

NEW FOREST NOTES JULY 2024

How to warn the pony-petters

After writing last month about my recent experience of pony-petters at Boltons Bench, I have heard from several people about the results of similar encounters. My own approach has always been a very low key one along the lines of explaining the dangers and also that several years ago a small child, visiting the Forest, received permanent brain damage from coming too close to a Forest pony. Occasionally the parents (it is almost always a parent and child combination) express gratitude for the warning, but more usually there is a sullen acceptance of the intervention of someone who is clearly a local busybody out to spoil their fun. Not infrequently the response is a nasty stream of abuse.

The latest such unpleasantness was received a couple of weeks ago by a long-time Forest resident and experienced handler of horses. An explanation of the dangers to both children and ponies was met with a vile explosion of bad language from a father whose children were feeding ponies beside the road. He did not need any advice from someone he then proceeded to abuse.

A more unusual encounter was described by a lady who runs ponies on the Forest. She found a family with a tiny child actually seated on the back of an unbroken and rather scruffy pony. She pointed out the extreme danger of such an activity. The family remained silent. They simply ignored the lady and continued petting the pony. Having achieved nothing so far and with an insight probably only available to a mother, she concluded her warning "and when you get home, do make sure to check the baby thoroughly for lice." The child was immediately whisked off the pony's back and the petting team made a hasty retreat.

New holly regeneration plots

Anyone who walks regularly in the Forest cannot have failed to notice the continued terrible decline of the old holly woods. Landscape clumps which have dominated the Forest for generations are being wiped out from Beaulieu to Godshill and there are very few woods which have escaped altogether. Holly is one more in a depressing list of trees being destroyed by pests, disease or mismanagement. All this is taking place in a forest virtually devoid of current oak and beech natural regeneration, throughout huge swathes of Open Forest woodland. The ravages of ash dieback disease also become more evident every day.

The problems with holly seem to have a number of contributory causes. Firstly, there is the ripping off of bark by ponies and deer. This has always happened to a small extent, but is now worse than I can ever remember it, due to high stocking levels and an absolute explosion in deer numbers. How responsibility is divided between these two categories of herbivores is a matter of dispute, but the consequences of this barking are indisputable. Often the trees are killed outright above the damage, but can be rejuvenated by felling to ground level. Where the holly is not immediately killed, the damage seems to allow or encourage the establishment of a fungal disease – *Neonectria ditissima* – which completes the destruction.

For some years Forestry England has been undertaking limited, but very successful treatments by coppicing or pollarding small plots within the damaged holly woods. The cut areas are then fenced to exclude all or some of the browsing. Where all access by large animals is achieved, the results have been remarkably good, but the re-growth is immediately attacked once the enclosing fences are removed. Some of this removal is intentionally to test the effects of resuming browsing pressure, but I think the consequences are already perfectly clear. Very interesting examples of the various treatments and periods of enclosure are to be seen beside the gravel road from Mogshade to Oakley Inclosure, north of the Bolderwood deer sanctuary.

If I have a criticism of the experiments so far, it is that some plots are far too small and the enclosures are not planned to remain fenced for long enough. Perhaps some revision is now needed. In the meantime, the Verderers have just approved six new enclosures at Berry Beeches, Bolderwood Hollies, Freeworms Hill (otherwise Fancy Trees), Ocknell, Withybed and Seven Holms. The last of these is a second attempt to save the clump in the past twenty-five years.



*Pony tearing the bark from ancient hollies
at Latchmore Bottom*

Who decides what in the Forest?

This is a question that has been debated with greater or less intensity for the last 150 years, since the verderers' Court was established. In 1877 an Act of Parliament provided for the future protection of the Forest and set up a body called the Verderers of the New Forest to ensure that the common land was protected and the character of the Forest maintained. The actual ownership of the land remained with the Crown (later with the government) while the Inclosures, greatly reduced in their effect on the commoners, fell largely outside the jurisdiction of the new court. From the very beginning there were disputes as to how far damaging works by the Crown, actual or technical, on the commons was allowed without the consent of the Verderers. Not until 1949 were these disputes partly resolved by another New Forest Act. The dividing line was further clarified in 1964 and 1970. For example, the last Act prevented the Forestry Commission from carrying out recreational development, like camp site building, without the Verderers' approval.

For a while the post-war solutions seemed to work well, but from time to time there have been periods when the FC (or FE) has become increasingly resentful of the protective powers of the Verderers. I don't think I am alone in seeing the present-day as one of those times and perhaps the most serious one in recent years. FE now regards the Open Forest as a potential source of tourist money and recreational opportunities which it would like to exploit. It therefore finds irritating the Verderers' control over such matters and seeks to evade the protection.

