

NEW FOREST NOTES APRIL 2015

Counter attractions to the New Forest

On a freezing cold but bright day in February I was taken to Hengistbury Head near Christchurch. My last visit was as a child when I remember it as a wild and isolated place, little used except by those with beach huts at Mundeford. The contrast now could not be more marked. It was heaving with people, dogs and bicycles, despite the cold. Its restaurant was packed out and its information centre (a remarkably good one) was doing a brisk trade. In places there were almost queues on the manicured paths and steps, while little patches here and there were fenced off "for nature". Even on the beach below, safety fencing made access to much of the cliffs impossible. Only the unchanging and beautiful views of the Isle of Wight were as I remembered them.

All of this may seem to have little to do with the New Forest, but as I fought my way through the crowds, the urbanized state of Hengistbury seemed to serve as both a blessing and a warning for the Forest. It is an undoubted blessing in that the amount of recreational pressure (most of it car-borne) that it absorbs is immense. If this place did not exist, there can be little doubt that some of the displaced demand would be transferred to the southern parts of the Forest which are already beyond their capacity to accept people without damage. The warning, of course, is that this is a vision of what the New Forest will ultimately become as the population of southern England continues to increase.

Counter attractions to draw pressure away from the Forest have been discussed for decades but, of course, nothing has been done. The expert New Forest Review report of 1988 made a specific recommendation for such attractions, but as with many of its proposals (including the undesirability of establishing a national park), the tourism and development authorities found it convenient to ignore such advice. Some counter attractions, like Moors Valley Country Park and Hengistbury have developed naturally in response to growing demand on existing popular areas, but they are a small fraction of what is needed. Virtually nothing draws away any pressure on the hard-pressed Southampton side of the Forest or even south of Salisbury. Close-in demands from the Waterside and from the Lymington to Highcliffe fringe are much more difficult to deflect.

The required attractions cannot be developed on the cheap. People must want to use them in preference to driving to the Forest, so they must include all the usual desired facilities – free parking, restaurants, lavatories, trails, adventure activities, dog running areas. They must also have what the former Deputy Surveyor Donn Small used to call "quality" when he was seeking to develop car parks and camps in the forest itself. In other words, disused industrial land will not do. They must be places that the public regards as attractive and convenient and if possible more attractive and convenient than the Forest itself.

In the long term perhaps nothing can save the Forest from the effects of over-population, but counter-attractions could buy a little time if only the money and will could be found.

Pylons again

In February I wrote about the possibility of the pylon line across the north of the Forest being put underground. Since then I have attended the National Grid's consultation day in which its staff gave further details of the scheme. The New Forest bid is part of a much wider national process where we will have to compete with other areas seeking to bury their pylon lines. In due course the various schemes will be judged by an independent panel. The Forest scheme has the advantage of being one of the shortest and thus least expensive of the proposals. If it goes ahead it will provide the greatest landscape improvement since the aerodrome concrete was broken up and removed in the 1960s. Of course there will be non-monetary costs. Everyone, from residents whose peace will be disturbed for weeks to scientists with obscure interests, will have to accept these costs if we are to be successful. In the past any attempt to provide noise screening for the A 31 road has been blocked because it did not suit one or another minority interest. There is a grave danger that the same tactics will be applied against putting the electricity line underground. My own particular interest is history and certainly the works might cause some damage to historic sites. It would be regrettable (although not disastrous), but one of those things which has to be accepted for the greater good of the Forest. A blind refusal to accept any alteration in the fabric of the Forest, whether from hydrologists, commoners, residents or visitors would be extremely short-sighted.

