

New Forest Notes – September 1997

Forest hunting to continue

There is no doubt a good deal of quite satisfaction in country sports circles that a new licence has been issued for fox hunting to continue in the New Forest. It is not just the licence itself which has been welcomed, but the evident success of the publicity campaign which has been waged over the last few months on a national scale. It would probably be going too far to suggest that the government has been frightened into an abject withdrawal, but the practical effect is probably not far short of that.

The official Forestry Commission statement says that the "temporary suspension of deer hunting" will continue pending a review of the National Trust's "Bateson Report". That such a suspension had been applied seems to have attracted little notice in the Forest. Certainly I has not been aware of it. In any case, the demise of the New Forest Buckhounds makes the suspension of academic interest only so far as the Forest is concerned -- at least for the moment. There have been suggestions that the voluntary closure of the Buckhounds leaves the way open for a return, on a change of policy or of government in a way that forced closure would not have done. Economics, however, seem to make any revival a remote possibility.

On the other side of the coin those opposed to hunting feel betrayed by the issue of a new licence. They believe (with how much justification, I do not know) that the Labour Party had given a commitment to end hunting on Forestry Commission and Ministry of Defence lands if returned to power and that this promise has been broken.

Although the granting of a new fox hunting licence had been widely predicted, it does contain some new conditions. For example, the licence may be revoked on one months notice. This is an odd condition which is not likely to be regarded as very fair by those who invest large sums of money in hunting. It can hardly be a necessary precaution in advance of an Act abolishing hunting, because the Act itself would presumably effect revocation of the licence.

Another condition is that the hunt will not be allowed to dig out foxes which have gone to ground, except in special circumstances agreed in advance with the Forestry Commission. I know several long time supporters of fox hunting in the New Forest who have always been faintly uneasy about these practise and who will not be sorry to see the back of it. To them it seems somehow "unsporting". The hunt is saying to the fox "You may have beaten us fair and square in the chase, but we are going to kill you anyway by digging you out of your refuge". Against this, no doubt those who support fox digging would argue a valuable pest control function.

It is strange how what is considered "sporting" changes over the years. Today I suppose no-one but those beyond the legal fringe of field sports would advocate the digging of badgers --

certainly not the Deputy Surveyor of the New Forest. Yet it is only seventy years or so since a previous holder of that office devoted eight pages of his book on the Forest to the delights of badger digging. Gerald Lascelles makes it clear, however, that the sport was never permitted except under his own superintendence or that of the head keepers and that harming the badger was strictly prohibited.

For the time being at least it seems that it will be business more or less as usual for the New Forest Foxhounds, their opponents and for the Forestry Commission.

Pony Collars

As the drift (round up) season advances, more ponies wearing reflective collars are likely to be seen on the Forest. It is hoped that the use of collars will be particularly concentrated in the of the two worst killing roads -- Cadnam to Godshill and Dibden Purlieu to Portmore. If the collars succeed in saving the life of only one pony, the campaign will have been well worthwhile, but the chance of achieving a marked reduction in overall accident numbers seems very small.

The idea of collars has been taken up with great enthusiasm, but it is really nothing new. Almost forty years ago we went through the same experimental process. I have been looking through some old press cuttings of 1960, including a photograph of the two daughters of agister Ron Ings demonstrating the collars on their riding ponies, themselves and on their hats at an after dark meeting of the Verderers and New Forest Pony Breeding Society in Rhinefield Road at Brockenhurst. Later on, an optimistic representative of the manufacturers told the Verderers Court that he anticipated the collars would stay on the ponies for ten years. His only worry was over the ponies growing inside the collars.

How many collars were eventually applied I do not know. After a short while with no noticeable results everyone tired of the idea and the Commoners Defence report for 1960 shows accident figures at the (then) record level of 328 killed and injured. In those days of course, none of the main roads were fenced and ponies wandered freely from Romsey to Lymington and from Totton to Salisbury.

Ragwort

This summer has been a particularly bad one for ragwort in parts of the New Forest. For those who do not appreciate the significance of this, I should explain that ragwort is a beautiful yellow flowering weed with evil smelling foliage and an even more evil reputation. It is highly poisonous to stock, especially when withered. Occupiers of land are supposed to clear it from their property, but unfortunately this is one of those laws that is never enforced. On the crown lands, the Forestry Commission makes valiant attempts to control the weed by spending large sums on hand pulling each year. The County Council usually deals with the

road verges, but this year seems to have given up in despair. There are portions of road verge in the Avon valley where acres of ragwort have been left to seed over adjoining holdings and over the commons. Things have been particularly bad at Rockford.

Ragwort seems to come in cycles. For a year or so there may be very little on the Forest and then suddenly, both fields and Forest are overrun. In fields it is encouraged by heavy grazing by horses and can best be controlled by reducing grazing pressure over several years and ensuring that every plant which appears is removed before seeding. Unfortunately for most people this reduction in grazing pressure is an unaffordable luxury, so the next best thing is constant pulling. That is also the only solution for the Forest.

Forest Maps

I recently had to mark up a set of large scale Ordnance Survey maps for the Environment Agency with information about the New Forest's archaeology. The maps seemed to me to be coarse, poorly printed and difficult to interpret. They were no doubt the product of some wonderful new computer system. Over recent years the quality of New Forest maps seems to have declined steadily. The 1909 Six Inch sheets (which remained "current" until the 1960s) were works of art -- beautifully printed and drawn. They were inferior only to their 19th century predecessors. Even the Provisional Edition which followed the 1909 maps was good if out of date. After that everything seemed to go downhill. The exception to this decline is the OS "Outdoor Leisure" map of the Forest at 2 1/2" to one mile which has become a firm favourite with visitors residents and managers.

The New Forest has relied on the Ordnance Survey for one hundred and fifty years now, but before that time the standard map for all management purposes was that prepared in 1787 by three surveyors named Richardson, King and Driver. It is usually known as "Drivers Map" which seems a little unfair as he was the least accurate of the three. It was printed in various editions, the last at full scale being dated 1848. Some versions had sheets based on the "walk" boundaries. These were the old forest law subdivisions of the Forest. Not only is Drivers Map a most beautiful document (and exceedingly valuable), but it gives a picture of the Forest as it was before the coming of the railway, main roads, major development and widespread silviculture. Fortunately quite a number of copies survive in private hands within the Forest, even after two hundred years. Some local libraries and record offices have copies available for public inspection.