So exactly what damaging operations may FE undertake on the Open Forest with, or without the Verderers' permission? It may licence all sorts of utility development such as power lines, telephone poles and water pipes, but only with the Court's consent. Similarly, it may build tourist facilities such as car parks, camp sites, trails and cafes, but only if the Verderers' agree. If it wants to plant trees or whole woods on the common (for certain purposes), again the Court's approval is needed. On the other hand, it can allow the building of access drives to private property without consulting the Court and this is a potentially very profitable power. In practice, the Court is usually consulted, but no power of veto exists.

The other side of the coin is that the Verderers can do virtually nothing of a physical nature on the commons without the consent of the Crown. So, if a stock pound is needed for the safe management of ponies and cattle, or if short lengths of fencing are required to assist with round-ups, the approval of the King's House authorities must be obtained.

This system has worked for the last seventy years or so, but with a financially starved (so it is claimed) land manager in FE, there is understandable resentment of any restraint on money-making out of the Forest. Friction points have come over such things as food vans, ice cream sales, huge recreational events and the turning over of more and more of the Forest to disruptive public activities.

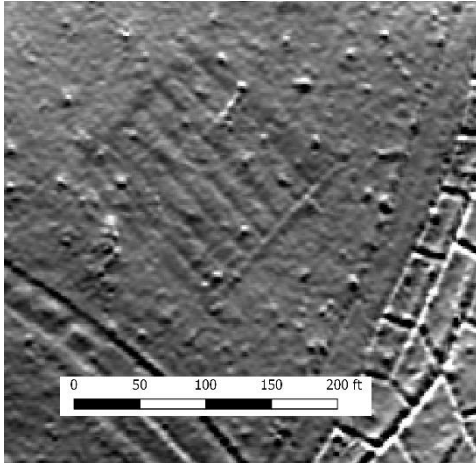
The waters have been muddied somewhat in recent years by the position of Natural England, which could do more to protect the Forest's traditional character, but in fact seems interested only in rather obscure ecological ideas. Natural beauty, tranquillity and cultural heritage are outside its sphere of interest. It is limited of course by its statutory remit. The national park is another simply nominal protector of the Forest, but in fact seems wholly uninterested in such crucial, but intangible, qualities. Like FE, and in disregard of its statutory priorities, for the national park tourism and commercial operations are the actual, but not admitted, primary objectives.

All this leaves the Verderers as the chief hope for the Forest's future. They have sometimes failed badly in the past, but they are still the main bulwark against a recreational and commercial free-for-all.

Glenbervie Nurseries

Although the Inclosures (plantations) of the New Forest occupy about a quarter of the Crown Lands, we know little about the physical work involved in their creation. This work included the construction of hundreds of miles of carefully formed hand-dug drains, most of which were maintained

even into my lifetime, but many are now abandoned – broken up by heavy forestry machinery and never repaired. There were also well-maintained grass rides, sometimes equipped with fine brick culverts, but all such brickwork is now destroyed and much of the ride network has become impassible in the years since the hunts ceased to have influence in the Forest. There are a few records of the costs of fencing etc, but as to the planting and early life of the woods, little is



A Glenbervie nursery c.1815, from lidar

known. An exception to this arose from the discovery, about a decade ago, of what has sometimes been called “Glenbervie Nurseries”.

Lord Glenbervie was an extremely active forestry officer at the beginning of the 19th century. In 1803 he was appointed Surveyor General of Woods and in 1809 he became the First Commissioner of Woods, Forests and Land Revenues. He was in charge of the Forests when an Act of 1808 confirmed the rather uncertain powers of making plantations in the New Forest. A huge wave of inclosure followed. The surviving fragments of his planting are among the most beautiful oak woods we see today, although he would no doubt have been shocked to find that today’s Royal Navy has no use for what he believed was destined to become the warships of the 21st century.

As to the discovery of the nurseries in the years following 2012, nobody I think, knows exactly how they worked. They vary in size, but are typically rectangular blocks about half an acre in extent. Within them is a series of carefully formed ridges at centres of about 20ft, separated by shallow depressions. They probably existed in most of the Inclosures of the period, but they are very fragile and many have probably been destroyed. The best guess is that they were used to accommodate (temporarily) the sapling oaks used in the planting or they held stocks of young trees to replace any that failed throughout the plantation.

Today the surviving nurseries are very vulnerable. As recently as March this year, timber hauling in Roe Inclosure (1811) has damaged one of the few survivors.

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