

New Forest Notes – September 1993

Tourists and Badgers

The usual diet of Forest controversies has been given an unusual variation over the last few weeks in the shape of a row over badgers. These secretive and generally inoffensive creatures are more often encountered as flattened corpses on roads than going about their business in the Forest, I seldom see them, although they regularly turn over the dung piles in my field and one night two of them decided to stage a fight outside my wife's chicken house. It was a fight which produced the most blood curdling screams imaginable. The contestants were quite oblivious of the human audience dragged from its beds by the dreadful noise and armed with torch. I often wonder if they were quarrelling over the anticipated spoils of a projected raid on the chicken house -- literally counting their chickens!

Anyhow is badger watching which is the subject of the present heated debate in the Forest. It arises out of a planning application by a Burley entrepreneur who has a business in the grounds of a private house showing badgers to visiting tourists and others. The planning application would therefore seem to be retrospective and the dispute centres upon whether or not this is a desirable and appropriate use for a residential property (in planning terms) and whether it is a good thing to display (the objectors term is exploit) the wildlife of the Forest in this manner. There is certainly no doubt in the minds of the business patrons as to the desirability of the scheme if we are to judge from a full page of ecstatic comments quoted in the publicity leaflet. They evidently regard the £8 per head entrance fee (children half price) as excellent value for money. Moreover, the promoters lay great stress on the naturalness of their display, the careful protection of the badgers and the claim that the enterprise relieves other setts in the Forest from public pressure.

The objectors see it very differently, questioning the ethics of making a tourist attraction out of the Forest's wild life and the appropriateness of this commercial use in a residential area. Their ranks are not confined to the conservation groups who might be expected to express concern, but include people with considerable experience in tourist matters. The dispute was even brought before the Verderers Court by a Bramshaw resident and, while the Verderers made no comment upon the welfare or otherwise of the badgers, they did object to the planning application on the grounds that any activity which increases night time traffic on Forest roads should be discouraged.

The merits of the case itself are not the only points at issue, because the application is to be determined by the New Forest District Council. The Council, as part of its efforts to boost tourism, has been much involved in promoting the badger business. It produces its own leaflet on the subject under the heading "Wildlife Encounter" inviting tourists to book their badger watching through the tourist information centre. It also figures prominently in the council's

New Forest encounter leaflet and its "where to stay" guide. It may be that the planners are able to put all this out of their minds and arrive at a fair and impartial decision on the planning application, but it is not surprising that objectors have their doubts about this. They see the tourism activities of the Council as its real underlying objective. camouflaged by the fine words of the New Forest 2000 plan and in this, if nothing more, I think they are fairly close to the mark.

Bombs

RAF Ibsley Historical Group's exhibition as part of the "Bygone Days" event at Gorley last month attracted a great deal of interest. However, the real star of the show was certainly the, reconstructed Dambusters bouncing bomb which was recovered from Ashley Walk bombing range in the Forest during the 1970s. This peculiar device looks rather like an immensely heavy garden roller from which the handle has been removed. It evidently contained little explosive since, apart from distorted metal at the 'ends and some repaired cracks the specimen is almost complete. Its rescuers are to be complimented on their enterprise, although it is sad that no attempt has been made to combat the ravages of rust which will eventually destroy the relic if left unchecked. I have no idea of exactly where it was found and knew of nothing like it remaining on the range today although there is still after fifty years, a surprising amount of shrapnel lying about. Those who ride at Ashley will know the distinctive clink of horseshoe on bomb fragment which signals another narrow escape from becoming lame or worse. Over the years I have thrown many of the worst jagged pieces of metal up against tree stems where they are less likely to cause damage. With modern metal detecting equipment, it ought to be possible for the authorities to carry out a fairly effective sweep of the remaining debris. It might even pay, for itself in, the value of scrap recovered.

Looking at the 1946 photographs of the range shows just how devastated was this part of the Forest. Above Alderhill Bottom was a moonscape of huge craters, most of which were filled in after the war. In the less heavily bombed areas the craters were left unfilled, with some of the largest at Coopers Hill now comprising very attractive ponds.

It is a good many years since I last remember live explosives being destroyed at Ashley Walk, although I was told that workers clearing seedling firs two years ago discovered a bomb in a deep hole. The army experts were then too fully occupied with the Gulf War to attend to it, so presumably the bomb continues to sleep quietly at the bottom of its pit. The wild heaths of Ashley Walk are not particularly magnetic to trippers, so I doubt if it poses much of a threat.

In other parts of the Forest, the risk has been much greater. When the camp sites were constructed, the army had to clear bombs from Matley Wood which was first established on the site of a First World War mortar school. I am also told that many years ago there was a fatality at Acres Down when a child found an unexploded devise. Perhaps none of this is very surprising when it is remembered that the services occupied eight thousand acres of the

Open Forest during the last war and almost all of the remainder was used for training of one sort or another. Gilbert Smith, in his book of reminiscences on the life of a New Forest keeper records the time when ammunition used to explode in the annual controlled burnings of the heath. Even last year I came across a scatter of live rifle cartridges in an area which, until the fencing of the A31 road, was a major tourist honeypot. After half a century the Forest has clearly not yet yielded up all its explosive secrets.

Chain Saw Restrictions

The days when the average householder in the Forest could apply to buy and cut up wind-blown firewood on the Open Forest are coming to an end. From January next year, the only chainsaw users allowed on Forest land will be those who have been tested for their level of operating skill and who as a result have obtained a certificate of competence. The test fee is likely to be £65, with those requiring a refresher course and test paying £160. Full training and test will cost £400. The new regulations are thus likely to exclude good many of those who have always bought from the Forest, but who will now find it less expensive and troublesome to buy ready cut logs and cordwood which they can cut up at home without a certificate. The Forestry Commission issues an explanatory leaflet entitled "Chainsaw Users Countdown to Safety".

No doubt those of us who have come to rely on the Forest for firewood will grumble a good deal about the new rules, but it is difficult to imagine any other piece of farm equipment quite so potentially as lethal as a chainsaw. I was certainly made to think hard about this subject on a recent visit to a relative in hospital. In the next bed was an experienced professional timber cutter, dreadfully injured as a result of an accident with his saw.