

NEW FOREST NOTES FEBRUARY 2018

Raymond Bennett – death of a remarkable agister

Ninety years ago, when Jesse Taylor of The Kettle at Picket Post was agister for the north of the Forest, life was very quiet and slow by comparison with today. Despite this there was already a steady toll of ponies and cattle killed on the roads. Communication with the agisters at that time was entirely by post card, telegram or word of mouth, so assistance for a sick or injured animal could be a very long time coming. Their only means of transport was their horses and bicycles. It is not surprising that Taylor spent as much time arranging for the burial of ponies as in attending those that were injured. Not until November 1936 did the New Forest Association agree to pay the initial costs of telephones for the agisters and that was forty seven years after the first telephone lines appeared in the Forest. Today (assuming the system works properly) the police call out one of the agisters on duty and help arrives within an hour. One of five agisters arrives in a smart well-equipped landrover supplied by the Verderers and assistance is provided, but there were many different stages between the system of the 1930s and that of the present day. Throughout many of the post-war years agister Raymond Bennett, who died on 15th January, served the north of the Forest from his home at Penn Common.

By the time of the Second World War, the Verderers' Court was virtually bankrupt and the team of agisters had been reduced to two in number – the brothers Hubert and Gerald Forward. Gerald, later a verderer, managed the north from his home in Fritham, while Hubert covered the south. In those days it was not just a question of dealing with road accidents and collecting marking fees. The agisters spent much of their time outside the Forest returning animals that had strayed into the surrounding villages and farmland. Even in Jesse Taylor's day the old road gates were largely disappearing and cattle grids did not come to the Forest until the late 1960s.

After the war, with the finances somewhat improved, the number of agisters eventually returned to four, but they were of varying quality and durability. Several changes took place and in March 1959 the Verderers appointed Raymond Bennett to the northern district. He was then still a young man, but one of the largest owners of ponies running in the Forest and on the Adjacent Commons. The Commons were then outside the Court's jurisdiction. Raymond, with his famous "Mockbeggar" ponies and well-known circle B brand, was a remarkable man. Not only did he know every one of his huge herd of ponies scattered across the Forest, but I think he knew every pony belonging to the commoners in his area. He could spot two small dots on the horizon – perhaps one grey and one bay – and be able to work out exactly who they were by a combination of knowing what animals ran in the area and what company they kept. Of course all commoners identify their stock in this way, but it is one thing to do it with a dozen or so animals, and quite another with perhaps a thousand belonging to other people. I doubt whether any agister before or since equalled Raymond's ability in this respect.

In those far off days my family would spend most weekends colt-hunting with Raymond Bennett, at least when they were not helping him to drive marauding ponies from farmland at Romsey or out of the housing estates of Totton. They were years long before the huge subsidies such as are paid today, when ponies were kept simply for the love of doing it and in the hope of breeding the occasional really good foal. The agisters drove about in rusty pick-up trucks or wooden-bodied cattle lorries with more rot than sound timber. In animal management Raymond was a typical commoner of his generation. He found it hard to come to terms with the public's demands, acceded-to by the Verderers, for ever higher welfare standards among Forest stock. Those standards are accepted with little complaint today, but it was a different story fifty years ago.

It was Raymond's love of his pony herd that led indirectly to his downfall as an agister in those early days. I remember him turning up at my family's breakfast table one morning early in 1961 and sitting down in a despondent state saying "The Verderers have finished with me". The trouble seemed to be that he had been spending too much time on his own ponies and, in the Court's view, too little on his duties. There were no mobile phones in those days and even radios had not yet come to the Verderers' department of Forest management. Telephone calls to his home seldom found him there. Raymond entered his wilderness years, but they were not to last long. He was soon made a "voluntary agister" for the Adjacent Commons in the Bramshaw area.

