

NEW FOREST NOTES FEBRUARY 2020

The future of Rockford and Ibsley Commons

Last month I had the opportunity to attend a National Trust lecture at Rockford Common in which a local manager announced large-scale plans for felling trees on its land there and on the adjoining Ibsley Common. The meeting was held chiefly to inform the local parish council of what will happen, but a few outsiders like me had also been invited. The meeting was not actually billed as a lecture, but that is what it amounted to as the organizers quickly made it clear that this was not a consultation, but simply an announcement of what would be done. This appeared not to be very much to the liking of those councillors who spoke and who lamented the fact that other local people had not been invited to attend, despite being deeply affected by what the Trust will do.

The event started with the staff member outlining five criteria which had determined the felling programme, all of which had an ecological basis. When I asked why the “National Trust for Places of Historic Interest or Natural Beauty” had not even mentioned the landscape consequences of what it intended, I was met with incredulous looks as if to say that this was really a very old-fashioned idea. The implication was that all that mattered today was rather obscure scientific objectives. Local people and visitors who valued the beauty of the commons would just have to accept that big brother knows best. When someone else suggested that the plan flew in the face of the current widespread desire to retain and plant more trees, the answer was that heathland was better at dealing with carbon than are trees.

The plans are for clumps and parts of clumps of Scots pine, birch and Turkey oak to be cut down. Other areas will be “thinned” – a process more appropriate in the management of commercial plantations and which results in regimented blocks of trees rather than the gentle lines of naturally developed woodland. The promoters seemed to have little understanding of, or interest in, the characteristics of such natural woodland or of individual landscape trees, which make both valuable to anyone who appreciates the beauty of the New Forest.

I presume it will now be for the parish council and for their electors to take things further with the National Trust, but I have to say that my experience of such work on other Trust land in the Forest has been far from a confidence-building one. At Hale Purlieu the Trust owns 430 acres of common land. It started clearance of Scots pine there about 40 years ago. The work was carefully planned, with trees and clumps of landscape importance being retained and with assurances given as to their protection in future. In recent years, however, all these undertakings have been violated as large areas have been reduced to a treeless waste in the centre and south of the Purlieu. I fear that the residents of Rockford and Ibsley can have little confidence that this is not a pattern of actions which will be repeated in their area too. Of course the maintenance of blocks of open heathland is important and not least for its landscape value, but the Trust seems to be obsessed with cutting down trees for its own sake or perhaps to allow it to secure some landscape-blind central funding. In return for this it has to be seen to be “doing something”.



One of many fine landscape trees cut down on National Trust land near Millersford in 2017 (left) and the same view today (right)

As to the actual plans, the site meeting did not even visit the bulk of the affected areas - mostly where broadleaved trees are to be cut – but rather concentrated on a small clump on Ibsley Common, considerably less than a quarter of an acre in extent, but important in the landscape especially when viewed from the north east. It adjoins the former Newlands Plantation where the Trust (or its lessee) has recently cut down conifers to the extent of four hundred times the area of this landscape feature. The arguments in favour of eliminating this tiny surviving fragment of woodland seemed to me particularly weak.

At Paddy Bussey's Firs, probably the most ancient New Forest planting of Scots pine, several trees survive from the mid-18th century. They are now surrounded by a small naturally-established wood. Here the scheme will see felling of about half the wood and thinning of the remainder.

Before I am accused of being an unthinking supporter of alien trees within the New Forest, I should say that I spent much of my early time on the Verderers' Court campaigning for the clearance of large areas of naturally regenerated pine throughout the Forest. This was at a time when the Forestry Commission still saw such regeneration as being a clandestine way of expanding commercial forestry onto the heaths. Things are very different today, but in management the need for balance of competing interests remains. Today it is the hostility to the protection of natural beauty which is wholly unjustified. In any case, Scots pine is not the alien it is often claimed to be. Writing in 1973, the late John Lavender (later amenity verderer and an acknowledged authority on the Forest) wrote of Scots pine "It is recorded from the last interglacial phase, and though absent during the last full glacial period, it returned some 12,000 years ago as soon as the improving climate would permit," eventually dying out locally only in the Roman period.

