

NEW FOREST NOTES - AUGUST 2000

Messages from the National Parks

A couple of days helping on the Commoners' Defence stand at last week's New Forest Show was an interesting experience, chiefly because of the information coming from the public rather than (as is more usual), the other way round. The theme of the Association's display was the likely damaging effects of a national park administration imposed upon the New Forest. The public was invited to sign a petition objecting to such a scheme. My limited experience of petitions in the past was that an occasional person would sign, often after lengthy persuasion and usually reluctantly. The response to the Commoners' petition could not have been more different. The demand to sign was such that within half an hour of the stand opening, a second copy had to be installed, then a third and still the queues formed. By the end of the first day, four hundred people had signed. On each of the next two days there were even more and by the end of the Show nearly one thousand three hundred people had registered their support. That represents a remarkable average signing rate of more than one per minute over the seven hour day when the Forest Corner has significant numbers of visitors. I had expected to find the addresses confined to local areas where people particularly value the traditional quiet characteristics of the Forest, but this was far from the case. While about two thirds were from the Hampshire and Dorset areas, the remainder came from right across the country.

Even more illuminating than the support for the petition were the comments made by those visitors coming from the existing national parks, especially those in Wales and the north of England. The Association had fielded a team of volunteers to talk to customers at the display, so I personally met only a portion of the park visitors, but all of us encountered more or less the same response - "It is too late for us, but save yourselves if you possibly can". Many were bitter about the dominance of recreation in their parks, whatever the legislation may say about this being a secondary park objective. One lady from the Brecon Beacons told me that their farmers are "treated like dirt by the park authority". Of course there will always be individuals with a particular grudge against a local authority, park or not, because of a failed planning application or other grievance, but the complaints were too universal and too consistent to be the result of mere financial bias. The reports were all much the same - "The tourist is king and we are second-class citizens".

At a county agricultural show I suppose one inevitably gets a farmer's view from informed visitors, but that is no bad thing. What is damaging to the farming of a national park (tramping feet, mountain bikes, traffic, dogs, litter, coaches etc), degrades the area for all quiet responsible residents and other users.

Is a wagon ride a "facility"?

At their July Court, the Verderers received a written complaint from a Minstead commoner that the Forestry Commission had acted improperly in granting a licence to a new

wagon ride operator, without first obtaining the consent of the Verderers. The Verderers enquired of the Commission if this was in fact the case and, although there is some confusion over whether the permit is a new one, a re-issue of someone else's permit, it was made quite clear to the Verderers that the Commission no longer feels obliged to ask for the Court's consent in such cases. It is thus a repeat of the issue raised by the infamous drag hunting trials refusal to accept the Court's jurisdiction. That is extremely serious for the Forest.

The Forestry Commission's argument is that it has now decided, contrary to past practice, that it does not require the Verderers' consent for recreational projects if these schemes do not call for physical development such as signs, gravel and buildings. It claims that non-physical developments (similar to what the planners would call a "change of use") are not "facilities" within the terms of the relevant Acts of Parliament and the Verderers accordingly cannot use their powers to protect the Forest against them. The Verderers dispute this interpretation of the law and deplore the consequent evasion of the Forest's shield against misuse.

The problem is likely to become worse, because the Forestry Commission seems intent on boosting its profile as a provider of widespread organised and informal recreation. Perhaps it is anxious to secure as dominant a position as possible in advance of a push along the same lines by a fledgling national park authority. Whatever the reason, this new attitude of the Commission constitutes a significant new threat to the Forest.

In the old days, the Verderers would not have hesitated to challenge the Crown in the courts over such a flagrant defiance of their authority. Those days are, perhaps rightly, long past. The Court has therefore suggested some form of arbitration as the best solution. That they are confident of winning, but if they were to fail, the traditional character of the Forest would suffer a severe blow and the floodgates of inappropriate recreational development would be opened another notch. The Deputy Surveyor is considering his position in the light of the Verderers' suggestion.

Running the Verderers' Court

The Verderers had something of a fright last month when, for a time, it seemed likely that they would lose their Clerk, Sue Westwood. Verderers' Clerks - I have known a number - come with varying degrees of competence and congeniality. Occasionally one is quite pleased to see a Clerk depart. At the other extreme, the loss of a Clerk can seem only one degree better than the end of the world. If the Verderers have difficulty in agreeing on some important issues, this was certainly not one of them. The threatened departure of *this* Clerk was universally accepted as being in the world-ending category. The danger is now, fortunately, passed, but one way or another the Court is undergoing quite a shake-up.

The first big change is undoubtedly beneficial so far as the workload on the office is concerned. The complex system of subsidies at present run by the Clerk and about which I wrote in May, will no longer be administered by the Verderers. It is likely that these subsidies will in future be controlled directly by the Forestry Commission (they pay in any case) with

the day-to-day management in the hands of a paid contractor. The Court will, of course, still have a considerable involvement because the subsidies are stock-based and are paid to the Commoners, but the office-clogging paperwork and supervision will be gone.

Other radical changes are also under consideration. There is, for example, the suggestion that a "technical officer" should be appointed to assist the Verderers with their work in the Forest. He might undertake site visits, prepare reports and recommend courses of action. This is a proposal which I find unattractive. Verderers are elected or appointed to do a job - not to delegate their functions to a paid official who would almost certainly be a great deal less knowledgeable than his employers. A Verderer, or at least an elected Verderer, who does not have a sound knowledge of the Forest and its geography, together with a great deal of mud on his boots, is not likely to be very much good, whether propped-up by a technical officer or not. Fortunately, I can think of none of my present colleagues and very few in the past, who fall into this category.

If a technical officer is not a very good idea, there is one area where paid assistance may eventually become necessary. The supervision of the field staff (agisters) is at present undertaken by a sub-committee which the Verderers call the Staff Committee. This comprises a chairman and three other Verderers, most of whom have their own businesses to run as well as their general tasks as Verderers. An excessive burden therefore falls on the chairman if he is to devote sufficient time and effort to his special duties. In addition, the Verderers' Office is overwhelmed with employment, tax and health and safety law relating to staff. It is true that there is a head agister, Brian Ingrem, who assigns daily tasks to his team, but with modern pressures over such questions as animal welfare, the agisters need more direct support and involvement by the Court. Whether this is provided by a paid employee remains to be determined. It looks increasingly as if this is the only solution. Many years ago the Verderers employed an officer, whom they called a Steward, to run the agister team. That did not work well and the mistakes then made must certainly be avoided now.

Forest speed limit

Morning work about the farm usually keeps me at home until after the rush hour, but recently I have been using the B 3078 Fordingbridge to Cadnam road between 8.00 am and 9.00 am. It was something of a shock to discover how completely the 40 mph speed limit is now disregarded at this time of day by all but a handful of drivers. The limit is, of course, intended for the protection of the Forest's grazing animals. When it was first introduced some years ago, there were regular speed checks and there was then a moderate degree of compliance. All this has now changed. If there are still speed traps, the commuters seem quite prepared to risk them. A driver travelling at a steady 40 mph on this road and at this time of day is likely to be the slowest person around. Moreover, with the limited visibility on much of the road, speeds of at least 55-60mph must be necessary safely to overtake a car travelling at 40. The infringements are therefore anything but minor.

One interesting fact which I have observed several times is that if there are two or three law-abiding drivers in a row, the speeders behind build up and seem reluctant to

overtake. Presumably they cannot see what is at the front of the queue and fear that it might be a police car.

This is a very sad state of affairs because it demonstrates such a callous attitude to animal welfare by local people who certainly should know better. I get the impression that in this respect at least, the holidaymakers are much better behaved.

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