

NEW FOREST NOTES NOVEMBER 2023

The story of a dog attack in the Forest

I am of an age now when I no longer have a horse of my own, but several kind friends lend me one every couple of weeks, so that I can still potter gently about the Forest and convince myself that I am not entirely past it. Sometimes I am accompanied by another rider and on others by someone on foot. It was in the latter mode that, on one of those beautiful warm October days, I was in the Forest near Lyndhurst accompanied by the elderly, but very fit, owner of the horse I was riding. As we neared home and had just walked through a group of ponies grazing one of the numerous "lawns" there, a large and loose-running dog emerged from the woods to the west. That is such a common (if annoying) occurrence that at first, I saw no particular cause for concern. This quickly changed as the dog raced towards us barking loudly and clearly intent on attacking the horse. Again and again, it ran at her and each time I spun her round to face the dog head-on. That seemed to un-nerve the attacker and while the assault continued, the offender now appeared reluctant to get within range of any possible retaliation. In retrospect, perhaps my tactics were really not the best to adopt. From the other end of the victim, a well-aimed kick with a steel-clad hoof could have brought about an early end to the attack and perhaps a permanent end to the attacker. Still, one does not think of these things on the spur of the moment and horses are independent-minded. They cannot be relied on to kick when it might be most advantageous to do so.

While this was going on and perhaps twenty yards away, the horse owner was hurrying to protect her much-loved mare, but she never reached us. Instead, the dog thwarted in its assault on the mare, turned its attention to an easier and frailer target in my companion. If the dog owner had not finally caught up with his "pet" at this point, the consequences might have been too horrible to contemplate. As it was, my companion managed to free herself, dripping blood, from two small wounds on one arm and in a badly shaken state. There followed a three hour visit to Lymington hospital for tetanus and other treatment and dressing the cuts. Fortunately, no lasting damage seems to have been done and my friend, with a generosity which I certainly would not have been able to match, declined to report the incident to the police. Such an attack would have been frightening for anyone, but for a lady in her eighties it must have been absolutely terrifying. The mare, fortunately, escaped unhurt and behaved impeccably throughout.

The apologetic and no doubt very worried dog owner, to his credit, did not follow the usual policy in such encounters of hurrying off into the woods muttering abuse about "bloody toffs on horses", but this is not really about just an individual owner or even the individual dog. At issue is the utter failure of the authorities to ensure that the New Forest is given the basic minimum protection afforded to nearly every other area of common land in the country – namely that dogs must be kept on leads when in the vicinity of livestock and at all times during the nesting season. The supine attitudes of both Forestry England and the national park mean that nothing effective is done to put a stop to this anarchy and that is where the fault lies. Mealy-mouthed assertions that with education, training and

the issue of dog management codes all will be well, have demonstrably failed over many years and will continue to do so.

The claim that many dogs are well-behaved and trained is entirely beside the point. The dog is a carnivore and in its natural state must hunt and kill for its very survival. The instinct to do so is deeply embedded, just as is the instinct to protect its young in otherwise peaceful large herbivores. Every year dozens of unnecessary attacks on Forest animals occur simply because the Forest is treated as inferior to every other area of common land, when it comes to livestock and recreation management. So, until there is some terrible tragedy in which a child loses its life, we will go on witnessing increasing numbers of these horrible attacks.

Ear-tagging Forest Ponies

September's road accident figures for Forest livestock showed a depressing, if small, rise in numbers on an annual basis. The worst time of the year is yet to come and we will be lucky if the 2023 totals do not show an overall increase. The endless search for a solution (which does not exist short of road fencing) goes on. The best that can be hoped for is that over the years the numbers can be held steady or marginally reduced, by such measures as the cutting of scrub on the verges, education of motorists, speed traps and reflective collars. There is, however, one suggestion that keeps coming up and which needs to be clearly and finally ruled out. This supposed solution is that ponies should be fitted with reflective ear tags.