Villagers' victory over cycle routes

Villagers in Godshill, Woodgreen and the surrounding areas have secured a small but significant victory in their campaign to stop the designation of routes to channel cyclists into the Forest from the north through the narrow lanes of their communities. The Verderers' minutes for January, published in late February, revealed that, rather remarkably, the court had rubber-stamped the proposal which had originally been put to the national park. It seems that most of the parish councils affected had not been consulted and it is not even clear if the members of the park authority had been informed, although the officers were certainly aware. I am told that one or two councillor park members were far from happy to discover what was being imposed on their constituents in their names. There seems no end to the park's ambition to ratchet up the cycling pressure on the Forest. I am sure that many residents were concerned primarily with highway matters, but those with a love for the Forest as well pointed out that the narrow twisting lanes proposed would, once established as a formal route, be found to need "improvement" in the form of additional land taken for cycles and perhaps even diversions through the Forest to avoid particularly dangerous sections. Moreover, the many inviting opportunities to turn off across the Forest would, inevitably, lead to more cycle trespass. From the road users' point of view, a steady stream of cycles riding through the affected villages would have presented difficulties. Conditions are bad enough when the affected parishes are flooded by organized events on several weekends each year and the thought of similar if more limited use on a permanent basis was alarming. Few drivers will not have come up behind a furiously-peddling cyclist who deliberately speeds up to prevent cars overtaking as soon as there is a short clear section of road.

I understand that the proposal has now been withdrawn, but I doubt if we have heard the last of it. The scheme is apparently promoted by the cycle lobby group Sustrans which is known to have large influence and deep pockets.

The twin forests

It is now a couple of years since my links with the New Forest Verderers came to an end, but last week I had the opportunity to sit for the first time in the verderers' court of the Forest of Dean – if only as a paying guest of the hotel company which now owns the Speech House. The Speech House is the Dean's equivalent to the Queen's House in Lyndhurst and contains the courtroom which is normally in use as a dining room. There the Dean's verderers sit from time to time, but they have no powers and are simply ceremonial. One of their number, Ian Standing, possesses an exceptional set of skills in that in addition to being a member of the court, a retired dentist, an experienced miner and geologist, and an authority on ancient trees, he is also an expert on Forest Law and the mediaeval history of the Forest.

One of the things that the New Forest History and Archaeology Group does particularly well is to arrange occasional study tours for its members and the latest of these was to the Dean, led in part by Mr. Standing. That tour accounted for my presence in the courtroom there. Over three days those attending were given a fascinating account of a forest which, until the 19th century was so very like our own. The phases of inclosure matched those of the New Forest very closely and we even share one special Act of Parliament - that of 1808 governing plantations. After 1850 the New Forest survived in something like its original form, while Dean was almost wholly inclosed and planted with trees. Its court became redundant and its commoners (apart from a few rogue sheep keepers operating on a very dubious legal basis) disappeared. Unlike the New Forest, Dean possessed very important iron and coal mining industries, relics of which survive everywhere. In places the "free miners" still operate tiny ramshackle collieries even today.

Apart from the history, which was the object of my visit, two aspects of management struck me very forcibly. Firstly, in the absence of a powerful Verderers' Court, the Forestry Commission can do just as it pleases in the way of recreational development and the result is certainly not pleasant. Everywhere there are trails, paths, markers, information boards, "centres" for this and that and a general feeling that anything is permitted, with no regard for the character and beauty of the woods. We were told that (as here) mountain biking is out of control, while the litter problem is certainly no better than in the New Forest. Disruptive events held in the Dean exceed even those which are permitted here in that motor rallies are held on the gravel roads.

The second management issue is, by contrast, a more natural one, although humans were at its source. The Forest appears to be overrun with feral pigs which have escaped from farms and which are breeding at a remarkable rate. They are causing immense damage throughout the woods. They tear up the road verges and any grass area they can find including village greens, football grounds and gardens unless these are very securely fenced. Disturbance up to 0.3metres deep is not

unusual. Apparently there is no accurate estimate of the numbers present, but it is thought that even if one thousand a year could be shot, it would still not bring the population under control. The marauders are secretive, operating at night and extremely difficult to destroy. It seems that this is a plague which is spreading across the country and if it reaches the New Forest the results will be appalling.

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