

NEW FOREST NOTES APRIL 2024

Trading vans on the Forest – exploitation or economics?

Last month a prominent Forest resident, Mr. Brian Tarnoff, told the Verderers' Court that plans for enhanced trading from vans on or adjoining the common land of the Forest represented "exploitation of the New Forest by Forestry England". His complaint was backed up by representatives of the leading Forest societies, including the New Forest Association and the Commoners' Defence Association. The Forestry England scheme was advocated by the Deputy Surveyor and supported by one of his commercial licensees. At a previous meeting the Deputy Surveyor had told the Court of the extreme shortage of money for the management and provision of tourist facilities and of the need to raise that money locally. The Verderers, after listening carefully to all the arguments, voted to back the new commercial arrangements. I and several of my colleagues opposed the plan and I fear that the decision of the Court is one which the Forest may bitterly regret in the future. It flies directly in the face of the long-established policies of the Verderers.

In essence, Forestry England wants to expand the range of goods sold from commercial vans operating on its land within the Forest. Most of that land is subject to common rights. At the moment there are fifteen vans scattered about the Forest selling ice cream and cold drinks. They are targeted on the busiest and most profitable car park sites. Now a third of these vans will be upgraded so that they will also sell hot drinks, cakes and "pastries" in addition to the ice cream, lollies and cold drinks. They will become mobile cafes. Forestry England claimed that the upgraded vans will be "visually less impactful, well regulated, environmentally friendlier, will offer more local produce and champion all our shared core values". That was not an assessment shared by those addressing the Court and every one of these promises is open to question, either wholly or in part, but there remain two overriding issues which the promoters have carefully side-stepped.

Firstly, are the Forest's woods and heaths an appropriate place for such trading, given their supposed protective conservation designations, grazing livestock, natural beauty and once peaceful environment? That such sites are exceedingly profitable for commercial operators and FE is beyond question. A long time ago, the Forestry Commission got its foot in the door with simple ice cream vans and now it wishes to push that door much wider open. In a few more years it may be to accommodate chairs and tables, enclosed safe children's play areas, balloon sales and so on. All the time the special qualities of the Forest decline, little by little. More and larger recreational events are held (with their own special trading vans). There are more seating and picnic tables, thousands more notices and expanded facilities disfigure the camps and car parks.

Nearly all the big sales points are within a short drive of Forest communities bursting with sales outlets providing for every possible need of the visitors. It is not the job of the Verderers directly to support such off-Forest traders, but the Court does have a secondary duty to foster local economic wellbeing. It is difficult not to have sympathy for village traders seeing their customers mopped up by intruding commercial vans.

Either the Forest should be a place of beauty and tranquillity, free from the ugliness and disturbance of modern life or it must continue to develop into a poorly managed and over-used version of Southampton Common. The latter is the route we seem to be following.

The second and perhaps less obvious problem with the enhanced trading vans is that of danger to both livestock and the public. For those affected – livestock owners or visitors at risk of injury, this is certainly just as important as questions of natural beauty and tranquillity. People and semi-wild ponies do not mix well. Petting and feeding of the animals may be theoretically illegal, but nothing will stop it and I doubt if anyone will ever be fined. I don't think there were any fines under an earlier and similar regulation abandoned a few years ago. Forest animals are not stupid. They know perfectly well that visitors picnicking on the grass or in their cars are an easy source of food and they will quickly learn that food vans can provide equal treasures. For years I watched the donkeys milling around the Stoney Cross ice cream van as I returned home each evening and they were not there just to admire the beauty of the vehicle. Cold drinks and ice lollies may not be high on a donkey's preferred menu, but the accompanying ice cream cones, sweets or anything else that the children may have been carrying were clearly prime attractions. Now it will be the cakes and pastries which will quickly become top of the list of treats and that is the problem. Forest livestock does not match the trained and disciplined pets encountered in a riding school. Semi-wild Forest ponies expect to take what they want, by force if necessary, and they can become quite cross when gifts are refused. In the euphemistic words of the NFA representative, the vans "can only increase adverse interactions between visitors and commoners' stock . . ." That means, at best, a nasty fright for a threatened visitor or at worst a rapid trip to Southampton General Hospital. For those farmers owning animals living near the van locations there is an ever-growing worry and risk. Food sales on the Forest are, in Mr. Tarnoff's words, "activities which endanger livestock, the public and the future of commoning." The decision was a bad one for the Forest.

