

NEW FOREST NOTES MARCH 2020

The results of February's storms

The wild weather which dominated most of February has had an inevitable effect on the Forest's woodlands and I several times encountered the Forestry Commission's team clearing fallen trees from the roads. Away from the highways I get the impression that the damage is not quite so bad as might have been expected and it is certainly not on the same scale as that caused by the 1987 and 1990 gales. This may be partly because in the Ancient Ornamental woodland so many of the very old and vulnerable trees have already been destroyed and little now remains of the fine pollarded beeches which figured so much in early 20th century postcards and book illustrations. Even in my youth the Forest contained innumerable such trees, but today only scattered examples remain in the old woods. A particularly fine pollard was destroyed by the gales three weeks ago just outside Holidays Hill Inclosure on the Bolderwood road into Lyndhurst, while the margins of the B3078 road remain littered with broken trees from Fritham to Cadnam weeks later. On the other hand, in a two and a half mile walk through one of the largest ornamental woods in the Forest (Bramshaw Wood), I encountered only two freshly destroyed beeches. This wood enjoys some protection from the west wind as it is on an east facing slope.

One of the problems with the great pollarded beeches is that many of them are at or near the end of their natural lives. It used to be said that such trees dated from before 1698, when the process of pollarding was made illegal in the New Forest. An Act of Parliament of that year provided that: *if any forester, keeper or under keeper or other officer or any person by their order direction or*



Ancient pollards at Soarley Beeches near Burley

procurement or any other person whatsoever, shall top, lop or browse any tree of oak or beech in the said Forest, such officer, keeper or under keeper for every such offence shall forfeit ten pounds and

be utterly incapable of being a keeper, under keeper or officer in any forest . . . While this pre-1698 dating may be generally correct, it is unlikely that the Act was strictly observed to start with and no doubt the practice continued well into the 18th century, if on a reduced scale. Most of our remaining pollards are thus likely to be between 250 and 300 years old.

Pollarding comprised the cutting off of the stem of “maiden” trees above the height where re-growth could be damaged by browsing ponies and deer. The tree then put out new branches which gradually developed into the well-known shapes (short stem and multi-branched crowns) which came to define our old woods. The re-grown branches were then probably harvested from time to time, but the cutting sowed the seeds of the tree’s ultimate destruction. The huge crowns, beautiful as they appear, were unstable and vulnerable to storms. Fungal decay then entered the tree through the wounds from wind damage or cutting.

About forty years ago the Forestry Commission made an attempt to create new pollards in Knightwood Inclosure. I think they mostly targeted oaks, but I am uncertain where the treated trees were or if the experiment worked. I don’t think this is the only such trial there has been in the Forest, although as usual with experimental work here, the recording has been inadequate. In Sloden Inclosure, on the west side of Sloden Hole, there is a line of beech trees which must have been pollarded prior to the last war, but I have yet to discover any details of the work. Natural pollarding – where one falling tree breaks off the top of its neighbour – also occurs, but is quite rare.

As I have said before in these Notes, the survival of much of the ancient woodland of the Forest is under considerable threat because for decades past there has been virtually no natural regeneration of oak and beech within vast areas. Browsing pressure from livestock and deer has very largely suppressed any new growth. In an interesting article in its journal last year the New Forest Association explained how thriving was natural regeneration in the years immediately following WW2. However, this altogether misses the point that today with a nominal 15,000 grazing animals, boosted annually by large subsidies, conditions are very different from the 1950s when the total was recorded as around 4,000. I know these figures are somewhat distorted by “ghost cows” which collect their money but never actually appear on the Forest and by under-payment of due fees in the pre-subsidy era, but the devastating upward trend in numbers is incontestable. It should also be said that that until 1964 a significant percentage of the ponies and cattle supposed to be on the Forest were not actually there, but instead were grazing the more attractive pastures provided by the lanes and open land surrounding the perambulation. The grazing pressure per head was thus significantly lower than even the modest turn-out figures of the 1950s suggest.

As to the effects of recent storms within the Inclosures (plantations of the Forest), I have not yet been able to get about sufficiently to make an overall assessment. One place which does seem to have suffered rather unusual damage is Burley Old Inclosure. This was once beautiful oak and beech woodland, much of which was mercilessly destroyed by the Forestry Commission in 1927 until its activities were curbed in a campaign, one of whose leaders was the then Lord Manners – predecessor of the present Official Verderer. Parts of the areas then cleared were later planted with

larch, the survivors of which are now very large trees. In the recent storms they have been snapped off like match sticks, rather than suffering the usual fate of conifers of being uprooted. In my own (northern) part of the Forest there also seems to have been a surprising amount of damage in private woodland and amongst hedgerow trees.

Use of the forest by helicopters

For many years past we have suffered bouts of disruption by military helicopters using the Forest for training. The noise is excruciating and often goes on for hours on end. I know it is legal, but it is about as inappropriate a use for the Forest as it is possible to imagine. I long ago gave up any hope that the much lauded “national park status” would do anything to curb the nuisance. Of course the military needs to train somewhere, but with huge reserves of land on Salisbury Plain already dedicated to firing, tank driving and so on, it seems utterly unreasonable that such disruption should be imposed on the Forest.

On 18th February I was working in the centre of the Forest and there were repeated noisy flights overhead. Then, as I returned home across Stoney Cross Plain, there was a large military helicopter motionless close to the ground. As it slowly edged forward its wheels came within a meter



Military training beside the road at Stoney Cross

of the grass and only 100m from streams of traffic on the road from Linwood which was presumably rat-running to avoid delays on the A 31. There is no time or place when such flying is acceptable in the Forest, but in the middle of the half term holiday and in an area heavily used for recreation and by

livestock, this was utter stupidity. Close by and just to the north people were flying a kite and the consequences of a collision with it might have been quite appalling.

Verderers' response to the Glover Report

For reasons that I don't understand, the national Park Authority asked the Verderers' Court to set out in writing its reaction to the Glover Report on national parks and other important landscape areas. In November last year I wrote in these notes about Mr. Glover's conclusions. Amongst other things his report proposed wider powers and finance for the parks and more encouragement for minority groups to visit the countryside. I can only assume that the National Park thought the Verderers would give enthusiastic support to the recommendations. In this hope I fear the Park will be disappointed. While regarding as "encouraging" various planning and financial suggestions, such as money for Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and the creation (not here) of a "national forest", the Verderers did not like the Glover Report. In the summary to their observations they said: "The Verderers were disappointed by the Glover Report. It is generalised and, in our view, contributes little of value to any debate on how the unique characteristics of the New Forest can best be maintained, preserved and indeed enhanced."

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