

NEW FOREST NOTES JULY 2023

Controlling woodland expansion

Now that money is once more flowing freely into the Forest through an extension of the Higher-Level Stewardship payments, Forestry England is busy devising operations for spending it. One of the first of these projects is an extension of the scheme for the “restoration of lost lawns”. In other words, there is an ongoing plan for the removal of trees and scrub from areas which were once smooth grassy clearings (or areas claimed to have had that character). Such lawns are particularly valued by grazing ponies and cattle and are therefore of great importance to their owners. In a well-maintained state, they comprise the best grazing in the Forest and they are also much valued landscape features.

There is no doubt that such natural encroachment has taken place in the past, although the establishment of new woodland which this represents largely ceased sixty years ago. Then, as grazing and browsing pressure increased and livestock was confined to the common land through the installation of cattle grids, instead of spending much time in the villages of the Avon and Test valleys and in the Waterside, such woodland establishment stopped abruptly. There is much argument over stocking statistics, the accuracy of records, the effects of marking fee evasion in the years before subsidies became dominant and of later increases in numbers when ghost cattle were marked and paid for in response to those subsidies, but never actually grazed the Forest. Still, the trends are incontrovertible. Give or take a thousand or so animals, there were about 4,700 ponies, cattle and donkeys on the Forest's common land in 1960, while in 2020 this had rocketed to 14,600. The total fell back by a third over the next two years in response to uncertainty about subsidies, but is now rising rapidly again encouraged by new valuable support for cow keepers. The area of good grazing had greatly declined following the gridding of the perambulation and that considerably increased pressure on what remained. Moreover, during the same period there had been an immense increase in the deer population. The abandonment of a few conifer plantations did nothing much towards restoring the balance. It is little wonder that so much of the ancient woodland has been declining for decades.

Without much apparent consideration of the trends in stocking densities, Forestry England is now seeking to remove a lot of this post-war woodland expansion, through its lost lawns project. Three such schemes were announced last month. The first and most significant of these is at Balmer Lawn, the second at Ober Heath (both near Brockenhurst) and the third between Longbeech camp and Rufus Stone near Minstead. The most straightforward of these felling proposals is that for Ober Heath, although how this is classified as a “lost lawn” is difficult to understand. The first large scale Ordnance Survey map (1869) shows this as “rough pasture”, with the usual heathland symbols, in contrast for example, with the site of the present Brockenhurst allotments which was clearly then lawn. Eighty years earlier, the government surveyor William King had specifically classified Ober as heathland and so it remained until colonized by Scots pine perhaps 160 years later.

Whether it was former lawn or heathland does not matter too much because the felling proposed here is almost exclusively of Scots pine, much of which is in very poor condition due to the choking-up of the drainage system. It is far from attractive and of no great age. There are a few older and very beautiful pine trees on the edge of the felling areas, but FE rightly intends that these should be retained. About 14 acres of pine trees will be felled completely and in a further 7 acres the younger trees will be removed. An unfortunate side effect will be the opening-up of much wider views of the hideous and intrusive Aldridge Hill camp site.

At Balmer Lawn the issues are more complex. The 1787 surveyor (here Thomas Richardson) described it as "a large tract of fine open lawn". If ditches were made, he said, it would form excellent meadow worth 20/- per acre, while the part next to the woods (with which we are here concerned) would grow corn. There is thus no doubt that the lawn is long established. Along the east side of this grassy open space, FE proposes that felling should take place in about 13 acres of woodland, but this will not be continuous cutting, but rather the removal of clumps and parcels of trees so that the actual area cut will probably be about half this extent. This is not the Scots pine of Ober Heath, but rather what the foresters used to call emergent high forest. In other words, in those early post-war days of moderate stocking densities, young oaks were able to get established protected by blackthorn and hawthorn and now comprise a considerable element of "new" woodland – if not yet particularly attractive trees. Oaks are mixed with willow, old thorn and other trees which it is intended will be cut at the same time. The better clumps of oak and individual character trees will be retained.

