

New Forest Notes - December 1995

Animal Welfare Politics

Back in the early part of the summer, there was universal horror and disbelief in the Forest community at the news that the RSPCA intended to prosecute one of the agisters for allegedly causing unnecessary suffering to a Forest pony. Not only were the allegations preposterous to anyone who knows Jonathan Gerrelli, but they demonstrated an extraordinary attitude on the part of the RSPCA which, until then, had worked closely with the Verderers and other national welfare organisations.

All attempts to make the Society see sense fell on deaf ears. Conversations with some of its officers who actually understood the Forest and who worked daily with the agisters, suggested that there was acute embarrassment within the RSPCA itself at what was being done. Similarly, even some members of the local welfare ginger group seemed, very uncomfortable. However, the case went ahead and for five days in November, Mr. Gerrelli, his family, friends and colleagues were made to suffer in the magistrates' court until he was acquitted.

The facts of the case were very simple. The agister asked a commoner to remove from the Forest a sub-standard mare. Whether or not he had received an earlier report of the animal, on which he should have acted, was a matter of dispute. The agister's request was not complied with and the mare remained on the Forest. Eventually she deteriorated to the point where all agreed that she was in distress. The magistrates convicted the owner for causing unnecessary suffering and required him to pay substantial costs. The mare was confiscated. There were various complicating factors and conflicts of evidence, but the RSPCA had attempted to place upon the agister a responsibility for the mare's welfare which was properly that of the animal's owner alone and which went far beyond the duties of the officer laid down by his employers, the Verderers' Court. The Society alleged a neglect of this responsibility but the magistrates found against it and dismissed the case.

To this day it remains a mystery as to why the Society suddenly turned, on the Verderers' Court and its agisters, without any prior warning or expression of dissatisfaction with the steady progress being made to improve Forest stock. No doubt Verderers and agisters will continue to have dealings with the RSPCA in the future and I am sure that every effort will be made to ensure that, on the Forest's side, these dealings will be courteous and efficient. However, it takes more than courtesy and efficiency to make real progress in any endeavour. Trust and mutual respect are other essential ingredients which it may take the RSPCA a long time to re-establish. By alienating the entire Forest farming community, it has made the task of all concerned in managing the Forests animals immeasurably more difficult. I am sure that none of those concerned in the management of the Forest holds any brief for those who deliberately ill-treat animals. Indeed, the Commoner Defence Association has repeatedly urged the Verderers to make more vigorous use of the bylaws. It is the unwarranted attack upon an agister trying to do his duty under difficult circumstances which must be regarded as the saddest chapter in the long struggle to achieve a high standard of animal husbandry in the Forest

A Watery Grave

Those who manage Forest animals are very used to being kicked, bitten or stamped on, but there also seems no end to the ingenuity of livestock in its perpetual war against the human race. This is illustrated, by two stories involving Forest ponds - one from October and the other from the distant past.

On a wet night about six weeks ago, a mare was struck and seriously injured by a motor vehicle near Hatchet Pond. Her would-be rescuers, including Mr. Jeff Kitcher of Furzey Lodge, succeeded in securing her by a ring rope (the commoners' substitute for a lasso around her neck), but the mare was wild and in pain. With Jeff on the end of the rope she plunged into the darkness and, within moments, the two of them were deep in Hatchet Pond. This stretch of water, beloved of the summer duck-feeding public, had its origins as a series of marl pits in the 18th Century or earlier. These seem to have been deliberately amalgamated to form the mill pond at Hatchet. Its bed contains deep and treacherous chasms which have claimed more than one human life. There is also the usual crop of stories about wartime aircraft and vehicles concealed in its depths. However, on this occasion, the pond was cheated of both its victims, although the mare subsequently died, as much from water in her lungs as from the injuries she sustained in the accident.

The second story does not have a happy ending. It is a gruesome tale of bucolic lust and violence told to me by a colleague as we drove back from a late meeting across a mist-swathed Forest on Halloween night.. However, apart from the time of its telling, I have no reason to doubt its truth.

