

# **NEW FOREST NOTES SEPTEMBER 2017**

## **Forest stream filling projects for 2018**

Last month the Forestry Commission held two days of consultation on its plans for stream filling works over the coming year. Such events provide an opportunity to study in detail some places which I visit only occasionally and, if the weather is good, they are a pleasant enough way of spending a day in the Forest. In the coming year the bulk of the works is planned for the surroundings of Burley, with particular attention to the areas south of Burbush, north and east of Forest Road and east of Bisterne Close.

I have always believed that the restoration of some of the drainage excesses of the early post-war years is perfectly justifiable but, after many years of such restoration, the Forestry Commission is running short of sensible targets and is increasingly trying to re-write history by degrading lawn and other drainage work which is now nearly two centuries old and a firmly established and stable part of the Forest landscape. That, it appears, is the price demanded by Natural England for pouring subsidy money into the Forest. To my mind it is a distasteful compact, often in conflict with the long term benefit of the Forest. The protection of natural beauty and the retention of good grazing areas is, I believe, quite as important as works which allow the ticking of some arbitrary ecological boxes, required by Natural England in return for short term cash payments.

Having said this, I don't think the 2018 schemes are among the most controversial brought forward by the Forestry Commission, but then I am not a resident of Burley and therefore not best placed to judge local feeling. Forest communities are rightly sensitive about what happens around their villages. After we had spent a morning walking round the proposed works near Burbush, it occurred to me to ask the Forestry Commission's convenor of the meeting why a representative of the parish council had not been invited to attend. I was told that this could not be permitted because the meeting was strictly for statutory consultees only. When I pointed out that the New Forest Commoners' Defence Association is, correctly in my view, included in the consultations and is not a statutory consultee, I was told that the CDA is a "special case" because it is represented on the HLS Board which controls the money for the works. That, at the time, seemed a good answer until I later had the chance to reflect that the New Forest Association is (again rightly) part of the consultation process. The NFA is neither a statutory consultee nor a member of the HLS Board, so the Forestry Commission's arguments seem to be wearing a little thin. Realists, I suppose (and there are still a few in the New Forest) might conclude that the consultation panel is in fact carefully designed so as to comprise only representatives of those bodies broadly supportive of Natural England's objectives.

## **New Forest Association 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary**

This summer marks the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the New Forest Association – now a charity whose business it is to look after the Forest. The establishment of the association took place on 22<sup>nd</sup> July 1867 at the Crown Hotel in Lyndhurst, although in the building which preceded the 1890s redevelopment of the site. To mark the event, leading members of the NFA and a few guests

met in exactly the same place and on 22<sup>nd</sup> July, one hundred and fifty years on. There is something about 150 year anniversaries that makes them rather less satisfying than centenaries or bicentenaries, but it was an interesting idea. It was made more significant by the principal speaker being the association's president, Oliver Crosthwaite Eyre. His great-great-grandfather was one of the original founders and would no doubt have addressed that first meeting on exactly the same spot. It demonstrated what remarkable continuity there is in the tradition of service to the Forest community among the leading landowning families. Lord Montagu, former Forestry Commission Verderer and another direct descendant of one of the founders, was also present. His great-grandfather was the second Official Verderer of the Forest, while the present Official Verderer, Lord Manners, also attended the commemoration.

I have to say that I was not impressed by the introduction to the proceedings of an actor who gave a distorted version of a speech to parliament by Henry Fawcett MP on the subject of the New Forest in the 1870s. It included allusions to present-day threats such as public over-use and Dibden Bay development proposals, but this was no doubt intended simply as light relief. In other respects the event was excellent. I have clear memories of the centenary as well, but regret that I am unlikely to be present at the bicentenary.

Before the formal business of the meeting commenced, the president asked me the intriguing question; "What would the founding fathers of the NFA think of the Forest (and our successes or otherwise in looking after it) if they could return and see it today ?" He had driven into Lyndhurst from Bramshaw that evening, just as his great-great-grandfather would have done and had given way to a herd of piglets crossing the road. He reflected that his illustrious predecessor, Briscoe Eyre, would probably have encountered exactly the same impediment to his progress – although I hope that his horses were pig-proof. They could hardly have been otherwise living in Bramshaw.

