

NEW FOREST NOTES MARCH 2019

Chris Packham's New Forest programme

Mr. Chris Packham's "Inside Out" television programme for the BBC on the subject of grazing pressures in the Forest has produced an angry buzzing from the Forest establishment, such as might be the result of someone poking a wasps' nest with a sharp stick. The programme certainly ignored or misinterpreted some complicated statistics and I have to say that I don't find Mr. Packham's style of broadcasting particularly appealing, but that is not to say that some of the issues he raised did not have real substance. Of course the best way of attacking anyone's arguments is to pick on a few peripheral errors and to use them to rubbish the whole thing. The Forest has done a good job of that. For example there are "ghost cattle" included in the total stocking figures and the programme ignored this. Cattle are marked by the agisters and a fee of £24 per head is collected. A marking fee receipt is then produced and handed to the Rural Payments Agency so that a subsidy of about £460 can be claimed because the cow is deemed to be running on the Forest. Some cows, the ghosts, never go near the Forest. It is a dubious (but legal) paper transaction, but these animals nonetheless appear as part of the turn-out figures. How many are involved is unknown, but the Verderers think the number may be significant. The number of ghost ponies (collecting lesser subsidies), on the other hand may not be very great, but again there are no figures available. All of this, of course, does not alter the fact that stocking by (actual) grazing animals is at or near an all-time record, which I think was at the root of Mr. Packham's case. Unfortunately he went on to claim that the "right" number of grazing animals is 5,000, although it was not clear on what this figure was based or how it was justified. He might have done better to concentrate on the fact that, ghosts notwithstanding, the present stocking levels are unsustainable over large parts (but not all) of the Forest. For example, the National Trust has for many years been presiding over the ruin, in landscape terms, of its common land near Bramshaw. Here Mr. Packham's claim of a "billiard table" surface is fully justified. I have photographs of these commons from over fifty years ago showing expanses of beautiful and thriving heather which is now eliminated over large areas. The natural beauty of the land (supposedly a prime concern of the National Trust) has been destroyed and in some places all that remains is a sea of disagreeable mud, virtually bare of vegetation. I don't believe that the delight of certain rare plants and lichens in such devastated conditions is sufficient justification for this widespread neglect. The tipping point between sustainable use and overgrazing has been exceeded over much of the eastern side of the Forest, but to the west, away from many large herds of cattle, heathland such as Handycross Plain and parts of the western Adjacent Commons have yet to reach that stage.

Perhaps the most compelling part of Mr. Packham's case relates to the complete lack of woodland regeneration on the Open Forest. This suppression of all re-growth of trees, caused by intense grazing pressure, need not cause concern when it occurs only over the short term. Indeed, periods of stagnation followed by expansion is characteristic of the history of these woods over the ages, determining their structure and natural beauty. Unfortunately we are now well beyond the short term. The open woodland (called the "ancient ornamental woods") is now in an advanced state of failure and the process has been accelerating throughout the post-war years. Perhaps a diligent

search might reveal one or two recent saplings in some of the denser scrub areas of the south west Forest, but the large tracts of A&O woodland in the centre and east seem in a state of terminal decline. It is not the grazing and browsing alone which is responsible for this, although they are a major factor. The older generation of oak and beech is now nearing the end of its natural life and it has suffered terribly from storms and drought. Huge numbers of beech trees were killed by the drought of 1976, while the storms of 1987 and 1990 made matters worse. In 1875 the Commissioner of Woods predicted that in a hundred years Mark Ash Wood would be a treeless waste. His timing was wrong by perhaps 50%, but we are now fast progressing towards a fulfilment of his prophesy and any natural regeneration which might have saved the wood has been systematically eliminated over at least two human generations. Mark Ash is not alone. Denny, Matley, Eyeworth, and Burley Old (thrown open) are just a few of the worst examples of what is happening across the east and central parts of the Forest in particular. Nowhere but in the Ashurst -Cadnam-Lyndhurst triangle is there an adequate successor generation on a large scale and even there new re-growth is now stopped.

