

NEW FOREST NOTES OCTOBER 2019

Curious behaviour in the Forest

The last few weeks have brought to light a series of very curious behaviours amongst Forest users. The first and most notable was raised before the Verderers by Ms Fiona Gover in a presentment to the September Court. Ms Gover was riding on Ibsley Common (a part of the New Forest owned by the National Trust) when her horse was disturbed by a great commotion. This turned out to be caused by a party of people attempting to drive off cattle which were trying to drink at a pond near Whitefield Plantation. Six or more adults and a large number of children were trying to scare away the thirsty cows because the group was using the pond to float model boats. When challenged by Ms Gover, she says they claimed that they only wanted to banish the animals for twenty minutes and that the herd could perfectly well wait for their drink. Ms Gover was evidently not someone to be deterred by such inconsiderate nonsense and under her watchful eye the cow-drivers reluctantly conceded the priority of the cattle's need. They packed up their boats and left. Their leader had said "We have done this before", revealing an appallingly arrogant attitude to the rights of the Forest livestock. Indeed, the website of a local activities centre illustrates a recreation group in possession of the pond and near the same site shows a group of children on mountain bikes trespassing across the Open Forest. That, of course, is a byelaw offence, while interfering with the needs of livestock is certainly an offence against the Forestry Commission's regulations. These are dreadful examples to set for children who should be taught to respect the Forest. I am sure there are plenty of privately owned ponds in the Avon Valley which, for a price, could be made available for model boating, while there are over one hundred miles of legal cycle routes forming a dense network across the entire Forest.

The second example of bad behaviour was reported from the other end of the Forest, but again involved water – a major recreational magnet. At Hatchet Pond there are clear notices prohibiting boating, but during the summer these were widely disregarded and Forestry Commission staff seemed to ignore such activities, although they must have known what was going on. I quite understand that a single keeper or "ranger" would be reluctant to challenge such miscreants. Those whose "fun" is being questioned can be extremely abusive and perhaps even violent, but a concentrated blitz by a team of wardens, targeted on known trouble spots like Hatchet Pond at peak weekends, should be able to bring things under control. Of course the protection of the Forest is a principal concern of the byelaws, but in this instance there is also a real danger to those offending. One of my verderer colleagues who lives in that area told the Court that he had seen two people drowned in the pond during his lifetime, while I remember the terrible events of the summer of 1960 when a raft launched into the pond by two local brothers broke up resulting in the drowning of both boys.

The final abuse related to one of the many cycle events held in the Forest over the summer and which make conditions for other road users extremely difficult at the weekends. During this particular event, and in addition to innumerable temporary signs directing participants, the organizers

indulged in a mass programme of graffiti spraying on the roads. Fluorescent crosses and arrows are now to be seen at many road junctions across the north of the Forest. I understand that the perpetrators claim that their handiwork will wash off with the coming of rain, but similar markings applied during another rogue event three years or so ago are still plainly visible today. Still, if they are now made to undertake the hard work of scrubbing off their mess, I doubt if we will see a return of such bad behaviour in future.

Ring barking

Large amounts of money are being expended in the New Forest eliminating trees which are not regarded as politically correct, or in other words non-native trees such as Scots pine. In many instances this is entirely desirable work as where a mass of such naturally regenerated trees is invading heathland to the detriment of grazing and wildlife. On the other hand there is often a total disregard of landscape considerations when such work is undertaken. This disregard usually comprises the felling of individual specimen trees or clumps which are much valued by both local people and visitors. The worst offender is the National Trust, but work on the Crown lands is not far behind. I am not a great admirer of the National Park's advertising magazine "Park Life", but of the principal tree photographs which illustrate the Summer 2019 edition, two of the three are of Scots pine. The Tourist Association's 2017 guide book has a Scots Pine dominating its front cover, while the same is true of the winter 2018 edition of the New Forest Association's "Forest Matters". Even the Verderers, perhaps in a moment of absent mindedness, presented a recently retired member of the Court with a card featuring the tree at Rushmoor. Scots pine has been an integral element of the Forest's landscape for the best part of three hundred years and is widely appreciated today.

Where felling of any type of tree is required to protect the Open Forest, it is important that the job is done neatly and efficiently, but the National Trust has recently introduced the odious practice of ring-barking standing trees. This is presumably because it is cheaper and easier than doing the job properly. There have been examples of this at Hale Purlieu and on Ibsley Common. The results are hideous. The tree dies slowly with the needles turning brown and giving a diseased appearance before eventually dropping off. Then a gaunt skeleton remains, perhaps for years, and this not only disfigures the landscape, but ultimately constitutes a danger to both livestock and people as the remains become unstable.

Some years ago the Forestry Commission tried the same thing, notably near Matley Wood, but protests led to the abandonment of the practice. Now, probably because of staff changes or cost cutting it is proposing the same thing again – this time on the heaths and woods north west of Lyndhurst. As so often, the demands of scientific ecology are said to require precedence over the protection of the natural beauty of the Forest, despite the latter being a prime statutory duty of management in national parks.

Acorns

This autumn looks like being the worst year for acorns for some time. By “worst” I mean the heaviest crop threatening Forest livestock with poisoning and making life difficult for horse owners whose fields may contain hedgerow oaks. A forester planning natural regeneration in a cleared plantation would look at things differently. The pannage season (when pigs are allowed out to eat the Forest acorns) this year runs from the 9th September to 10th November, but due to the size of the crop there may well be an extension. The September Court was only a few days after the commencement of the season and no figures for the numbers of pigs paid-for were available. In any case their consumption of acorns, welcome as it is, will not appreciably reduce the threat overall. In many cases acorns are hanging off the trees like bunches of gapes.

The hidden Forest beneath our feet

This year has seen some significant discoveries illuminating the ancient history of the Forest. At Brockenhurst in August, Professor Tony King, chairman of the New Forest History and Archaeology Group, continued his excavation of an important Roman site, revealing new evidence of walls and floors in a densely wooded site close to the Lymington River. At Ashurst, Bournemouth University and the Park have established a much earlier date for a circular earthwork enclosure than had hitherto been assumed.



The site may well be Neolithic (about 5,000 years old) and the only confirmed feature of its period on Forest land. The result does, however, raise questions about similar enclosures at Linford and on Beaulieu Heath which might be of the same period.

Such sites, important as they are, are very rare in the New Forest and the bulk of our ancient features dates from between the periods of these two excavations, in the Bronze Age (about 3,500 years old). They are the enigmatic “boiling sites” or places where water was heated on a communal scale. They were first widely studied in Ireland and in Orkney, but we now suspect that the density of such sites in the New Forest is even greater than that in the most intensively used parts of Ireland. A recent (2018) study of the Latchmore Valley has shown that the watercourses there were widely used for this purpose.

Unfortunately many boiling sites were damaged by 19th century and earlier drainage, while under modern stream filling operations the losses have been compounded by further disturbance and burial of the evidence. Recent fieldwork has pushed the number of known sites to the remarkable total of over six hundred on the commonable lands of the Forest. Their original purpose remains a mystery with communal cooking, bathing, and industrial processes all having been suggested. They are usually evidenced by the presence of local flint which has been heated to a very high temperature and the thrown into water-filled troughs dug beside a stream or spring. If the process is continued for long enough the water temperature can be raised to boiling point and, if required, maintained there. Over the years a number of experiments have been carried out to replicate this process, and very hot work it has proved to be. The picture shows one such experiment on private land adjoining the north edge of the Forest.

Anthony Pasmore