

## NEW FOREST NOTES - APRIL 1991

### A NATIONAL PARK ?

Those who want to see the New Forest converted into national park are again active following the recommendations of the National Park Review Committee (the Edwards Committee). Professor Edwards and his team would like to see the New Forest as a national park with a "tailor-made constitution" and his recommendation comes little more than a year after the government accepted the Forest Review Group's view that we should not be a park. So what are the arguments in favour of making a national park here and do they really stand up to examination? Firstly there, is the question of finance. We are told that public money would be made available for all sorts of good works in the New Forest and that without national park designation no such money can be given. Indeed, some would have us expect a sort of El Dorado of public expenditure, filling the commoners pockets and financing grazing improvement and drainage on an unprecedented scale. Well, perhaps there would be more money, but at what price ? The standard national park system provides 75% central government finance and 25% from the local authorities. At the moment the Forest receives finance (admittedly not enough) from the Nature Conservancy Council, the Countryside Commission and the Forestry Commission. The latter, so we are told by Jo Ivey in her newly published report, spends the equivalent of £45 per annum on grazing maintenance for every head of commoners' stock turned out — a substantial "hidden" subsidy of well over a quarter of a million pounds on last year's figures. It is simply not true to say that no central government money is going into the Forest and there is no logical reason why it cannot be increased. Certainly the local authorities who are so fond of describing the New Forest as the jewel in their crown have, in the recent past, contributed virtually nothing. The county council does provide the princely sum of £450 per annum towards the maintenance of car free zones and has recently spent large sums of money on rumble strips, undulations, chicanes etc. If national park administration is conceded, tailor-made constitution or not, it is likely to be local authority dominated and the price of financial aid will have to be met in weakened power to resist public development and in council intervention in the traditional management systems of the Forest. The county council tried this once before when it promoted a Bill to dominate the Verderers Court in return for money. The Bill was resisted by Forest people and never even reached parliament.

The second "advantage" we are told, is that the New Forest would receive greater protection, although protection from what is not entirely clear. Obviously not from excess tourism since, although often denied, the promotion of tourism is a primary activity if not an aim of the national park authorities. Under the insidious guise of information and interpretation, the parks are vigorously promoted and sold to the visiting public. Apply to any park authority by post and you will see what I mean. You will receive colourful tourist papers, maps, leaflets and accommodation brochures. Of course there may be marginally enhanced planning powers which could benefit the suburban fringe, but the Forest itself is seldom threatened by private developers. Central and local government development on the other hand is a continuing and very real threat. A road scheme promoted by local councils which influence or dominate a park authority could receive a much easier passage than

under the present management. No doubt it will be argued that the Verderers might be permitted to retain their powers, at least nominally, but the exercise of those powers in resisting a threat from an external highway authority is an entirely different matter from fighting a damaging scheme supported by the national park authority.

Of course the whole promotion of a national park is utterly unnecessary in the New Forest simply because the present administration and quite unique legislative protection has an excellent record. The problems which the New Forest has been unable to control (excess tourism, traffic pressures and so on) are shared by the national parks — not solved by them. Professor Edwards has put forward some excellent suggestions for improving the existing parks, but he should leave the New Forest alone for it has a system of protection which would be the envy of any national park.

### LITERARY AGISTERS

Most people would not associate the tough outdoor life of a New Forest Agister with the more sedentary task of writing. However, retired agister Geordie Cooke has just published a children's book, the story of which draws on the experiences gained in his many years of service to the Verderers Court. I am no judge of children's stories, but this one contains all the right ingredients — a schoolgirl heroine, ponies, the New Forest and adventure — and may well prove a success. In any case, I suspect there will be more than a few adult readers anxious to see if Geordie is as effective with his pen as on horseback. The book, "A New Forest Friendship", is published hardback at £0.50.

Somewhat surprisingly, Geordie Cooke is not the first agister to try his hand at writing. In about 1910, Charles Every wrote a brief but fascinating paper on the exercise of common rights in the New Forest with particular reference to his own area around Burley. Among other glimpses he gives of a forgotten world is a rare mention of the exercise of marl rights. Common of marl is confined to the southern parts of the Forest where the 1854 Register of Claims lists 24 "open and accustomed marl pits and places within the New Forest". The right allowed the digging of marl clay in the Open Forest and the material was then applied to agricultural land. The records of its exercise are very scarce indeed, but Every says "I have seen hundreds of loads of marl carted from the Forest and put on private land in my time, but there is very little of this done now. It is a fine thing for land, especially for wheat growing".

Of course, like most of us, the agisters' daily tasks involve a certain amount of paperwork and this includes a requirement by the Verderers that a daily diary should be maintained. In fact this has been a condition of the agisters' employment since the last century, although with one exception, only those diaries of very recent years have been kept. That exception is the diary of Jesse Taylor covering the period 1907 to 1923. It has never been published and does not form part of the Verderers' records. Taylor kept a copy of his official diary for personal use and this was retained by his family. A transcript prepared for the late Miss F. Hardcastle of Burley has at least ensured that a few more copies will survive.

In thousands of mainly one line entries, Jesse Taylor paints a picture of the New Forest from before the motor car when the roads were gravel, when the gentry ruled local affairs and when the commoners cut turf for fuel and fern for stork bedding. The Forest of today bears little relation to this tranquil and well ordered society. Perhaps In one hundred years time, visitors to the Hampshire Record Office will stare curiously at the agisters' diaries of the 1990s and try to imagine the Forest when there were commoners and when day visitors did not need to book a month in advance

### **THE NEW FOREST COMMITTEE GENERAL MEETING**

It is sad that, despite advertising, the first general meeting of the New Forest Committee generated so little public interest. Apart from Queen's House staff and press. I counted only 15 members of the public, while on the previous day the same courtroom had been filled to capacity for the regular bi-monthly meeting of the Verderers, Of course the committee itself must accept some blame for this lack of interest You cannot operate in secrecy, as the New Forest Committee, does, and then expect a sudden flood of interest at one public meeting a year. Even the minutes are not made public, although they are available to those Councillors and Verderers who choose to look at them. Having read the lot (and it is a real mountain) over the last year, I cannot for the life of me see any grounds for this degree of secrecy. Greater openness would engender confidence in the committee and help, perhaps, to dispel rumours such as that currently circulating as to the vast sums of money supposed to have been spent on designing a logo ! Those who did attend the meeting heard a most interesting account of the commoners' housing scheme and a fairly bland report of some of the less interesting and less controversial matters considered by the committee. However, they also had the real treat of listening to the guest speaker, Jo Ivey. who has just published the results of her survey of commoners and their views on the Forest and its future. I don't suppose the report tells us much which was not already known about the commoners, but it is written with such clarity and conviction that it stands head and shoulders above the average committee-prepared reports with which the Forest is so often plagued. Every commoner should have a copy if only because it sets out so well the complaints and grievances which his community has been struggling to express over the last 50 years.

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