

NEW FOREST NOTES OCTOBER 2024

More trouble over the Bishop's Dyke

Two years ago (February 2022), I wrote about Forestry England's latest plans for stream filling at a place called Penny Moor within the Bishop's Dyke, north of Beaulieu. There, for ecological reasons, FE wished to fill in the last remnants of drainage systems in the area and to allow the bog land to expand over the adjacent grass. The scheme was later approved, much to the annoyance of some local commoners and in defiance of the evidence of historical land-use in the area. It has been extremely successful in achieving the objectives of the designers in that the remains of the adjoining lawn are becoming inundated and the targeted watercourse has been obliterated. The line of that course can still be identified, but only because of motorway style post and rail fencing. The fencing was necessary to protect ponies and cattle from becoming trapped in the enhanced swamp. The result is very unattractive, but the fencing will no doubt collapse in a few years. One rail is already down.

From a grazier's point of view, that was a battle lost from the moment the scheme was approved, so there is not much point in complaining about it at this stage. However, a new row is now developing over the manner in which the work was done and the state in which the site has been left following the departure of the ecologists' machines. Several presentments on the subject were made at the September Verderers' Court, including one from the retired head agister, Mr. Brian Ingreem.

Leaving aside the aesthetic objections to the (very necessary) motorway fencing, the present troubles are related principally to access for livestock and horse riders. In the centre of the Bishop's Dyke is a sandy ridge of about 27 acres entirely surrounded by bog. It is approached from the north (Furzey Brow) by a good causeway for both animals and pedestrians, but not vehicles. From the south, access used to be via two bridges which could also be used in emergency by vehicles. This southern access has effectively been wrecked. The north part has been replaced by a deep ford with defective approaches and littered with sharp logs. Beyond the ford to the south is a short length of causeway surfaced with rejects. These are the large blocks of sharp flint which are removed as a waste product during the making of concreting aggregate. Such material is painful to cross for ridden horses and even Forest livestock has been trying to avoid it by reducing the soft margins to mud. Forestry England simply will not learn from past mistakes. I recall many years ago the then Ministry of Agriculture Verderer (Mrs. Pat Thorne) objecting strongly to the use of rejects in a similar causeway near her home in Linwood. That problem was quickly remedied, but in other schemes rejects have been used again and again, despite protests. A notable example occurs west of Pitts Wood.

Further south from the rejects at Penny Moor, the approach to the causeway is poor and will deteriorate further as the bog spreads, unless remedial action is taken.

There is next the trackway which approaches the causeway from Frame Inclosure and which was used by the heavy machinery accessing the engineering works. This crosses the 13th century Bishop's Dyke earthworks, where the ecologists filled in the ditches, and gravelled the surface over a



The Penny Moor reject surface causeway

short length. The enclosure is not actually a scheduled ancient monument, so I doubt if the works were illegal, but they were certainly irresponsible. Even worse were the efforts to cover up this activity. In order to disguise the gravel, machines were sent into the surrounding heathland to secure materials for the work. At least seventeen shallow open trenches were dug, averaging about six feet in length and up to nine inches deep. These pits are no threat to riders on the track, but they are certainly more than capable of bringing down a horse and rider during colt hunting or drifting. In these activities the rider must follow the quarry wherever it goes.

Altogether the works at Penny Moor leave a great deal to be desired and they demonstrate the lack of understanding, under our present ecological controllers, of the Forest and its traditional management and grazing practices. Forestry England told the Verderers that the complaints would be looked into, so it will be interesting to see if any remedial work results.

