

NEW FOREST NOTES APRIL 2020

The Forest and the virus

Last week, on 22nd March, I listened to Mr. Mike Seddon, chief executive of Forestry England, being interviewed on the Today programme of the BBC. He was describing policy on public access to the land he controls throughout the country. Essentially his message was that, subject to observance of the social distancing rules and the closure of facilities like visitor centres and some large car parks, it was business as usual in the Forests. The forests remained open to the public for fresh air and exercise. The tone, if not the substance of his answers, was somewhat at variance with the later statement by Susan Smith, media officer for South Forest District. She threatened immediate closure of all car parks if the government's guidelines on social distancing are not being adhered to, or if public health advice changes. She also predicted some evil consequences of total closure of car parks. All this, of course, came before the prime minister's statement the same evening which, while allowing daily exercise, added nothing which would throw more light on the way in which the forests can be used. Altogether the rules seemed to be very unclear and so it remains at the time of writing (Thursday 26th).

Before he moved on to higher things, Mike Seddon was our Deputy Surveyor here in the New Forest from 2003 and he is therefore thoroughly familiar with public demands on the Forest and the extreme sensitivity of any perceived interference with users' "rights". Perhaps that is why he took a rather different approach to that of the National Trust which the day before had closed all its gardens and parks to public access.

In the light of Mike Seddon's encouraging statement, I set off for a long walk in the Forest, alone and never approaching other people closer than one hundred metres or so. It was a beautiful day with the first real signs of spring – the first leaves on some birch trees, thorns and larch. There were almost cloudless skies. It seemed a terrible contrast that at the same time as the arrival of all this beauty, some people were dying of the virus, many more were in pain and all but the very stupid were anxious or frightened. I was in a quiet part of the Forest, but those people I did see still showed little regard for social distancing (spacing of at least two metres). One party I saw walking in a tight bunch, comprised five people with two bicycles, two dogs and a pushchair. No doubt this was a family group which had arrived in one car and expected to return the same way. They accordingly saw no reason to observe distancing in the open air. I had not been in the Forest the day before (Sunday), but I have been told from several sources that there was almost total disregard for the rules and a good deal of very bad behaviour.

It is actually not very easy to walk in company keeping at least two metres from the one's companion. The best training I know is experience in a land surveying team, some of whose members are carrying two metre long steel pointed ranging poles. Infringing the protective zone can be immediately painful if ultimately less deadly than attack by the virus.

That Monday, I got the impression that the Forest was rather less busy than on a normal weekday in school holidays. Car parks were less full and the roads were certainly quieter than normal. Mountain bikers on the other hand seemed more numerous, all peddling furiously as though their lives depended on outdistancing the virus. Ice cream sales continued from the car parks and that seemed rather stupid. Altogether it appeared that nobody was quite sure if and how they should use the Forest.

The next day the National Trust closed its car park at Hale Purlieu and the dog walkers and others responded exactly as Ms Smith had predicted by verge parking and driving over the ditches onto the grass.

I have no idea how Forestry England is continuing its business from Queen's House, but the Verderers' office is closed to the public and the court fixed for 18th March was cancelled. I suppose it is unlikely to meet again this year unless we see a rapid and unexpected return to normality. The office staff may be contacted by phone or email. The agisters too remain on duty ensuring the welfare of Forest livestock, but cattle marking has been suspended. Instead commoners will be asked to provide ministry ear tag numbers of those cows they wish to turn out. In the old days this might have resulted in a good deal of marking fee evasion, but today commoners are anxious to secure their subsidy money and that is dependent upon the production of a marking fee receipt, so nobody is likely to twist that element of the system.

Finally, as I returned home on that Monday, the southern sky revealed a large column of smoke, suggesting that forestry staff were making a valiant attempt to salvage something of the 2020 burning programme – long delayed by the incessant rain - as only a few days of the permitted burning period remained. It was a small but welcome piece of normality.