A horrible death

One of the most unpleasant sights I encounter in the Forest are the decaying remains of fallow bucks tangled in electric fence tape wrapped tightly about their antlers and which they have



dragged deep into the woods before dying a slow death from starvation or perhaps strangulation. Usually I find only a mass of tape with the skull and antlers within it. The dogs and foxes have removed all the more readily accessible bones.

In the last year I have found two such victims, the first deep in the woods east of Lyndhurst and the second just outside Brockenhurst. The Lyndhurst buck, shown in the photo, has electric fence tape wound around its antlers. No doubt the keepers find many more such as this and it is usually the fault of thoughtless horse and pony owners. The tape comprises extremely strong plastic, interwoven with a series of small steel wires which carry the electric current. It is quite unbreakable and difficult enough to cut with a sharp knife and wire cutters. The tape is undoubtedly very useful and cheap fencing and I use it on my own farm. The problem seems to be when it is allowed to become loose or fallen and particularly if blocking a hole in a hedge. Often it is to be seen in untidy tangles along hedge lines, comprising a lethal trap. It really needs to be checked daily.

Abatement of an encroachment

In September of last year, I wrote about an encroachment on the common land of the Forest near Ringwood which was being challenged by the Commoners' Defence Association and others. In March the Official Verderer announced that this particular battle had finally been won and the land has been returned to the common grazing from which it had been fenced in.

The New Forest is plagued with householders who try to help themselves to little bits of common adjoining their houses. Usually it is only a few feet of ditch (subject to common rights) which they think would make an attractive addition to their garden. The freehold of the ditch may belong to them, but they have no right to fence it because the grazing belongs to the commoners. The Ringwood case was rather different in that the owner of a significant area of common land fenced in from the common a paddock adjoining his garden. It took many months of hard work to get the dispute resolved and the land thrown open again. Two commoners in particular – James Young and Mike Eccles – took a leading part in the campaign and their work was of great benefit to the Forest.

A dreadful mess at Alderhill Inclosure

Years ago, the Forestry Commission used to make quite a mess extracting timber when ground conditions were unsuitable, but in recent times there has been much less of this trouble. Now things are changing for the worse again. Following last year's highly destructive operations at Turf Hill and on the adjoining National Trust land at Millersford, the latest target is an inclosure called Alderhill near Fordingbridge. Except for the east end (1860s oak and ash) it is not a particularly beautiful plantation, but it is enjoyed by local residents and horse riders. Many of the tracks have now been reduced to something like the set for a WW1 movie, while acres of ground between the rides are similarly torn up. The photograph shows the lower slopes of a once attractive small hill called Pitchers Knowl.



For some years now a team of archaeologists has been working for a week each summer in an inclosure near Beaulieu which has exactly the same status as Alderhill. As a responsible organization they do, as a matter of course, fill in their trenches and leave the ground level and safe. After the leaf fall a few weeks later, it is impossible to see where they have been working. However, the conditions imposed by Natural England are quite ludicrous. Layers of soils must be carefully segregated and stored, before being replaced in exactly the same order. At Alderhill Natural England ignores many acres deeply churned up and turned over, while the Beaulieu work covers less space and volume than half that occupied by a single cut stem of Douglas fir. Hundreds of such trees litter the ground at Alderhill and dig huge channels as they are hauled through the mud. The topsoil is destroyed deep into the clay beneath and such archaeology as has not already been wrecked by earlier operations is being damaged or is immediately threatened. I increasingly despair of the thoughtless and destructive manner in which so much Forest management is undertaken.

Anthony Pasmore