The Blood Pounds

We have reached the time when there are very few commoners left who remember the events and great changes in land use which occurred in the Forest during World War 2. Even the subsequent generation's memories, acquired secondhand from parents and others, are fading rapidly. There are now many new and young commoners and that promises well for the future of the Forest, but a lot lack the connection and sense of continuity with the past which has been such an essential constituent of the local community. Still, there are one or two infallible sources of such history from the immediate post war years and they are always worth listening to. One such source I encountered in Denny Wood last month. In the course of a discussion about livestock and ponies in particular, he asked if I had ever heard of the Blood Pounds. This was a name quite new to me, although I had a fair

idea where the discussion was leading. Amongst the Verderers' papers, now stored at the Hampshire Record Office in Winchester, there are repeated references to the collection of a substance which used to be called pregnant mare serum (now equine chorionic gonadotropin). Today it seems to be used for veterinary purposes in promoting fertility in farm livestock, but during the war I understand that it had an important role in human medicine. I now have no access to the original records, but Dionis Macnair's informative book on New Forest ponies records that blood from the mares was collected for use in the treatment or prevention of disease in humans at a time when imports from abroad were no longer possible.

The bleeding of pregnant mares required better handling facilities than were then available on the Forest and a series of new pounds was constructed for the purpose. They became known as the Blood Pounds. Presumably the difficult and controversial procedure ceased once imports were again possible and perhaps the name Blood Pounds died out soon afterwards. Certainly, in the fifty years I have been involved in Forest management, I have never heard it used. It is an interesting piece of history for which I am grateful to my Denny Wood informant.

Plastic beef

We are told there is plastic in everything from sea water to the food we eat, but it usually



arrives by an indirect route. The New Forest seems to provide a more streamlined approach. A visitor from abroad was last month astonished to encounter, on Ocknell Plain, a cow happily devouring one of the ubiquitous Forestry England's plastic notice boards. As the animal swallowed the last remnant of the notice, the visitor was able to obtain this photograph through the window of his

car. A second cow then arrived and, not willing to be outdone, demolished about 20 feet of plastic red and white tape which it then “wound in like spaghetti”. The tape, stretched across a gravel road, served no purpose as the track was already obstructed by a locked barrier. Unfortunately, this spaghetti incident was not photographed, but there is an old farming saying that “binder twine is the vet’s best friend”. Cows (and a few ponies) find shiny plastic irresistible.

Plastic notices are a growing curse of the Forest landscape. All are ugly, many are unnecessary and not a few are plain irritating – “danger hot ashes” or “don’t climb on the log piles”. Only recently have they also become dangerous. The week after the photo was taken, I encountered two lines of plastic tape which had been stretched across the Sloden driftway near Fritham, for no obvious purpose. Both had been removed by cattle and thoroughly chewed. What portion of them had actually been ingested, I do not know. While the use of such tape for marking trees in the Inclosures has been quite longstanding, its appearance on the Open Forest is potentially lethal and quite unnecessary.

In discussions at the Verderers’ Court, the Official Verderer remarked that tape should only be used in an emergency and for no more than a few hours until a safer alternative could arrive.

Strangles

The Forest is going through one of its periodic outbreaks of strangles – an unpleasant equine disease which, despite its name is only rarely fatal. There are often odd isolated cases in the Forest, but this time it seems to have got quite a hold north of the A 31 road and at a particularly difficult time for management. The drifts (round-ups) of ponies are underway and those in the affected areas have had to be cancelled. Veterinary advice is that the ponies should be left in peace and quiet and that cases of infection should only be removed where they are really serious and there is no alternative. Drifts, of course, involve a good deal of disturbance, opportunities for spreading the disease and, potentially, risks to the ridden horses taking part.

Strangles is spread by nose-to-nose contact between horses or through contact with infected material which may be carried by people. Riding horses in fields adjoining the Forest can be infected as they socialise with Forest ponies over a gate or fence. Cases such as this have occurred in the present outbreak.

There is a good explanation of the disease on the British Horse Society’s website, but the most easily recognized symptom is a thick yellow discharge from the nose. Unfortunately, there can be complications such as the infected material being expelled from other parts of the body. This is, or at least used to be, quite often fatal. I remember many years ago nursing a little mare with a discharge from her neck, but that eventually proved unsuccessful and she had to be destroyed. Another very concerning problem is where the infected animal recovers, apparently fully, but becomes one of the small number to remain a carrier of the disease. That can call for repeated and very expensive treatment. During the present outbreak I was introduced to such a carrier riding pony

which is very fit and cheerful, but is causing her owner distress and expensive treatment, so far without much result.

Anthony Pasmore