The River Blackwater

I doubt if many Forest residents will even know the name of the Blackwater, let alone be able to tell its location. It is one of those streams (unlike Highland Water, Avon Water or Latchmore) which few people set out to visit. In fact it is a tributary of the Lymington River fed by several small streams rising east of Burley. It only has an identity of its own between Burley Lodge and the Ornamental Drive. Some parts of the Blackwater in Vinney Ridge are quite pretty, but upstream in the rather grimly named Dames Slough Inclosure the river was "restored" some years ago under a stream-filling project. As a result at least half of the flood plain length has been inundated and inaccessible for the last five months. After a fortnight of fine weather the water levels have dropped sufficiently for most parts to be accessible with difficulty on foot. The scrub and brambles have colonized much of the surroundings of the stream, but in those parts where there is still an element of natural side drainage there is the potential for making small areas of good grazing lawn if only some of the coarse vegetation could be cleared. I don't expect to see it done. One area where the scrub has not taken hold shows considerable promise.

Perhaps the most distressing thing about the state of this valley is that until the drainage was wrecked, the Ancient Ornamental woodland called Dog Kennel Wood came right down to the well-defined and free flowing watercourse. Then trees hundreds of years old, including many beautiful pollarded beeches, were killed as their root systems became permanently waterlogged. In the years since the work was done, most have fallen and disappeared, but the dead skeletons of a few late survivors still stand as a stark reminder of the activities of the restorers. The photograph shows some of these on the banks of the now filled stream four hundred metres downstream from Dog Kennel Bridge. In 1877 the New Forest Act required managers to protect the ancient ornamental woods and trees in the Forest and this is a sad disregard for that provision.



Further east and downstream a small tributary from Knightwood has also been filled in and here the 1859 oaks stand leafless and lifeless because of what has been done. I have not counted them, but several dozen have been killed.

New Forest Commoners' Defence Association report

Of the many annual reports I receive, the only one I tend to read from cover to cover is that produced by the Commoners' Defence Association. It is an invaluable record of Forest life and related statistics. In recent years it has also been beautifully illustrated with Sally Fear's action pictures of the Forest. It is really the principal contact with members now that the 2020 annual general meeting has been, with remarkable optimism, re-scheduled for November. There is one subject I do

find increasingly depressing as I get older and that is the list of members' deaths with which the report usually opens. This year's list seems longer than usual and most of those recorded I have known from childhood.

Two names in particular struck me this year – Teddy Coutts and Ken Harding. Back in the 1960s my family used to be out most weekends colt-hunting with Teddy and his neighbour the late Raymond Bennett. When my father wrote his book on the New Forest's commoners thirty years ago, he included the following anecdote relating to Teddy under the title of "Biting the Dust". This gentleman had the misfortune to lose his natural teeth at an early age and was consequently equipped with dentures. One day he and his companions were attempting to capture a yearling on Ocknell Plain and Teddy was in the lead. Suddenly the rider immediately behind shouted "Teddy-your teeth !" The false teeth had come adrift and fallen into the heather. The chase was abandoned and all searched, ultimately with success, for the missing teeth. The pursuit was then renewed.

As to Ken Harding, he was one of the quiet gentlemen of the Forest from the days when the commoners' community was less motivated by greed than perhaps it is today. Ken was a digger driver for the Forestry Commission and was full of interesting stories about his work. I remember him assisting with the archaeological excavation of 17th century bee gardens at Holmsley Ridge in the mid-1970s and prior to their ruthless destruction by the Commission in pursuit of gravel. In defiance of all health and safety dictates, he raised the photographer high in the air above the trenches in the front bucket of his digger. He also told how he had discovered ancient hearths while digging drains in Burley Old (now again long lost), which he interpreted as metal working sites. Many years ago he told me how the curious ridges in Burley Outer Rails were formed – the work of French prisoners at the time of planting in 1811 – see New Forest Notes for April 2009.

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