

New Forest Notes – April 1994

The Ministers fact finding visit

LAST WEEK'S fact finding visit to the Forest by two government ministers was instructive for those of us privileged to see a small part of it. The Ministers, Mr. Robert Atkins and Earl Howe, were given a bus ride round the Forest and its suburban fringe areas before lunch in the Verderers Hall. They then received a presentation on the New Forest Heritage Area from senior planning officer and New Forest Committee member Mr. Ted Johnson.

After this Mr. Peter Impett (secretary to the New Forest Committee) gave a short lecture on why the committee needs statutory powers and status. The chairman of the Committee, Maldwin Drummond, then called on half a dozen or so prominent people (all members of the New Forest Committee) to explain to the ministers how worthwhile the committee is and how generally welcomed would be the grant to it of the coveted powers and status. Within this paean of praise, the only mildly dissenting voice was that of the Official Verderer. Of course the organisers of the event (the New Forest Committee) could scarcely have been expected to shoot themselves in the foot by inviting anyone of a contrary view to speak, thus disrupting the rosy atmosphere of self-congratulation. Perhaps a word or two of disquiet may have reached the ministers' ears over lunch, but they had, overall, a distinctly one sided view of Forest opinion. A pessimist might therefore assume that the ministers returned to London satisfied of the universal welcome which national park status and related powers for the New Forest Committee would receive amongst the locals. However I am disinclined to write off two experienced politicians as quite so gullible. No doubt we can now expect a very early statement on the "park" proposals and my guess is that the Committee will get some watered-down form of statutory status together with some face-saving trimmings, but it will no doubt be well satisfied with that. Its foot will be firmly in the door and it is, likely to find a second round bid for power much easier. If I am wrong and the government gives the Committee immediate wholehearted backing, the Forest is in for a turbulent time.

The Tourism Juggernaut

At a time when the various Forest factions are so often in disagreement with each other, there is at least one subject on which unanimity can still be expected, the over use of the Forest for tourism. From the most extreme conservationist to the most down to earth commoner, there is agreement that the Forest is being steadily degraded by too much and too intensive recreational use. Official reports and learned scientists have come to much the same conclusion, yet not only is virtually nothing being done to arrest the process, but the recreation promoters in some public authorities continue to sell the Forest for all they are worth. A particularly interesting example of growing pressure on the Forest emerged a few weeks ago. A senior officer of the District Council reported, with evident satisfaction, that a Dutch tour operator had included the New Forest in its cycling brochure. Bookings were already being received as a result and he, the officer hoped that this was the first of many such packages. Now of course he was only doing his job. If you are 'trained and employed to promote tourism or "leisure services," you can hardly be criticised for doing just that. It might well be argued that the more you sell, the greater your achievement. I have no doubt the hotel owners who will benefit are thoroughly satisfied with the service they are receiving from their council. It is the Forest

that suffers from this and a thousand similar pin pricks which collectively comprise repeated sledge hammer blows. No amount of dressing up these sales in the pseudo-conservation jargon claiming educational motives or green tourism can mask their true effect upon the Forest.

It was just this sort of nonsense that the original Heritage Area Committee was supposed to have put, a stop to by showing the error of their ways to those local authorities and others engaged in large scale promotion of the Forest. In this it has singularly failed, but it is not alone in that failure. The amenity and scientific societies and English Nature have all proved equally ineffective. Even the New Forest Association which established a special committee to consider the subject has backed down. The committee fizzled out after only one meeting. No-one, it seems, is prepared to take the unpopular step of saying plainly and firmly that there is an appalling over use of the Forest for many forms of recreation and that this use must be cut back if anything like the traditional character of the area is to be restored. Everyone concerned with the Forest management knows it, but all, for their various reasons (too often financial), are unwilling to take action.

Tourism on a small scale is traditional in the New Forest and, as such, is an acceptable and relatively harmless boost to the local economy. Farmhouse bed and breakfast, pony rides, the odd holiday cottage or private camping field have for years contributed to the incomes of commoners and other residents. It is the high pressure promotion of the Forest by public authorities which does the damage. The Forestry Commission is already showing itself quite incapable of controlling home-generated pressure from mountain bikers, yet now we have the District Council welcoming a further turn of the screw from abroad.

In 1970 the Forest had been brought practically to its knees by unrestricted vehicular access to every corner of its woods and heaths. Only then was action taken. Must we really repeat the whole dreadful process again with excess recreational pressure?

Birds and Beasts

April is the month in which the Forest ponies begin to shed their winter coats and to exchange their walking doormat character for the sleek bodies which delight the summer visitors. White patches on the grass denote the rolling places of grey mares and the favourite rubbing posts dotted, about the heaths receive renewed polish as the old coats are removed. Many years ago before the grids were installed to keep Ponies within the Forest, I remember an agister contemplating one such rubbing post-an old holly, stem, in Black Gut Bottom. He observed that such knarled and polished stumps helped to cement the ponies attachment to their runs and thus keep them from straying out of the Forest. Whether or not that was true, it is certain that the accumulations of equine grease and the burnished protrusions from such stems suggest that they remain in use for many years.

This great annual shedding of coats by two thousand or so ponies like so much else in the Forest, is put to good to good use by others. It provides an immense source of nest material for the birds, not all of whom are prepared to wait patiently for time and gravity to provide. It is quite common small parties of birds (usually starlings or magpies) apparently collecting material from source and lined up on the' back of some uncomplaining mare. While I suppose waste hair to be the primary object of their attentions, no doubt the odd parasite is an additional benefit. I have even seen what

appeared to be a sort of game in which birds walked up the neck of a recumbent pony to slide in turn down its nose!

Forest ponies general seem very tolerant of birds of all sorts and none more so than an old mare of mine which has struck up a friendship with a cockerel. He hatched in her stable last autumn and because she is brought in to feed morning and night, he has come to regard her as part of the furniture. In the morning he struts up and down her back flapping and crowing, and leaving behind unpleasant traces of his presence, before moving on to make a nuisance of himself elsewhere. At night he climbs aboard again to roost, sometimes on her rump, but more often across her withers where he can get a good grip so that he is not dislodged as she wanders about. From here he has to be removed in a sleepy state when he is turned out some hours later.

Nature has decreed that one always has too many cockerels and that cockerels are always troublesome, so that this unusual equestrian is now in need of a good home if he is to escape the cooking pot!