

New Forest Notes – September 1991

New Landowners

Two days of hectic duty with the Atlas of Common Rights at last month's New Forest Show provided a surprising insight on a new category of landowner which is clearly growing in the Forest. For years the Forest's residents (commuter or otherwise) and the commoners have been in somewhat unequal competition for small parcels of land, but both groups now face a rival in what may be described as "absentee horse keepers". As house prices have risen making the prospect of a country cottage with land no more than a dream for many townspeople, some of the more enterprising have settled for a compromise in the shape of land alone. They have been buying anything up to six acres or so as a base for rural recreation, usually riding, while continuing to live many miles from the Forest. Most come from the Southampton conurbation, but others are from much further afield and I even met one group from Kent owning land on the east side of the Forest.

Many of these people seemed genuinely interested in their new acquisitions and clearly do not look on them merely as a good investment. The dubious benefits of possessing mast or marl rights evidently delighted them. However, as yet another turn of the screw on New Forest farming, this additional pressure is not good news for the commoners. Of course such outside interest may be no more than a passing fashion, but with the extreme scarcity of land and the impossible price of Forest cottages, I suspect it is here to stay.

Heathstone and Burley Rock

From a casual view of New Forest architecture (almost exclusively red brick) it might be assumed that the area is devoid of its own local building stone, but this is far from being the case. One of a party of visitors to the Queen's House at Lyndhurst recently questioned me on the attractive rust coloured concretion of gravel which is used in the lower courses of the north elevation. This material occurs naturally in the hills around Burlev from which place it derives its name "Burley Rock". It has been dug there for centuries and there are probably few old houses in the village which do not contain some of this material. Occasionally, as at Mill Lawn, entire walls are built of Burlev Rock. The place names Rock Hills and Burley Rocks record its presence and exploitation in past times. Good exposures at the surface are rare today, although a bed of Burley Rock, may be seen in the A35 road cutting at Markway Hill.

Burlev Rock is the best known of the Forest's building stones, but there is another finer grained ironstone which was widely quarried across the north of the Forest. This was known locally as "hethstone" or "heathstone" and is found in the footings of almost all old cob buildings in the northern villages. Excavations have shown that it was dug and extensively used by the native population of the Forest in Roman times when it was particularly valued for use in strengthening pottery kilns. Old pits

are to be seen at Sloden, Hasley, Deadman Bottom and Stone Quarry Bottom. One house in Black Lane at Redlynch is largely faced with heathstone and a recent archaeological dig on the site of the ancient Greyhound Inn in Fordingbridge has shown that the use of this stone was not confined to rural buildings.

The only other local stone which I have occasionally found incorporated in buildings is sometimes called "sarsen". It is a fine grained grey stone which occurs in very hard irregular blocks randomly distributed in the plateau gravels. It can often be found eroded out in Forest stream beds. One particularly prolific source is in a small valley just to the south west of Eyeworth.

Departing Verderer

It was with genuine sadness that the Forest said goodbye to Peter Baillie on the completion of his term of office as Forestry Commission Verderer. Although the appointee of the Commission and nominally the guardian of their interests on the Court, he has been a good friend to the commoners, particularly through his services as chairman of the Commission's Drainage Committee. In the Court itself his cheerful good humour relieved the tension of a good many potentially heated discussions. His successor is Mr. R. Hewitt of Woodgreen, a village which now supplies two of the five appointed Verderers.

The position of appointed Verderer is a peculiar one. The statute which provides for their appointment lays down few specific duties or obligations apart from preventing them from voting on certain presentments made by their appointing authorities. During my years on the Court I have seen a good many appointed Verderers come and go. A few have clearly had little interest in their office or the Forest, but most have quickly learned the intricacies of the area's administration and some, much to their credit, have stood out against damaging proposals of their appointing authorities.

Contrasting Recreational Pressures

During a rare escape from Hampshire in the middle of August, I had the opportunity of comparing the recreational pressures on the New Forest with those on Exmoor. Although my visit coincided with one of the busiest holiday weeks of the year and was blessed with good weather, Exmoor seemed deserted after the Forest. Admittedly I did not seek out the tourist honeypots, but a week's riding over the moors was dominated by an atmosphere of solitude and quiet. The minor roads carried so little traffic that they remain tolerable places, for riders and the almost total lack of traffic noise provided perhaps the greatest contrast with the Forest. Such comparisons show just how degraded has become the environment of our beautiful Forest. Road noise now penetrates into almost every corner, our villages are choked by seething throngs of visitors in search of entertainment and even the remotest parts are under constant pressure from people and dogs.

But despite all this, the relentless promotion of the Forest as a tourist magnet goes on. No doubt Exmoor will go the same way in due course. The early signs are there with a mushrooming Lorna

Doone industry which has resulted in the spoiling by over use of one beautiful valley and the level of use by long distance back pack walkers is probably not far below that of the Forest. However, in a week I saw only three mountain bikes and very few wheel tracks. During the same period in the Forest I would expect to encounter several hundred and every path would carry the scars of their passing. Exmoor's car free zone protection is, by our standards, very primitive and will no doubt give problems in the future, but signs of vehicle penetration and erosion are so far very slight

Of course a week is a fraction of the time necessary to explore and understand such large and complex landscapes as either Exmoor or the New Forest, but the differences are immediately apparent. Before it is too late, I hope that Exmoor will see and avoid the pitfalls into which the New Forest has so spectacularly slumped

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