An interviewee on the Inside Out programme, Mr. Jonathan Spencer, is a longstanding authority on the A&O woods and expressed his concerns less colourfully than Mr. Packham, but to my mind with rather better effect.

Leaving aside all the bluster on both sides of the argument, I think there is actually quite a lot of agreement on some of the fundamentals. At the heart of the present problems (and not simply those of grazing pressure) is a thoroughly rotten subsidy system which rewards every cow marking fee paid with a net profit of over £400 in respect of animals turned out into the Forest (or deemed to be so depastured), so long as the owner possess what is called an "entitlement" in respect of that animal. I think few people who understand the Forest would support this system. The Verderers are well aware of the problems it causes and I have heard it condemned by an RPA official. Of course we are constantly told that Brexit will correct this nonsense, but I have grave doubts about such optimism. Only in the New Forest is the system such a disaster: it works more or less satisfactorily on other common land where the rules are different and give better control. The situation here would certainly be improved by a root and branch change in the New Forest subsidy regime, but it is already too late for that by itself to be a cure. The Forestry Commission has for so long been in flagrant disregard of its statutory duties to protect the A&O woods that drastic action is called for, while at the same time learning from all the mistakes which were made in the 1950s when the last attempt was made to promote natural regeneration.

I find it very sad that the old amenity societies which would once have championed the protection of the woods seem to have declined into mere cosy talking-shops. The time when the leaders of those once effective forces, such as the late Tim Dixon, Jean Cobb and June Irvine achieved much, now seems very far off.

Sir Harry Burrard Neale

I have followed with interest the reports of the excellent and long-overdue work to restore the Burrard Neale monument at Lymington. The famous admiral's public exploits are well recorded, but one of my own forebears served under him in the 1820s and family papers give a tiny glimpse behind the scenes of naval life at the time.

My ancestor (Charles) joined the navy at an even earlier age (11 years) than his illustrious cousin and later commander. He was quickly in action and, apparently on *HMS London* in 1806, at the capture of the *Marengo*. By 1811 he was serving on *HMS Victory* and is reputed to have slept at the very spot where Nelson died. This must have been a particularly hard time for the young man as his eldest brother, Paul, died at the infamous retreat to Corunna – killed by the same shell that dispatched Sir John Moore to whom he was aide-de-camp. Charles's next brother, John Thomas was drowned while on active service in Weymouth Bay and a third brother, William, was killed in the assault on San Sebastian, also in the Peninsular. Finally his father (General Sir Harry Burrard), described as a brave but undistinguished soldier, was captured by the French and passed much of this time in captivity in drawing. He died in 1813 and was succeeded by Charles, who then became the second and last Baronet Lymington.

Charles's career advanced rapidly with command of several ships including *HMS Grasshopper*, employed in the Channel against smugglers and *HMS Hind* described as "a handsome frigate". Finally the two cousins came together on *HMS Revenge* with Sir Charles serving as flag captain to the admiral, Sir Harry Burrard Neale. *Revenge* was a 74 gun ship and had been one of Nelson's fleet at Trafalgar. She was now in the Mediterranean and often at Naples where Charles met and married Louisa, daughter of Sir Henry Lushington, our Consul General in the state. For nearly a year the newly-married couple and the admiral and his family lived together on the ship. The party, headed by Lady Neale, included her adopted daughter and husband. Writing many years later



my great aunt, Emily Nelson, added that it also included "...ladies' maids in proportion. It is a wonder that it was fairly peaceful."

A picture, painted by Sir Charles, shows *Revenge* going from Naples to Castellammare in the autumn of 1825.

After paying-off, probably the next year, Sir Charles left the navy and returned to the New Forest, living first at Fawley

near the family home (Calshot Castle), then at Hythe and finally Lyndhurst. His life seems to have been devoted to his growing family, the Church, travel and to the exercise of his considerable talent as an amateur artist. Admiral Burrard Neale by contrast seems to have served a few more years in

the navy before concentrating on politics as part of a life of public service which led eventually to the building of the Walhampton obelisk following his death in 1840.

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