

NEW FOREST NOTES APRIL 2013

Ditching the Forest road verges

The row over ditching to prevent roadside parking at Setley Plain and elsewhere eventually led to the Forestry Commission backing down and repositioning parts of the complained-of ditch, but the issues involved are important and affect all parts of the Forest.

In 1970 a landmark report on the Forest recommended that formal car parks and camp sites should be made and that the whole of the remainder of the Forest should be protected against vehicular access. This was to be achieved by ditching and posting (dragon's teeth) the road edges to stop people driving about the Forest, together with the provision of locked barrier gates across the main access tracks leading into the woods and heaths. There were inevitable howls of rage from campers used to setting up vans and tents where they pleased and from motorists accustomed to taking their cars into the remotest corners of the Forest. Fortunately in those days human rights had hardly been invented and the complaints eventually dwindled away as one area of the Forest after another was closed off and provided with parks and camp sites. It was the single most important protective measure for the Forest in a century and it is hard to believe that such a scheme could be implemented today in the face of rampant demands for access at any price and in the light of national park policy of letting recreation and tourism rip. However, it succeeded then and for the next twenty years or so the Forestry Commission was careful to maintain the car-free protective measures in at least serviceable condition. From the mid 1990s onwards the ditches and dragon's teeth became increasingly neglected, although the scheme just about held together. Such neglect, with few visible signs of maintenance work, led to an increasing ignorance amongst residents and visitors about the importance of protection against vehicles. People parked where they pleased with two wheels up on the protective banks, eroding them still further, and with the other half of the car stuck out into the road. The increasing number of four wheel drive cars enabled their owners to drive over the remains of the banks altogether, although even then few trespassed far into the Forest.

Today the Forestry Commission, having secured money from the HLS scheme, is in the process of repairing the worst eroded parts of the protection and, occasionally as at Setley, seeking to improve it by closing off unsuitable verge parking areas. It is this maintenance that has led to the complaints, at least in part from newcomers who do not remember the "Conservation of the New Forest" report of 1970.

I think there is no doubt that the survival of the New Forest depends now, as it did in 1970, on the protection of the car free zones (as they were then called), but the whole business of car parking as established forty years ago is long overdue for review. The original instigator of the work, Deputy Surveyor Donn Small, sought to provide in his car parks what he called "quality". In other words he drove access tracks deep into the Forest, often for 100 metres or more, and built parks in secluded glades, invisible from the roads. Forest interests resisted this policy at the time and events have proved them right. Not only are such

parks very intrusive on the landscape and wasteful of land, but they are an open invitation to crime. Cars are broken into on a regular basis, with the thieves secure in the knowledge that their activities are invisible from motorists on the nearby road. For that reason, I will never use such secluded parks if I can help it. In addition to this, the hidden parks are ideal for barrier cutting, fly-tipping, drug taking, and other even more unmentionable activities for which such parks as Sluffers East and Longcross are notorious. Finally, the long access tracks make such parks costly to maintain and the almost universal lack of proper repair makes many of them more akin to the tank training grounds of Salisbury Plain than a place to take the family motor.

Some years ago a former colleague on the Verderers' Court visited one of the northern national parks and tried to interest the Court in the parking strategy adopted there, namely the provision of parking spaces in what amounted to extra large and well maintained lay-bys, rather than the gravelled areas cut deep into the common which we have. Such road edge parks are relatively safe from the crime point of view and are easy and cheap to maintain and to clear of litter. They do not intrude into the surrounding countryside (the road environment is already largely spoilt) and altogether have much to commend them. I seem to remember that neither the Court nor the Forestry Commission expressed much interest at the time and that was a pity.