Whether ear tagging ponies is actually illegal on welfare grounds I do not know, but it certainly should be. Anyone who is used to horses will know that the ears are perhaps the most sensitive part of the animal's body. Many horses cannot bear even to have their ears touched, let alone have a hole punched through them. I remember that years ago when it was common for Dartmoor ponies to be shipped up to the Forest, some came with ear tags installed and the ear wounds were almost invariably infected. Back in the 1960s the Commoners Defence Association also undertook some experiments with such tags, again with nasty and painful results.

I always used ear tags on my cattle because the law requires cattle owners to do so, but it was an unpleasant task and painful for the victims. When hot branding of cattle was banned and "brand ear tags" or freeze branding was substituted (in addition to the ministry tags) I always felt that the pain inflicted was much worse than an expertly applied hot brand. Today, of course, hot branding remains legal for ponies as identification of the owner and there is no need to mutilate the ears, even if doing so could produce some small element of additional road safety.

Peculiar autumn conditions

After the blistering summer temperatures of 2022, both the Forest and surrounding farmland looked, for a while, like a desert. This year conditions have swung to the opposite extreme. Parts of the Forest, which would normally by this time be virtually bare going into winter, look almost like lush meadows and it is quite rare to come across a pony or cow which is not comfortably fat. Unfortunately,

the same vegetation is present in fields surrounding the Forest and almost every horse owner I have spoken to is having to take stringent precautions against laminitis or is already paying crippling vet's bills for its treatment. Laminitis is a condition affecting horses' feet and is extremely painful and difficult to deal with. It particularly affects over-weight animals stuffed with rich grass and lacking adequate exercise. On top of this, there is the periodic problem of acorns. In large quantities they are poisonous to both ponies and cattle. In the spring it looked as though there would be a huge crop, but in fact not all trees are affected. In general, many of the old oak plantations of the Forest seem relatively free of the problem, while roadside oaks and hedgerow trees are loaded. That is not good news for those ponies which run in villages. For them it is particularly easy to shovel up large quantities of nuts very quickly from the hard tarmac surfaces.

Other Forest vegetation has shown peculiarities as well. Rhododendron (which flowers in May) has been attempting a second flowering in mid-October. This is particularly marked on National Trust land at Newlands Plantation near Ringwood. In the same area some bell heather plants seem to be attempting to flower again two months after the normal appearance of flowers in August.

Finally, and a great deal more worryingly, ash dieback disease has got a real hold on the Forest this summer, so that it seems only a matter of time before we face the same decimation of some of our woods as is already apparent in the West Country.

Another disease which I don't think can be blamed on the extraordinary weather is strangles. This is a very nasty illness affecting horses and ponies. It causes large swellings under the jaw and these eventually burst. There is discharge from the nose and the affected animal clearly feels most unwell. Sometimes the swellings occur in other parts of the body and then the result is often fatal. Scattered outbreaks of strangles have been occurring across the Forest for over a year and this season they have again led to the cancellation of a planned sale at Beaulieu Road yard.

Altogether perhaps we need a hard winter to put at least some of these oddities back in order.

2024 – an election year

The general election next year may be of more importance, but of no less interest within the Forest will be the Verderers' election, which usually takes place at the end of November. Two members of the court, Dave Readhead and Graham Ferris, complete their present terms and are entitled to stand again for election. There will be only two seats available this time, the majority of elected verderers having been chosen in 2021 for the usual period of six years. For the coming election, the New Forest District Council has kindly agreed to provide technical assistance in a process which has become increasingly complex over the years. An important objective this time will be to increase the number of people on the electoral roll. This has declined a good deal from its peak under the 1949 constitution and that is surprising given the immense interest shown in the Forest and its management. In the sixteen elections (or potential elections) since I joined the court, it has been repeatedly emphasized that although a property qualification determines who can vote, it is a very small qualification indeed. A great landowner possessing one thousand acres can vote, but so can

the short-term tenant of a small piece of abandoned orchard on which a riding pony is kept. Both need only one acre to which is attached rights of common, and the bulk of land in and around the Forest carries such rights.

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