

New Forest Notes – April 1997

The Forest and the General Election

I read somewhere that a potential candidate for a part of the old New Forest constituency had recently answered a question on the Forest, but at the same time had suggested that questioners might do better to concentrate on national issues. That seemed to me to have been an injudicious remark. I am sure that most voters still make up their minds on the basis of national policies, but the New Forest is not just any constituency- it has a character and "national " importance of its own. Moreover, as distinctions in national politics become increasingly blurred, there must be a growing number of people (like me) who for the first time in their lives are approaching a general election without fixed voting intentions. Perhaps only a few hundred of them would actually decide which way to vote on the basis of a candidate's attitude to the Forest. In the old days of multi-thousand majorities. they could have been ignored with safety. Now those few hundred might make the difference between success and failure. Whether one loved, hated or was indifferent to the party politics of our last two MPs, there can be no dispute that they understood and worked hard for the New Forest, as the Forest, and not just any constituency. In the case of Sir Oliver Crosthwaite-Eyre, this was due to instinct a long family tradition, while with our present MP it was more probably as a result of education in the office , although none the worse for that.

In the years since the war, New Forest MPs have had to deal with three New Forest Acts, an abortive New Forest Bill, with Countryside Act, the Wild Creatures and the Forest Law and the Lyndhurst bypass Bill. In other words, there has been almost one piece of legislation affecting the Forest every seven years or so. As the conflict between the protecting the Forest and abandoning it to unrestrained recreational use intensifies , I can see no likelihood of this sequence coming to an end and that takes no account of such matters as whether or not to ban hunting, another attempt to turn the Forest onto a national park, or allegedly commercial policies of the Forest Commission.

It is, of course, very easy for the any candidate simply to climb on the bandwagon for instinctive public opposition to car parking charges or whatever unpopular management policy (good or bad) the Forestry Commission may be advocating at a particular moment. Most of them seem to be doing it.

I suspect that some of them may have no understanding of the issues and merely see odd cheap vote in attacking the Commission's plans. In the past things were different. Our MPs earned respect by, in the latest Forestry Commission jargon, " putting the Forest first", irrespective of the fact that they were following an unpopular line at that time. Sir Oliver's championing of the New Forest Bill in 1963 and the Sir Patrick's opposition to the Lyndhurst bypass Bill and the national park proposals were good example. With the election only a few weeks away, I cannot even remember the names of the main parties candidates in my own portion of the divided constituency. It may be too early, but I have received nothing in the post from any of them, no visits from canvassers, and I have heard of no meetings locally. Perhaps I should regard myself as very lucky! I certainly know nothing of their attitude to the Forest and the day to day local issues so important to the many people who live and farm here. If there are others like me, it does seem that an opportunity is being missed by all the main candidates, or perhaps they simply don't care.

Life Money

The Forest is waiting for the outcome of a joint application by a group of local bodies for European funding amounting to several millions pounds. The application is to a source of money called the Life Fund. If it is successful, it is to be spent on all sorts of good work including, in the Verderers' case, a special premium (cash subsidy) for really good ponies running on the Forest. Unfortunately there have been rumours that one or two of the projects included in the bid are, to say at least, rather odd. The whole matter has also been difficult to investigate. In the light of the rumours, I asked for details of what was included in the bid. A copy of a bland and useless summary was the result.. I then called at the offices of New Forest Committee (which has been dealing with the paper work) and asked if details of the application were available to the public. I was told that the information was freely available, but that one or two figures which might prejudice some land purchase negotiations were " sensitive". The young lady to whom I spoke said that she would delete these figures and send on to me a copy of the remainder later that day . That seemed perfectly reasonable, so I waited - for two weeks. After that time I asked the Clerk to the Verderers to investigate and a further long silence followed.

Eventually , I discovered that a meeting had been held and that it had been decided that the information was not quite so public as had at first been suggested. An editing process was being carried out to make the details suitable (perhaps worthless) for public consumption. Without knowing exactly what is included in the bid it is difficult to know what is behind all this. Fees paid to private individuals, hourly rates and so on might, I suppose, be regarded as confidential, but we are dealing with expenditure of huge sums of public money (albeit European money), to be undertaken largely by public authorities . There is something rather disturbing in the degree of secrecy which seems to be surrounding the whole affair. Surely it is reasonable to know how much money is to be spent on, for example, rhododendron clearance and how many acres are to be cleared .

Turf Hill

Ever since the great storm of 1990 blew down a large part of Turf Hill Inclosure, There has been a battle going on to secure its proper restoration to heathlands . Several years ago a landscaping plan was produced and felling has been going on sporadically ever since. However, the real problem (recorded in these notes in 1995) was the deep ridge and furrow ploughing which was done in preparation for timber planting in 1960s and which had made the land permanently inaccessible to walkers and riders. The difficulty of course, was cost,. Levelling of the ruts for return to heathland is an expensive business but quite essential, if the protection of the Forest is a priority of management. It was one of those long-running battles in which the Verderers worry way at the Forestry Commission in private month after month, and for which they seldom receive much credit. In December of last year the Commission finally agreed that something had to be done and proposed treatment for a trial near the Turf Hill car park. The Verderers were told most firmly that they were not to expect action overnight. Despite this, in February, a large tracked excavator equipped with a root forked turned up and spent the next few weeks crawling about pushing up brash, removing tree stumps and destroying the ruts. The trial plot has been left level and clean of debris. The work is a credit to the Commission staff who organised it and to the skilled work of the anonymous driver of the

machine . It is only a start, however, because large areas of the felled plantation adjoining remain unrestored, but it shows what can be done. The precedent is of great importance because pressure is on the Forestry Commission to return many of the called " Verderers Inclosures" to open Forest . These plantations were made in the 1960s by destroying heathland- just before its importance as a rare habitat and its landscape value were generally recognised. All of them were deeply ploughed in the same manner and, as they are cleared, that ploughing is going to be expensive to restore . Turf Hill has proved that there are no insuperable practical difficulties in doing it.

E. Coli 0157

Last week I watched a group of village children playing on Hatchet Green as their predecessors have undoubtedly done for centuries . Lying down enjoying the first spring sunshine, chewing the cud and watching the children, was a group of cows. Hatchet Green is overlooked by the village primary school and is used by it as a semi- official playground and sports field without, I hope too much inconvenience to either the junior sportsmen or the cows. However, the latter produce what television reports on abattoirs call animal faeces and the rest of us call dung. Vigorous football games, quarrels and falls bring the children and the dung piles into inevitable and intimate contact. With learned scientists saying that on school farm visits children should not be allowed even to touch the animals, one wonders if we are about to see wholesale infection of the New Forest and visiting the children with the fashionable but unpleasant E. coli 0157. I asked a bacteriologist how it was that past generations of rural children had not been wiped out or seriously damaged by this scourge. I was not even sure how I survived as a child , remembering the family dung-collecting outings in the Forest to feed the wartime vegetable plot. It seems that the 0157 strain is a relatively recent variation of one line of E. Coli family of bacteria, other harmless strains of which, as she put it, " we are all carrying internally " in any case. It would therefore seem one more factor to be considered by the families bringing young children to the Forest to play - along with adder bites, kicking ponies, toxacara infection from dogs fouling and the occasional wandering maniac.