In 1974, the then agister for the north, Geordie Cooke, became unwell and Raymond was taken on again by the Verderers as a sort of locum. He returned full-time in the summer of 1975 and then served continuously until his retirement in 1995. I had joined the Court a year before his reinstatement. Then, as now, one of the duties of an agister was to keep a diary of what he does and where he goes in the Forest. Most holders of the office more or less dislike this chore and the quality of many diaries I have seen is less than inspiring, especially when compared with those of the 19th century. By contrast, Raymond's diaries (which as a staff committee verderer I was required to read), were a delight. He knew the Forest intimately and he had learned every placename, however obscure and whether on the Ordnance Survey map or not. You could follow the diary record of his journeying through the Forest as clearly as if it had been a film.

The Forest is full of stories about Raymond's exploits over the years, some of which were told in my late father's 1991 book on the commoners. A rather more recent story well reflects his life in the Forest. One afternoon a police car came up behind Raymond's landrover on the main Fordingbridge road across the Forest. It was in the days when that road was often quite deserted except at rush hours. The vehicle was weaving gently from side to side across the road and the following officers were convinced that they had a drunk driver in their sights, but it was only Raymond, a lifelong teetotaler, scanning the horizon for ponies and oblivious of the threat from behind. Aside from occasional erratic driving, he was a fearless horseman, often "tailing" young ponies required for branding. That process comprised catching the target by the tail from horseback, usually with the assistance of a couple of companions. He carried the branding iron across his back wrapped in sacking and when the pony was eventually secured and tied to a tree, a fire would be lit and the branding carried out on the spot.

I will always remember Raymond Bennett as a very kind and gentle person. I never heard him use bad language, even in the stressful circumstances which often arise in an agister's work, and I believe he came from a chapel background. Shortly after I left school I was without a horse of my own for a while. Raymond lent me his old favourite pony "Black Beauty" and I rode her for quite a time. He said "Don't worry if you fall off – she will never leave you", and I took him at his word. One hot summer day I got off on a hill overlooking Latchmore and went to sleep in the sun leaving her grazing loose beside me. About an hour later I woke up and there was no Black Beauty. After a moment of panic (it would have been a seven mile walk home), I found her fifty yards off dozing quietly in the shade of a tree. Raymond knew his ponies' characters very well.

Old Sloden

Between Fritham and Hyde lies a ridge-top wood which used to be one of the jewels of the New Forest. It is called Sloden Wood or Old Sloden and it was once a statutory Inclosure, made on the site of a much earlier, Elizabethan, coppice. It was noted for its fine trees and for containing more yews than any other part of the Forest. Old Sloden was a particular favourite with the famous artist Heywood Sumner, being illustrated by him in his own books and in the fifth edition of Wise's "New Forest". Then, in the 1960s, the yews started to die from an unknown cause. Some healthy yews remain, but at the western end the wood is reduced to complete wreckage on its southern side. Fallen yews, which are slow to rot, are heaped in a tangled mess of fallen timber and interspersed with still standing skeletons. Perhaps even worse than the death of the yews is the total absence of natural regeneration of all tree species. It has been completely suppressed for the past sixty years or more. With today's high grazing and browsing pressure in the Forest, there is now no hope of the wood surviving unaided. It used to be said, quite rightly, that a lack of regeneration in the Forest's ancient woods for up to a few decades did not matter, because over time the balance would change and less stock on the Forest would eventually allow new trees to establish themselves. Old Sloden, however, has passed the tipping point. Although many fine trees remain, there is not a handful of saplings through the whole 80 acres. The Forestry Commission has a legal responsibility, quite apart from one reflecting good management, to ensure that "the ancient ornamental woods and trees in the Forest shall be preserved". That is the requirement of the New Forest Act 1877. In the case of Sloden, as with other ancient woods in the Forest, management is now failing miserably in meeting that requirement. It is sad that even the past champions of Forest landscape, such as the New Forest Association, are now silent on the subject, while scientific conservationists seek little but the creation of bog land and the retention of huge piles of rotten wood. The survival or loss of the great landscape woods of the Forest seems a matter of indifference to them. Sloden Wood needs re-inclosure now, for a period of perhaps twenty years, and not to grow commercial timber, but to secure natural regeneration which will ensure that future forest residents and visitors are again able to appreciate the full beauty of this extraordinary landmark.

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