

NEW FOREST NOTES July 2025

Access and fire risk in the Forest's ancient woods

A recurring theme of these notes over the years has been the dire state of the ancient woodland of the Forest where, for a long time past, virtually all natural replacement of oaks and beech trees has ceased and where management seems completely unwilling to do anything about it. This is a really distressing neglect of its duties under the New Forest Acts and a total disregard for the pleasure of future generations who will be deprived of the natural beauty we enjoy today. However, there are some important side issues which are not so readily obvious. Those were brought to the attention of the Verderers in a presentment made to the Court last month. The complainant was Ms Lucie Rowe, a commoner from Linford near Ringwood, with a long family history of working in and using the Forest. Her address to the Court covered a wide range of issues, but concentrated particularly on the vast quantity of fallen trees and branches choking every ride and pony path throughout the old woods. The examples she gave were from her own district – Pinnick, Redshoot and Ridley woods, but the pattern is the same from Eyeworth Wood in the north to Frame just outside Beaulieu at the other end of the Forest. Almost no fallen wood is cut up and removed. It is all left where it falls or, occasionally, pushed up into ugly heaps by machine where it is blocking access for forestry equipment. It is true that Forestry England employs a small amount of skilled labour to clear the occasional path when a wood becomes virtually inaccessible to riders and to livestock, but the scale of such work is minute when measured against the problem.

Ms Rowe pointed out that access for riders is vital for the proper management of the Forest ponies and cattle. Livestock being driven during one of the drifts (round-ups) does not obligingly avoid difficult areas by keeping to open country. Indeed, cunning old mares being pursued quickly learn that the best chance of escape is in the tangled jungle of debris which the dying old woods now provide. Both horse and rider entering such woods at speed are at serious risk of injury and, as the presentment said “good colt hunters do not grow on trees and are difficult and costly to replace”.

So why is the problem so consistently ignored by FE? The principal excuse is that Natural England now demands the retention of every last branch of fallen timber, to rot on the ground, providing homes for bugs, beetles and fungi. Without such a policy, it is said, these natural delights could not thrive in the Forest. The claim is patently nonsense. Look at any Victorian photograph taken in the Ancient Ornamental Woods and the ground is virtually clear of fallen timber except for the odd artistically positioned branch. At that time and no doubt for centuries before, all accessible windfall wood was sold by the Crown as fuel for use in the cottages and great houses of the Forest. It is likely that many trees in difficult places or remote from villages rotted where they fell and provided adequate accommodation for the same organisms as are today said to require the entire produce of the ancient woods. Those of us who are able to remember the years of WW2 or the two decades afterwards know that firewood sales continued unabated. The track network remained clear and more moderate grazing pressure permitted a generally acceptable level of natural regeneration, aided by



A view in a debris-free Mark Ash Wood about 1890

some controversial, but ultimately successful, intervention by the Forestry Commission, comprising fenced and planted blocks of native trees.

In, I think, about the 1960s, the noose began to tighten. The proportion of any fallen tree which might be sold was limited. As late as the mid-1980s, I was purchasing beech in Studley Wood and having to leave behind 25% comprising the large bole of the tree. That suited everyone because the heavy base timber involved a lot of sawing. At about the same time, the woods from which timber might be taken were reduced in number. Finally, the Forestry Commission introduced stringent training requirements for anyone using a chain saw, making it virtually impossible for private individuals to operate on Forest land. There followed the stealthy introduction of a complete ban on the removal of any wood at all. I cannot remember any consultation or publicity, but by then I was fully occupied in managing my own woods. The ban was quietly introduced resulting, inevitably, in the chaos we see today. Of course the purchasers had in many instances been their own worst enemies, creating deep saturated wheel ruts through the woods by using vehicles in unsuitable weather conditions, but this simply reflected a lack of proper control by the Forestry Commission. A valuable resource had been lost by local people and, as Ms Rowe said, the bugs and beetles argument is in large measure an excuse for poor and penny-pinching management.