Many years ago, in the village of Minstead, there was a man who owned a cow which he wished to put in calf. The cow was on heat and this fact, like that of Marley being dead must be distinctly understood. In those days there were no obliging technicians driving smart cars from the A1 centre at Lyndhurst to give discreet attention to such matters. The man accordingly decided to take his cow to the bull on Mr. lights farm at Canterton, about a mile away across the Forest to the north. The era of Landrovers and trailers had not then arrived and the pair set off to the bovine wedding on foot the man leading the cow. He never reached his destination and was never seen alive again. In due course his drowned body was recovered from Stanlidge Pond, an uninspiring pool on the edge of Stricknag Wood.

What happened during that short walk across the Forest is entirely a matter of conjecture. However, the finger of suspicion (whether the coroners or that of informed local opinion) pointed towards the amorous cow. When consumed by the desire for a mate, some cows will mount anything and, in the absence of one of their own species, are perfectly prepared to regard any nearby human as an acceptable substitute. Those knowledgeable in the ways of cattle therefore concluded that the unfortunate farmer had died under the sudden and unexpected embrace of his cow which knocked him perhaps unconscious into the pond where he drowned. Whether the cow made it unaided to Canterton and her subsequent fate is not recorded. It is a series of events which I feel sure should be covered by some obscure Chinese proverb and goes to prove what a dangerous place the Forest can be.

Forest of Signs

Seven years after the New Forest Review report which gave firm recommendations on signs in the Forest, the various bodies concerned with management remain incapable of working together to control the proliferation of ugly and disfiguring notices. Indeed, the latest outrage is actually the work of the New Forest District Council. The Council, against the wishes of the Verderers, has designated the Godshill road (B3078) as the "Roger Penny Way" and has erected hideous plastic signs proclaiming this at Bramshaw Telegraph, Brook and Godshill. Roger Penny was a much respected local highway official who was sympathetic to the Forest and I suspect he might have been as disgusted at what has been done as are the numerous people who have come to me asking how the Verderers could have allowed such a disfigurement. Of course they did not allow it. It was simply done without consultation and removal of the offending signs is now being sought. Unless the Council can show that their signerecting powers override the New Forest Arts, their action would appear to constitute a trespass against the commoners which is liable to action in the Verderers' Court.

How a planning authority, which one would expect to give a lead in matters of design and conservation, could do such a thing is beyond belief. However, they are not alone in their careless attitude to the protection of the Forest. The Forestry Commission whose own signs are generally modest and in keeping with the Forest, seems powerless (or unwilling) to control the actions of certain commercial establishments who see in the Crown land an easy advertising opportunity. At Cadnam, for example, on the principal entrance to the Forest, a tier of hotel advertising is constantly growing. At New Park, a dreadful range of illuminated signs (most of them quite indecipherable from a moving vehicle) disfigures Sporelake Lawn. This is just about the last place in the Forest where the Commission should allow illuminated signs. Even the County Council has joined this spree of unnecessary signing. Anyone who doubts this need only look at the clutter surrounding the junction of the Ornamental Drive with the A35.

In the matter of signs, if nowhere else, there was surely a role for the co-ordinating activities of the New Forest Committee. It needed no statutory powers or national park designations - just a banging together of local authority heads, but in five years nothing has been done and the problem becomes steadily worse.

I was intrigued to learn how one enterprising West Country planning authority has tackled the problem of illegal advertising signs. It simply sent its officers out to pull them down. The offender was then told that his sign could be collected from the nearest council depot. If the sign subsequently reappeared it was removed again and deposited rather further away. With each removal the recovery of the sign was made more inconvenient so that eventually the advertiser, gave up in disgust. The New Forest could do with some imaginative thinking such as this, but I suppose we shall go on in the same old way with a complete lack of co-ordination among those who are supposed to be protecting the Forest landscape.