Protecting Forest verges

The latest work in protecting verges from damage by car parking has been taking place around Fritham and down the Bolderwood Road to Emery Down. The idea is to prevent mini car parks forming whenever a driver finds it inconvenient to use the official parks and instead accesses his favourite haunt by driving onto the grass verge and wearing it out. The method employed is to

block off these unofficial stopping places using dragons' teeth (short wooden posts) which are hammered into the affected verges to form anti-car obstacles. The intention of the work is entirely laudable and I know that a lot of effort has been put into seeking good results, but it does suffer from a fatal flaw. This is what the former deputy Surveyor, Donn Small, christened "the shunting effect". By this he meant that any piecemeal attempt to control recreational damage on a particular area of Forest land immediately displaces that damage to the next available location. In his days, of course, it was large-scale parking actually on the Forest as opposed to today's less serious erosion of verges, but the theory still holds good today. His solution was to provide comprehensive plans to control damage across large areas and these were implemented one after the other until the whole Forest had been dealt with. It was an excellent strategy and the lessons from it should have been better learned (or remembered) than they appear to have been.

The current blocking of unofficial parking places is simply displacing pressure to the next available slot and that is often immediately adjoining or only a few yards down the road. Examples may be seen at Woosons Hill and near James's Hill, where errant drivers simply shift their activities to adjoining patches of verge grass and create a new worn out area. Dragons' teeth are a very expensive form of blocking (up to ten times the cost of ditching) so that this is a costly and unfortunate mistake. It would have been a simple matter to plan protection to cover much greater lengths so as to guard at least all those areas likely to be attractive to users. Of course there will always be a few people who will resist even the most reasonable controls and the Verderers were told that some of the new work was vandalized within days of being installed.

While better and more comprehensive planning is an essential first step, the forestry authorities also seem incapable of grasping the regulatory nettle which makes verge parking a perfectly legal, if anti-social and damaging activity. From the byelaw which prohibits driving vehicles on Forest land there is specifically excluded parking "by the side of a highway for a stop of reasonable duration for refreshment or other reasonable cause". Clearly this sabotages any effective control of verge parking other than continuous physical obstructions. It is high time they took action to close this loophole.

The Brockenhurst allotments battle

At time like this, when the Verderers are fighting increasing attempts to encroach on common land in the Forest, it is interesting to reflect on events exactly one hundred years ago at Brockenhurst. Early in 1920, the Lymington Guardians, the Brockenhurst Parish Council and the Brockenhurst Allotments Society were all involved in an attempt to enclose four and a half acres of Forest at The Weirs. The land was intended for allotments to be made available to soldiers returning from WW1, but the whole process quickly became a classic New Forest tangle, not helped by the fact that the Crown was confused about what land (and where) was actually being sought. A petition from 593 commoners against the encroachment was countered by one signed by 163 Brockenhurst people. The Commons Preservation Society and various councillors quickly became involved. Eventually the Verderers, after exhaustive enquiries, issued an order against all concerned that the work should

stop. In those days there was still an effective judicial arm of the Verderers – the court of swainmote. Some at least of the promoting bodies backed down in the face of this order, but activity on the site continued. In August two working men (Painter and Munday) were prosecuted in the swainmote. One of them claimed in evidence that he had recently returned from “keeping back the Germans”.

The Verderers fined each defendant £1 – a not inconsiderable sum for a working man in those days. The Court also ordered that the 3ft deep trench which had been dug around the site should be filled in and so it eventually was. Today, however, faint traces of its alignment can still be followed on the ground and these were plotted seventeen years ago by a local history society. I doubt if there are many children of the participants in this battle still surviving who have (secondhand) memories of the events, but the surface of the Forest and the fading pages of the Verderers’ minutes keep the details alive.

Anthony Pasmore.