask before getting itself into such a mess. Any horse owner, commoner, Verderer, vet or reasonably intelligent student of human nature could have warned them of the consequences.

### **The Atlas Project**

New Forest common rights are recorded on 1/2500 Ordnance Survey maps bound up into sixteen huge volumes kept at the offices of the Verderers at Lyndhurst. Those maps showing rights over the Crown lands (the 1949 Atlas) were prepared in the 1950s, while the volumes dealing with the Adjacent Commons are about twenty years younger. The 1949 Atlas is based on very old sheets, mostly surveyed about a century ago, while the actual paper comprises early photocopies which are now far from clear. Moreover, half a century of constant use has left many pages dog-eared and damaged.

The Verderers have now decided to update the entire system by having scanned the original maps in the Public Record Office and then storing the results on computer, thus allowing the atlas to be related directly to modern maps. The expected bill is in the region of £21,000. Of this the Court will contribute £12,000, the National Park £5000, while the balance is the subject of a generous donation from the Christopher Tower Foundation. The whole job is expected to be complete by the end of the year.

Exactly what do the atlases record ? They show rights attached to land in and around the Forest which allow commoners to use the heaths and woods for various purposes like grazing ponies and cattle. In fact the possession of rights is now almost meaningless from the point of view of practical farming. Unlike common land elsewhere in the country where the number of animals depastured is strictly related to the rights possessed, people in the New Forest turn out animals to any extent they like, provided only that they keep within the terms of the byelaws and other regulations and that they have, say, a nominal garden plot with rights. Of course in practice the occupation of a reasonable area of land is essential to support any farming operation, but whether or not such land has rights is now immaterial. The atlases are therefore little more than historical curiosities with no practical purpose beyond checking the qualification of voters at a Verderers' election. However, the "historical curiosities" have now developed an economic significance of their own. There is still a widespread belief that the rights are important and the "valuable Forest Rights" beloved of estate agents are included on sale particulars, suggesting a sort of mystical quality belonging to property which is sold in the Forest area. Agents and solicitors pay good money for official

searches of the atlases, bringing in to the Verderers' coffers over £10,000 in 2007, which is not a bad return for sentiment. There are actually a handful of Forest rights which might properly be described as "valuable", and these are the allocations of firewood which are attached to only about 100 houses in the area. Records of them could be stored in a single slim folder. Still, the Verderers Office must by law maintain the records, while the carrying-out of searches and the checking of electoral qualifications absorbs a lot of time and staff effort. The present expensive transcription process is therefore fully justified and somewhat overdue.

### **An important discovery of Forest placenames**

I am grateful to Richard Reeves of the New Forest Museum for drawing my attention to a very remarkable donation to his library's collection in the form of a map showing innumerable lost or previously unknown placenames in the New Forest. At first sight this map appears to be nothing out of the ordinary – simply a print of Richardson King and Driver's survey of the Forest in 1787, incomplete in that the south eastern portion of the Forest is missing. The map is clearly one of the later editions in that inclosures dating from the first decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century are included. There are also marked in ink and colour-wash a number of later timber inclosures up to the 1860s, suggesting that the map may have had an official origin, perhaps with the New Forest Inclosure Commissioners. However, interesting as this is, it is not exceptional. What makes the map apparently unique is that many additional placenames have either been written or printed on it. Some tie in with names known from other historical documents, but never before properly located. Others are names which have, quite independently, been handed down by word of mouth, but which have never before been seen written down. Still more are entirely new names and some of them are very curious indeed. Examples include such oddities as "Stupid's Hole" and "Gipsies and Smugglers Hole" near Bramshaw. The distribution on the maps of these new names is uneven. They are concentrated in the north and west of the Forest with only two or three additions to the south east of Lyndhurst. Altogether this is a very rare find indeed and a map which will prove invaluable to local historians.

### **Cowbells and buckets**

A recent television programme reported the use of cowbells on a herd near Purbeck and that brought to mind the bells which, in my youth, were still used in parts of the New Forest on the dairy herds - now no more than a memory. I can recall only one herd in which the lead cow was so equipped and that was in the vicinity of Bramshaw Telegraph – probably Bob Hatch's animals. On the other hand, retired agister Raymond Bennett can remember several herds with bells in the Ogdens area which he describes as making a lovely sound as they moved across the Forest. No doubt they were also present in other areas.

The use of cowbells must have died out finally about fifty years ago and I remember reading somewhere (probably in the Verderers' papers) that the visitors took to stealing the bells. Old milking cows can be very tame and I suppose it is just possible that they stood still while the trippers divested them of their ornaments, but in general people tend to be very

weary of cattle – “nasty dirty fierce beasts”. It is a pity that such caution does not extend to the ponies which really are capable of inflicting injury if molested.

Today, of course, the cattle on the Forest are beef animals, largely ignored by people, a favour which the cattle return. On the other hand I recently attended an archaeological excavation in a remote part of the Forest and it soon became apparent that a nearby herd of Galloways had its attention firmly fixed on the work being undertaken. This was more than ordinary curiosity, as the herd threatened to overrun the work site. The dominant cow had spotted that the archaeologists were using buckets and, of course, in cow minds buckets can have no other purpose than to contain food. It took some prolonged and vigorous persuasion to assure the herd that this was not the case.

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