

NEW FOREST NOTES OCTOBER 2026

A busy autumn for the Forest

The September Verderers' Court is usually the busiest meeting of the year and it was no exception last month. The length of the agenda is partly due to there normally being no court in August, so that two months of accumulated applications and complaints have to be dealt with. I think perhaps that the Forest assumes the Verderers enjoy a quiet summer of freedom from commitments, but this is seldom the case. There seems to be an uninterrupted stream of site visits and committee meetings, quite apart from the usual commencement of the pony drifts. The last of these fell victim to equine flu this year so far as the early drifts were concerned and there was a forced postponement until the end of September. The infection is now, thankfully, dying out in the Forest herds.

August also saw the great fire at Backley and presentments on this subject dominated the September court, with congratulations for the work of all those involved in the emergency and its aftermath being the principal theme. There were, however, undercurrents of criticism as well, suggesting that those with the best knowledge of the ground and long experience of controlled burning in the springtime were not sufficiently listened-to at the height of the conflagration. One such experienced local worker told me that he would have no idea how to tackle a fire in a city tower block and that the firemen who were sent from the towns were correspondingly at sea in managing the challenging ground and wind conditions in the Open Forest which to him were normal daily tasks. In walking the area afterwards, I saw for myself four separate areas where the fire engines had been driven off the hard ground and become bogged. My informant said that this was less than half the actual total of such incidents.

The fire area is now buzzing with teams of ecologists and other researchers either anxious to assist in planning remedial works or to prevent such operations on the grounds that they could simply worsen the damage. The best informed seem convinced that overall, the less interference with nature the better.

Leaving the fire aside, there were other important matters to be considered by the Verderers in September.

The next chapter in the food van controversy

The long-running attempts by Forestry England to secure food sales at several of its car parks and tourist honeypots were again up for consideration. Earlier this year the Verderers approved such sales at the Blackwater recreation site which lies deep within fenced timber plantations to which ponies and cattle have, at least in theory, no access. The court also noted (it had no power to approve or reject) similar sales in F.E.'s own private woodland at Bolderwood Grounds. Applications in the spring for sales on the Open Forest at Wilverley and Bolton's Bench were deferred and at both sites F.E held meetings during the summer explaining exactly what is now being planned.

There are really two principal issues to be weighed up in considering Forest food sales. Firstly, there is the question as to whether or not such sales are appropriate in beautiful open country such as the New Forest. The case against such sales was well argued by Mr. Brian Tarnoff in the February court and he concluded that: "Damaging activities should not be encouraged just because they are tied to a 'revenue' component, and if they cannot be shown to be mitigated, stopped." Mr. Tarnoff is a leading member of the New Forest Association and currently chairman of the Consultative Panel, but was on this occasion speaking simply as a Forest resident. In rather blunter terms, his case might be summarised emphasizing the conflict between profit, tourism and visitors' demands versus the natural beauty and traditional character of the Forest. The fact that food outlets in the villages are readily available within a few minutes' drive of these honeypot sites is, to my mind, another powerful argument for putting the welfare of the Forest first.

The second issue – and it is one that dominated the Verderers' discussions last month – was that of public safety and the extent to which it is prejudiced by the distribution of food in areas of open land densely populated by grazing livestock and particularly half-tame, but certainly not trained New Forest ponies. If I give food to a riding horse in a field, I don't fear that it will lash out at me when I next encounter it and offer nothing. It has been trained to respect humans. That is not the case with unbroken New Forest ponies. Through generations of hanging about car parks and being fed by visitors, some of them will regard the issue of food as a right and may become aggressive when it is withheld. F.E euphemistically writes of "livestock interactions", which it says have been considered, mitigated and minimised in its sale plans. Anyone who has watched such interactions and their consequences across the Forest, from the smallest roadside layby to the great recreation sites like Wilverley, will know that the providers of such sales facilities and those who give permission for them, bear a heavy burden of responsibility for their actions.

The Verderers, after much discussion, were evenly split over whether to support food sales at Wilverley or to prevent them. The matter was settled in F.E's favour by the chairman's casting vote.

Of course, for those Verderers who are elected there is a further key consideration. The commoners who own ponies could be put at risk of legal claims by visitors injured in food related interactions (more accurately confrontations). Ponies known to have been corrupted may be ordered off the Forest, putting yet more pressure on already stressed farming operations. If Joe Smith with his family chooses to set up on the Forest a large picnic that has been brought here from his home, ignoring all the warnings of keeping away from livestock, that is his affair alone. If a child returning from a food van clutching cakes is accosted, the commoner may bear the cost of what happens, but the moral responsibility lies with those who created the risk in the first place.

Over the proposed Bolton's Bench food sales there was less uncertainty in the Verderers' Court. All agreed that this is a controversial matter related to a very high-risk site. In response to F.E's latest presentment, the public's views should be sought at the October meeting.



Commercial dog walking vans operating from New Forest car parks

Dog fouling of the Forest grazing

I can sometimes see no end to the ever-growing conflict between recreation and the welfare of the Forest. This conflict was highlighted in a presentment from former verderer Jim Greenwood at the September court. As was to be expected from someone with his experience of sitting through long, rambling and incoherent presentments, his address to the Verderers was short and to the point. He complained that since Covid, commercial dog walking on the Forest has become a huge local industry with about one hundred local businesses signed up to a code of conduct and another unknown number who are not. All this is on top of the immense number of private dog walkers. The surroundings of his local car park, Busketts Lawn, are absolutely disgusting as a result and of course this is repeated across the Forest. In one five metre square of grazing lawn adjoining the car park he counted nineteen piles of dog mess, working out at close to one pile per square metre. In my corner of the Forest, Turf Hill car park is sometimes almost as bad, while during a survey job on West Wellow Common a few years ago, it was impossible to run out a 30-metre tape anywhere near the car park without it becoming appallingly fouled by such filth.

Trading on the Forest without permission is a byelaw offence, yet Forestry England does nothing to control this blatant abuse of the rules. If an organization to which I belong arranges a guided walk in the Forest for a dozen quiet adults, it must obtain permission and may also have to pay. If I have a commercial dog walking van discharging perhaps a dozen dogs onto the Forest four times a day, I may do it perfectly openly, without charge and without permission, often with my trade advertised on the van's side. No wonder that Mr. Greenwood demanded action to take effective control of this abuse.



The Brogenslade Valley where a strange drought phenomenon was first identified

A strange result of falling air pressure

As yet another year's severe drought came to a stuttering end during August, a strange phenomenon first recorded by Heywood Sumner became apparent. In observing the little stream through Brogenslade near his home at Cuckoo Hill, Sumner noted that water would appear in the long-dry stream bed in advance of impending rain. He concluded that the fall in atmospheric pressure released underground water from the source springs and seepage lines which in normal times fed the stream. I have not myself observed this at Brogenslade, but the same process was apparent at Woodford Bottom (Linwood) on 8th August. Here a small bog draining from near the west end of Hasley ceased discharging during the drought. A smooth dry sandy fan was evident above the trackway leading to the north west. It had been left behind as the water disappeared. Then, before the rain came, the flow suddenly returned and the consequences were apparent as water trickled over the dry sand, producing fresh channels through it. Close observation may show that such processes are common across the Forest. It would be interesting to set up fixed observation points on other streams in future drought years.

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