

NEW FOREST NOTES JANUARY 2020

Changing demands on Forest management

Last month the Advertiser and Times published a letter from retired Deputy Surveyor of the New Forest, Donald Thompson, in which he lamented (in the light of growing international pressure for tree planting to combat climate change) the clearance from the Forest of areas of conifer. A few years ago such views would have been regarded as heresy, damaging to the landscape and failing to meet increasingly strident ecological demands. Today they need to be taken more seriously, especially when they come from so authoritative a source. Suddenly the consequences of climate change seem very real and may need a re-think of management policies, even in places such as the New Forest where change comes very slowly.

Land management objectives seem always to have been cyclical in nature and not only in the Forest. Nearly thirty years ago I visited a farm near Studland where the owner told how his father had been paid by the government to plough up and destroy part of the Dorset heathland. He then (1992) was being paid, again by the government, to undo his father's work and restore the same fields to heath. This exactly mirrors management policies in the New Forest. In 1949 an Act of Parliament was passed to allow for the planting of trees on heathland in the Forest. Ultimately 2,000 acres of such planting took place. The work had multiple objectives including timber production for security of supply in times of conflict, screening nearby development and roads, preventing animals from straying out of the Forest and reducing road accidents involving commonable stock. It also, through payment of rent by the government, kept the Verderers from bankruptcy.

By the 1990s there had been a complete reversal of management objectives and the new plantations were being clear felled wholesale. Today only a fraction of the planted areas remains – chiefly where the trees are valued for their landscape contributions or because they are important to local people or for recreation. Indeed, it is really only the two great Waterside plantations of Dibden and Fawley Inclosures where anything like the original tree cover remains. Now, as climate change threatens, the pendulum seems likely to swing back towards forestry. Once again there are secondary considerations. The Waterside plantations are already being considered for reinclosure in part, to provide recreation space for dog walkers so that they can be segregated from grazing livestock. Such proposals would have been unthinkable only a decade ago.

As to the former Deputy Surveyor's suggestions for the planting of fast-growing poplars, pines and Douglas fir, I am sure that his ideas are likely to be controversial. If the first target for reforestation is parts of the Verderers' Inclosures, I doubt if much of the soil would grow Douglas fir successfully, to judge from the initial attempts of the 1950s. For this tree there might be greater opportunities in parts of the 18th and 19th century inclosures which have been similarly denuded of trees, such as Milkham and Pitts Wood. I have to admit that I regard proposals for the widespread planting of poplars on the Forest with a certain amount of dismay. Scots pine and the North American conifers by contrast have an established if not always universally welcome presence in the area's landscape.

Of course it is not only the Crown lands which have seen these fluctuating management policies in recent years. My own parish (Hale) has witnessed probably the greatest depletion of woodland area of any village in the New Forest. In 1980 there were about 400 acres of woodland, perhaps a fifth of the total land area. In twenty years something like a third of that woodland has been clear felled, with no intention of replanting. The work was no doubt done with the best of intentions (if not always with much sensitivity to landscape interests), but when judged by current thinking on climate change the extent of these clearances is overwhelming. They have to be considered alongside a further 100 acres adjoining (but outside) the parish boundary which has been similarly denuded. It is a rate of attrition probably equalled only in Third World countries now condemned for unsustainable deforestation.

I suppose most of us in the Forest feel reasonably secure from the immediate effects of sea level rise. I live at 100m above present sea level, but I doubt if I would feel so comfortable in Beaulieu or Hythe. A couple of years ago I attended a lecture in which the speaker outlined the consequences of sea level rise for the Forest's coastline. Apart from the distressing prediction of people losing their homes and livelihoods, the worst consequences it seems will be from rubbish. The coastal marshes have accommodated many decades of refuse dumping. Either excavation and relocation of this material upon a vast scale would be necessary, or enormous engineering projects would have to be undertaken. Concrete walls sunk deep into the predicted sea bed would have to surround the dumps and they would need to be protected for all time as refuse islands projecting out of an enlarged Solent. The loss of a few hundred acres of trees may seem insignificant beside this, but perhaps we all need to revise our ideas on climate change.

Higher Level Stewardship scheme

Over the last ten years or so the New Forest has received large government funds for various projects ranging from stream filling to aerial mapping. Some of this has been valuable and some of it controversial. All, however, has involved the employment of more staff, which relies on the continued flow of money. Now that the scheme is coming to an end, the government has consistently failed to give a clear indication as to whether or not the funding will be renewed. The general consensus seems to be that a continuation, which is for some reason called a "roll over", will occur, but it must be very unsettling for those employees whose future within the New Forest remains uncertain. They are in the Park offices, the Queen's House and among the Verderers' staff. Perhaps with the end of uncertainty over national government and its relationship with the EU, we may hope for a clear direction as to Forest finance in the years to come.

Signs in the Forest

The appalling clutter of signs which disfigures the New Forest, especially on the road verges, has long been of concern to the Verderers' Court. Signs are described in the Verderers' policy document as "a major problem", yet they seem to breed like rabbits. Despite the Court's worries over them, more seem to be approved at every meeting, usually on the grounds that they are essential for public safety. We have, for example, signs displayed adjoining forestry bonfires warning of "hot ashes". Other notices exhort the public not to "climb on the log stacks" and to refrain from jumping off

bridges into the water beneath. There is a growing welter of “temporary” animal accident signs which often end up in the ditch or facing the wrong way. Now we are about to see an explosion of “Livestock – keep your distance” signs in car parks throughout the Forest. These undoubtedly important warnings are designed and public-spiritedly provided by the New Forest Commoners’ Defence Association in response to the growing numbers of incidents involving confrontation between grazing livestock and (principally) dog walkers. Permission has been given for the display of these signs in Forest car parks for an initial period of six months.

I cannot help thinking that if Forest users and visitors would only behave in a sensible and civilized manner, the need for all this disfiguring junk could be largely eliminated.

Slap Bottom tree felling

There does not seem to have been much Christmas goodwill in the discussions over felling of a wood of Scots pine near Bur Bush car park at Burley, in an area with the curious name of Slap Bottom. Through the intervention of the local MP, Sir Desmond Swayne, the felling appears to have been “paused”, but not before a confrontation between forestry officials and some local residents. I presume that this means that after some shuffling of papers the tree cutting will simply be resumed.

The wood at Slap Bottom occupies a rather damp piece of ground right on the edge of Burley village and immediately adjacent to several houses and paddocks for which it provides a measure of privacy and protection. The trees are not, to my mind, individually important – nor is the wood as an entity particularly valuable in landscape terms. That does not mean that it is unimportant to adjoining residents. Bur Bush car park is a major visitor honeypot and I can understand how for local people anything which opens up the surroundings to more public use and disturbance could be very unwelcome.

As to the objectives of the work, the timber is surely of little value, while the clearing of this sodden site is not going to provide a sudden bonanza of additional grazing. I doubt if the felling will create an important sanctuary for wildlife. It is simply a box-ticking exercise in the unholy war against anything perceived as remotely unnatural within the New Forest. The Forestry Commission’s disregard of the views of some adjoining residents does therefore seem to be rather unneighbourly to say the least.

I am not sure on what evidence the authorities believe that this wood is a “lost lawn” of the Forest. It is shown on Driver’s Map (1787) as partly heathland and partly an encroachment field which was presumably abandoned later because of its waterlogged state. Early Ordnance Survey maps of twenty years later show very much the same. What these maps also suggest however, is that the extent of natural woodland in the immediate area declined in the early years of the 19th century and that the self-sown Slap Bottom wood and some adjoining fragments did something to redress that loss.

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