Towards the end of her presentment a new and interesting argument was made suggesting that the accumulation of fallen timber presents a severe fire risk in a world now dominated by climate



The wreckage in Soarley Beeches a dying small wood 2025

change. Here, I think she may be on less firm ground. When we were considering her complaint, one of my colleagues quoted the renowned woodland historian, Oliver Rackham. He is said to have maintained that trying to set fire to deciduous woodland was the equivalent of trying to burn damp asbestos and that is certainly my experience. One has only to consider the innumerable black circles of illicit camp fires lit in the woods by visitors to see that a conflagration is unlikely. It is the heaths and young conifer plantations that present the real danger of fire, but everything is changing and Ms Rowe may ultimately be proved right.

In summarising her presentment, Ms Rowe asked the Verderers to acknowledge her complaints and to put pressure on Forestry England to amend its fallen timber policies. I am sure she will receive a polite response from the Official Verderer this month, but I very much doubt if effective action will follow. The forces of economics and ecology are simply too heavily stacked against sensible management and the interests of local people for us to see much improvement.

Forest maps

I have once or twice written about the remarkable contribution to the study of New Forest history made by the National Library of Scotland. Such a contribution seems about as likely as Hampshire County Council assisting the Scottish fishing industry, but local historians will be well aware of what I mean. The library has a vast and expanding archive of Ordnance Survey maps covering the whole of Britain and which it makes freely available online, while at the same time selling prints. Initially the collection, or at least available parts of it, comprised early small and medium scale maps, but as the last proper 1/2500 OS plans have gone out of copyright in recent years, these too have been added to the website. I say “proper” maps because they are the last in the long tradition of beautifully produced and clear plans on high quality paper. Today the no doubt highly accurate, but rather disagreeable computer generated Superplans have succeeded the paper versions, for those wealthy enough to afford them. Still, the advantage of studying maps for places such as the New Forest is that changes tend to be slow and for large areas the 1950s plans are still perfectly useable and can be updated with very little effort by anyone used to handling maps. Moreover, although the maps are chiefly of value in local history, they remain perfectly good for all day-to-day purposes, including agriculture and planning (subject to the rules of the appropriate authorities). Of course the more built-up the area, the more out of date they become, but even the 1909 editions are still perfectly useable in the depths of the Forest. Full details are on the website - [Map images - National Library of Scotland](#).

The Forest of fifty million years ago

This subject, like the treasure house of early Ordnance Survey maps, has an unexpected Scottish connection. This spring, a researcher from the University of St. Andrews, Dr. James Barnet, returned to his roots in the New Forest. During this visit he gave a lecture to a large audience at Lyndhurst on the 23rd May, describing his early work in the Forest and his recent publication on the Forest’s geology.

Dr. Barnet was brought up in Bramshaw and at an early age became fascinated by the fossil record exposed in the clay banks of several streams across the north of the Forest. It was an interest which led to a career in geology, both in the commercial world and in research. Like a number of others during the enforced idleness of covid, he was occupied in writing a book. “The New Forest, Geology and Fossils” will become a key source of information on this rather neglected subject. The book’s publication initially escaped me as I did little browsing in bookshops during the pandemic. Unlike an increasing number of local books over recent years, this one breaks genuinely new ground rather than being made up of material gleaned from others’ work and simply repackaged.

The book’s subject matter is in fact a good deal wider than a record of what the Forest’s geology today can tell us. It covers the story of the Hampshire Basin from West Dorset to eastern Hampshire and of course my heading above is somewhat misleading. The place now occupied by the New Forest was then, and for eons to come, open sea or estuarine waters, with different climate,

vegetation and animals. It has to be said that large parts of the book are quite technical, but that difficulty is eased by innumerable maps and diagrams.

I suppose most people are familiar with at least the existence of the world-famous fossil beds in the cliffs around Barton, but it is less well known that some of the same beds are exposed in little streams across the Forest. Tiny fossils can be found in many of these streams, but the really important exposures are in Shepherds Gutter and the upper sources of Latchmore Brook. The latter were almost lost a few years ago when the Forestry Commission sought to bury them under hundreds of tons of stream-filling material, but this scheme was eventually stopped. Forty pages of illustrations show the beautiful shells and other animal remains which would have been made inaccessible to researchers.

For those whose interest in the subject is a little deeper, there are excellent explanations of the formation and trapping of oil across Southern England, but for some of us these bring back unpleasant memories of the attempted assaults on the Forest by oil companies at Hasley in the 1950s and later at Denny Inclosure and Beaulieu Heath.

Dr. Barnett's book is available from the New Forest Heritage Centre in Lyndhurst.

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