As to the more immediate question of "unauthorized" verge parking, the use of properly defined and suitable car parks is clearly preferable from the Forest's point of view, although far from ideal for users in many cases. As I understand it, parking on the verges is not illegal of itself. If it causes a highway obstruction or danger, that is another matter, but the mere parking of a vehicle on common land within 15 yards of a road does not seem to be an offence. Forcing a way across one of the protective ditch, damaging it in the process, would almost certainly be against the law, but the Forestry Commission's byelaws which prohibit vehicular access to the common, specifically acknowledge that it is not illegal to "park any vehicle by the side of a highway". The motorist who shuns the dangers of an ill-kept car park in favour of a clear stretch or hard verge where he causes neither obstruction nor danger to stock, thus seems to be acting perfectly properly and perhaps points the way to a revision of parking policy in the New Forest.

The wrecking of Dames Slough Inclosure and the camping threat

As the rain continued to fall, month after month, the consequences for the Forest became more and more serious. To start with there are the extraordinary events which have occurred at the aptly named Dames Slough Inclosure between Lyndhurst and Burley. This was a plantation, now thrown open to grazing, made in 1859 and extending to 358 acres. It contained some beautiful areas of old pollarded beech at Dames Slough Hill and at Anderwood Corner, now sadly in the final stages of decay. Between them lie large expanses of younger woodland. Here the Forestry Commission has been carrying out thinning of the timber, the extraction of which has resulted in damage worse than anything I remember before in the New Forest with the possible exception of repeated violations of Islands Thorns

and the exploitation of Rushpole Wood in 1968. Much of the low-lying land has been torn apart by huge vehicles leaving ruts up to a foot or more in depth, destroying the formerly close-grazed grass rides, crushing the hand-dug 19th century drains and damaging fragile historical sites. It is to me quite incomprehensible that such mis-management is tolerated in woodland which supposedly benefits from an impressive array of conservation and other designations. I am told by the Forestry Commission "that work was stopped in Dames Slough due to the poor ground conditions". That is about as feeble a justification as it is possible to imagine. Work should have been stopped before the Inclosure was wrecked - not afterwards. Of course the rides will ultimately be levelled off and in four years or so may return to something like their former condition, but off the tracks the network of ruts will be ignored and will remain for generations. The ditches will be left choked and overflowing and of course the damage to historic sites could never be made good, even if there was a will to do so.

Aside from the actual damage in Dames Slough, the potential threat to saturated camp sites posed by the hordes of vehicles thought likely to invade the Forest over Easter has been causing concern to the Commoners Defence Association. It was the subject of a presentment by their chairman to the March Verderers' Court. The Deputy Surveyor told the Verderers that some sites like Ashurst, Ocknell and Longbeech will be kept closed over the bank holiday. That is, of course, welcome news, but even the driest sites like Roundhill were in no state to take heavy pressure from vehicles. As Graham Ferris said in his presentment to the Court, "This is a moment to put concern about long term damage to a fragile environment ahead of short term commercial gain". Sadly short term gain is the guiding principle of so many management policies in the New Forest from Dames Slough to the camping grounds.

Fortunately the weather seems finally to have taken pity on the Forest with more than a clear week of fierce drying winds immediately preceding the holiday weekend and with temperatures low enough to deter all but the most determined visitors.

Private enterprise litter clearance

At the March Court, the Official Verderer complimented the Highway Agency's contractors for a good job done in clearing litter from the verges of the A 31. That clearance is horrible work because of the vast amounts of rubbish thrown from cars onto the Forest and because of the danger from speeding traffic. I understand that lane closures are necessary to protect the workers.

While there is probably no worse area of the Forest for litter than the A 31, no part of it is now free from this disgusting plague. The main road is fouled by those merely passing through, but the general Forest litter is caused primarily by visitors. Only a tiny fraction of it is ever collected by the authorities and none at all away from roads and tourist facilities, yet it is remarkable how much private enterprise collection goes on. A pioneer of such clearance was the late Desmond Polack who, single handedly used to clear Fritham village in the 1970s, but today all sorts of people adopt a patch of Forest around their homes. They certainly deserve medals for taking on so filthy a task. I know of one elderly lady who regularly clears a mile of

verge opposite her house in the north of the Forest and it will be a bad day for that piece of National Trust land when she eventually has to give up.

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