The president's question was one I had never considered before. I think perhaps that the initial reaction of the founders following that same route into Lyndhurst today would be one of pleasure in that physically there is much that has not changed. They would recognize the same ancient woods (although sadly depleted of their pollarded beeches), and the same glades beside the road. They would marvel at how the great timber inclosures that they had fought against (Shave Green and Brockis Hill) have developed into integral parts of the landscape. On the other hand they would be horrified to see the streams of traffic on the A 31 and A337 and hear the deafening roar which makes the vicinity of those roads a no-go area today for anyone looking for peace and quiet. They would be shocked to see the fencing of the roads (they were hunting gentlemen). The necessity for separating livestock and traffic would need explaining to them. If they could leave their carriages and walk a short distance into the Forest, I am sure they would be appalled by the general air of neglect which pervades the modern Forest – the choked drains, waterlogged rides, piles of rotting timber in the Inclosures and the wreckage of trees which disfigures the ancient woods. They would be sickened by the litter left about by the public. They had campaigned for "public" rights in the Forest, but the public of their day comprised artists, amateur naturalists, historians, and above all the hunting community. Perhaps they also included the occasional well-behaved and country-loving hiker

and day visitor, but certainly not today's mass invasions of urban population in pursuit of fun and games, careless of the sensitive nature of their surroundings. Even twenty five years after the NFA's foundation, twenty or thirty carriages a day visiting Beaulieu in the height of summer was considered remarkable pressure.

One thing I am sure the returning founders would thoroughly approve is the standard and welfare of the Forest ponies in which many of those country gentlemen had interested themselves – not always with good results. Starvation of ponies in hard winters was then not uncommon, while today it would meet with a very swift response from the Verderers including (a terrifying sanction) the loss of a small part of the subsidies payable to the owners.

### **The National Trust – a new round of felling**

The National Trust is about to embark on yet another felling spree on its land at Hale Purlieu, similar to that which has been causing concern at Bramshaw. This time it is to attack several small clumps of Scots pine of landscape importance. They occupy only a tiny area of land and are responsible for minimal natural spread, but give character and variety to an otherwise featureless expanse of heath. Moreover, they are clumps which the Trust, in more enlightened days, specifically said would be retained when (quite properly) more widespread and invasive natural regeneration of the trees was removed thirty years ago. There seems, these days, to be an almost complete disregard of natural beauty on the Trust's lands in the New Forest, with its staff hell-bent on cutting down as much as possible in the way of trees for "conservation reasons".

Throughout my life I have been a strong supporter of clearing areas of invasive pine in the New Forest and the programme for doing that has been remarkably successful, not only on the crown lands but on the Adjacent Commons also. Much of what now remains is of landscape importance and the Trust seems wilfully blind to that fact.

The Scots pine is regarded as a "non-native" tree in the New Forest although if considered over a long enough timescale, that is incorrect. It was indeed probably absent for a period, but the extreme ecological lobby would now like to see the elimination of pine altogether, irrespective of the landscape consequences. Much of the local public on the other hand is rather more discerning. Scots pine figures prominently in the picture postcards sold to visitors and the atmospheric photographs of the Forest which fill coffee table books. It is a much-loved component of the heathland scene and even figures repeatedly in the works of such famous artists as Barry Peckham and (a generation back) Heywood Sumner. It was planted on the commons by the Earls of Normanton and their predecessors as landscape features in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and even as early as the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Paddy Bussey's Firs on Rockford Common is at least older than 1759 and still contains some of the original trees. Even at Hale the very slow-grown and fairly small trees pre-date the break-up of the great Hale Park Estate a century ago.

I have tried on several occasions to point out to Trust staff that people actually do value such scenic clumps and individual trees, but I have always been met with the same response: "We have a

legal duty to destroy the trees for ecological reasons and irrespective of landscape considerations". I think that is a distorted and foolish interpretation of the law and disregards one of the fundamental reasons for the Trust's existence – to protect natural beauty. Nobody is saying that regeneration should not be controlled – simply that the Trust should not create a largely featureless waste out of landscape it was given to protect. It is not, fortunately, the line adopted by the Forestry Commission on the crown lands.

Anthony Pasmore