When considered in isolation from the remainder of the Forest, with its obvious tides of woodland expansion and contraction, the scheme seems quite justifiable – but you should not judge bits of the Forest divorced from the whole. Along the western edge of Balmer Lawn is Hollands Wood camp where every last stem of natural regeneration has been suppressed for fifty years. The older oak and beech trees have been felled or horribly mutilated in the interests of campers' safety and the ground is stamped flat and consolidated by years of vehicle wheels, tents and general recreation. Fifty-seven acres of ancient woodland overlooking Balmer Lawn are thus dying a slow but inexorable death, while on the other side of the green some small compensation is now to be eliminated.

Across the whole Forest the rate of death of the A&O woods exceeds any advances secured in the early post-war years, but there is no attempt in the plans of management to correct this imbalance. An official box needs to be ticked for having secured the removal of advancing woodland, in order to satisfy Forestry England's ecologically driven paymasters. In this part of the Forest alone, Hollands Wood, Denny Wood, Matley Wood, and Frame have been largely devoid of successful regeneration for the last half century, while ancient trees die in their hundreds. Most compensatory woodland advance it seems, has now to be eliminated by felling. A lot of careful thought has clearly been given to the detailed planning of the Balmer Lawn works, but those plans are too tightly focussed on one small area, ignoring the wider picture.

The final target of the present campaign of tree clearance is the area of hillside and valley floor west of Rufus Stone. Here the proposed tree clearance is directed to the margins of small

woods scattered across the landscape and to little clumps of trees within the larger woods. The total



area to be felled is small compared to the other two schemes and perhaps amounts to less than three acres of non-continuous tree clearance in all. However, over the greater part it is not restoration of lost lawns in any common-sense interpretation of that process. Ecologists seek to justify their objectives by reference to the presence of relic grassland plants within the woods and they often disregard historical and landscape evidence. There is certainly some present and former lawn here. Upper Canterton Green and the area immediately surrounding Rufus Stone have expanded in post-war years, while Coalmeer Lawn has suffered some Scots pine invasion, but invasion is the exception. The innumerable glades and wider open spaces between the woods were heathland until well into my lifetime and were so indicated on the 1869 Ordnance Survey maps where they are mostly classified as “furze”. I know memory can be an unreliable source of evidence, but there survives one colour photograph from about 1962, of the area immediately south of Blackthorn Copse. This shows the lost heathland (being crossed by riders) in its original form, while the second view taken sixty years later from the same spot demonstrates the transformation to grass. Lawns here have expanded greatly – they have not been lost.

Heavy grazing pressure and dunging have transformed the landscape here over the last half century so that the former vegetation has been replaced by grass. It is the extension of that grass (and not the restoration of lost lawn) which is the objective of the present felling plan, while at the same time nearby ancient woods like Long Beech and Stricknage are dying.

The New Forest of signs

The National Park should establish a new tourist advertising campaign inviting children to collect mobile phone photographs of signs in car parks. We seem to be in the middle of a sign explosion, right across the Forest. When the parks were first made in 1970, notices were very strictly controlled and only those approved by the Verderers were permitted. The car park name board and an occasional byelaw notice that nobody read and certainly nobody now enforces, was all that was allowed. Then pillars with a few notices exhorting visitors to behave themselves started to appear. Next there were information boards, maps, leaflet holders and all manner of other junk. Nearly all these started without consent of the Court and those that were approved were limited to one or two

locations. The Forestry Commission interpreted this as meaning that they could appear anywhere and everywhere.



The latest rash to infect the Forest, again without the Court's consent, includes what one Verderer described as "begging boards" inviting the public to donate money to Forestry England. There are also over one hundred new Public Space Protection Order boards which are likely to be as ineffective as the byelaw notices. Even worse, large posters (requiring three-post supports), have started to appear on the Open Forest telling the public of the excellent service it receives from Forestry England – see photograph. Why the poster should include a large photo of Dartmoor or some other rock-strewn scene of forestry activity is quite unclear. I have seen these at Hasley, Pignal and Amberwood, but no doubt they will spread across the Forest.

A couple of years ago I counted sixty-two separate notices in the two adjacent car parks at Wilverley and I estimated that this was one notice for every three cars. No doubt they have been busy breeding ever since. Last week there were nineteen notices in the larger of the two parks at Boltons Bench (Lyndhurst) with the fresh soil from digging-in new posts still apparent, so this looks like an even more generous allocation of notices per car than at Wilverley. Goodness knows when or if this madness will cease.

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