

New Forest Notes April 1995

Select Committee visit to the Forest

THE events surrounding last weeks visit by the Environment Select Committee left many in the Forest's management speechless with amazement at the discourtesy shown to the Official Verderer and the Court. At Monday's public meeting of the Court, the Official Verderer confirmed that he had not been invited to attend the visit which was to take place on the following day. The Verderers had not even received formal notification that the Select Committee was coming and it is strongly rumoured that the invitation to the Forestry Commission was very much an afterthought.

The Environment Select Committee is investigating the effects of recreational pressure on sensitive places such as the New Forest. It is visiting a number of areas throughout the country and taking evidence from, those concerned with management affected by recreational pressure. In the New Forest, of course, the management of recreation is in the hands of the Forestry Commission within the limits dictated by the Verderers. Those most directly affected are the commoners, the amenity groups and the scientific societies. So who was responsible for organising the programme for the Committee and choosing suitable witnesses? The Westminster authorities denied any responsibility for what happened and appeared genuinely concerned at the evident snub to the Forest community. So far as I have been able to discover, the local planning was in the hands of the New Forest Committee and the New Forest District Council, although who actually prepared the list of those who were to attend and give evidence remains to be discovered.

There is, of course, a widespread belief in the Forest that all this was no accident and that the exclusion of the Official Verderer was considered essential if the Members of Parliament were to hear only evidence in praise of the New Forest Committee. He had after all been the one dissenting voice in an earlier managed eulogy of the Committee when ministers visited the Forest. For the same reason the Forest societies and commoners (also opposed to the New Forest Committee's ambitions), could not be allowed a hearing. The plan, if plan it was, worked fairly well until the Deputy Surveyor made clear his opposition to the grant of statutory powers for the Committee. This occurred during the formal evidence taking session at the, end of an afternoon in which the Westminster delegation had toured the Forest by bus.

A small and very angry group of commoners and other Forest people was allowed to watch the proceedings in which Forestry Commission officials gave their views on recreation management. Then a team of New Forest Committee members and council officers pursued the old theme of how important it is for the Committee to have statutory powers and status, both of which have been refused by the government. No-one opposed to the Committee's ambitions (with the honourable exception of the Deputy Surveyor) was called as a witness. The Verderers, who control the very subject of the Select Committee's enquiries in the Forest and who also oppose the grant of statutory powers, might as well not have existed so far as formal evidence was concerned. Altogether the day could scarcely be claimed as a triumph for supposed co-ordination and conciliating role of the New Forest Committee.

Peace In Bramshaw

The long running and acrimonious saga of the Oak Cottage land exchange at Bramshaw was finally settled, apparently to everyone's satisfaction, at the Verderers Court on 20th March. The owners of Oak Cottage secured the little piece of land they needed to build a bathroom, the objector to the exchange obtained a modification of the plans to exclude a length of ditch and adjacent bank and the Forest received a useful addition in the form of a paddock at Bramshaw Telegraph. No doubt various firms of lawyers were also well satisfied with the outcome and proceeds of the contest.

I suggested to the Deputy Surveyor that perhaps this notable treaty should be marked by the erection of a bronze plaque on the Telegraph land. There is, in the Peace of Amiens, a precedent for such celebration. In 1802 Thomas Eyre, bailiff of Burley Manor, erected a stone on the Open Forest at the Burley Street entrance to the village to mark peace between England and revolutionary France. However, it is not an entirely happy precedent since, just over twelve months later, the contestants were again at each others throats. I suspect that even the Commissions delight in memorial plaques will not extend to the Peace of Bramshaw. They, like the rest of the Forest, will be glad to have heard the last of Oak Cottage.

Conservation Truce

This year, relations between some branches of administration in and around the Forest seem to have reached an all time low. The County Council is trying to oust the Forestry Commission from managing the Forest, the District Council has been trying to eject the County Council and to secure "unitary status" for itself and the Forestry Commission is openly defying the Verderers over mountain bikes. Meanwhile, the New Forest Committee continues to spread dissension and mistrust over the battlefield through its renewed empire building ambitions. In the middle of all this, it is good to find one area of greatly improved relations.

Over the last Year there has been a marked easing of tension between the commoners and English Nature. The issues which divide them have not altered, but a change in staff at English Nature has allowed both sides to make a fresh start and to give a little ground without loss of face. I cannot remember a time when commoners have been more optimistic about grazing maintenance in general although the intractable problem of drainage still leads to occasional confrontations.

English Nature has followed up its diplomatic success with even more positive action to help the commoners. It has given a large grant to the National Trust to help with the rhododendron and birch clearance on the Trusts New Forest commons. The Trust was not slow to take up the offer. Within weeks of its being made, contractors were hard at work clearing birch encroachment. Then at the end of January, a team of two excavators, two tractors, Trust staff and volunteer labourers, moved in to tackle a century of rhododendron infestation at Hale Purlieu. The team worked until, after ten days the funds were exhausted. They dug out thousands of rhododendrons ranging in size from single stems to huge bushes fifty feet across and fifteen feet high. Well over a hundred acres of scattered growth was cleared leaving only perhaps ten acres of the most dense jungle for future treatment. Unfortunately, the work coincided with a record period of wet weather so that a good deal of surface damage was caused by the vehicles. This is now being put right.

The appearance of the Purlieu has been transformed, although I suspect that a vigorous programme of further treatment will be, required to control regrowth from portions of root left in by the tracked excavator used on the larger bushes.

Secrets of the Timber Producer

Most people who have been around the Forest for a while know a little about Verderers, Agisters, how the camp sites operates and what English Nature does. Timber production is a very different matter. Since the great battles of the 1960s, the Forestry Commission has tended to keep rather quiet about its timber production methods and objectives. Indeed, since the great storms of 1987 and 1990, visible forestry operations have concentrated to a large extent on clearing up the damage. Felling has been minimal. Now all this changing with vast areas of softwood marked for felling or thinning and with major (and controversial) plans for thinning the old oak plantations. These programmes are under the control of the Forestry Commission's operations manager, Mrs. Alison Field, so that it is an appropriate moment for her to address the New Forest Section of the Hampshire Field Club on the subject. On 21st of April, at the New Forest Museum, Mrs. Field will speak on "Timber Production: the Forester's view of the New Forest". Lectures such as this are arranged primarily for members, but a few seats are available for non-members and anyone interested in attending should contact the Hon. Secretary on (01703) 282124.

Mrs. Field is developing a reputation as someone who gets things done in the Forest, so views on timber production will be interesting and may foreshadow future Commission policy.