

## **NEW FOREST NOTES AUGUST 2004**

### **A Park to please nobody**

The government seems to have succeeded in displeasing just about everyone, except the Council for National Parks (who are “delighted”), New Forest Tourism ( “thrilled”) and sundry property developers (who are keeping quiet), in its choice of the form and extent of the national park which it has decided to impose on the New Forest. Even the most dedicated recreation groups such as the Ramblers Association seem dissatisfied with the boundaries.

The Countryside Agency had promised the Forest immense new protection from development pressures by encompassing large tracts of the suburban fringe areas within the park. It drew the boundaries to accomplish this. That always seemed to me a rather weak argument because the so-called Heritage Area had been given status equivalent to that of a national park for planning purposes, so that making it an actual park seemed to achieve little. However, the Countryside Agency claimed that the Heritage Area was liable to periodic review and was not to be trusted. Its own boundaries, it said, conferred overwhelming protection. Well, that argument and most of the promised protection has fallen at the first fence. Not only has the government rejected the great swathe of protection we had been promised, but it has actually cut back the existing protected zone by excluding significant parts of the Heritage Area. More development, closer to the Forest, is now the likely outcome of the supposed protection conferred by the national park. I have no doubt that property speculators and developers with land banks north and west of Totton have been discreetly celebrating the park announcement.

An unsolicited email which I received last month from a senior serving planning officer suggests that the protected area of the Forest will be reduced by nearly 4,500 acres on present levels and will be nearly 25,000 acres less than promised by the Countryside Agency. For those who have difficulty imagining such vast acreages, 25,000 acres is more than all the plantations of the Forest put together. So far as the government is concerned, of course, this is a politically sensitive matter and “homes for young people” carries with it a lot more votes than “protecting the New Forest”.

So what is left from the wreckage of this grand protection scheme for the New Forest ? The national park authority members will administer, for planning purposes, a small strip of the Forest’s fringe, the villages within the perambulation and two or three agricultural estates in southern Wiltshire. That will hardly keep them very busy. While there was the prospect that the park would be getting to grips with the urban problems of Lyminster, Ringwood, Fordingbridge and Bransgore, it might not have been inclined to intervene too much in the management of the Forest itself. Now the Forest is almost all that is left on which it can stamp its authority. The Countryside Agency told us that that this authority would be entirely benign, but then it also promised a great ring of protection. One promise is likely to be as untrustworthy as the other. Suburban control of the park authority will lead, inevitably

(and theoretical national park objectives notwithstanding) to the satisfying of suburban demands on the Forest – sporting facilities, “trails”, mountain bike routes, car parks, information boards and so on. Interestingly, the public inquiry inspector also saw the park authority engaging in recreational manipulation of private property – an additional and unwelcome increase in pressure on the true New Forest from an area which has so far been relatively quiet.

I understand that a civil servant will establish a sort of interim park authority while the wheels grind onwards towards 2006 when the real thing will come about. He is to be housed in rooms above the Verderers’ offices – originally intended for the Court’s Stewardship officer. I am not sure about the symbolism of this move. Perhaps it has something to do with “getting on top of those Verderers from the start”.

There remains the question of how the national park authority should be staffed. Clearly it will need a bevy of planners to do, no better than the New Forest District Council, some of the work which that Council’s planners are currently undertaking. Then it will need people to get the Forest itself under control. In my view it would be a great waste of talent and past public expenditure if the experience and knowledge built up by the New Forest Committee over more than a decade did not fill the vacancy. The Committee’s staff has unparalleled experience of producing New Forest reports, complex minutes, statistics and publicity material. It is a master in the administration of committees, sub-committees, working groups and seminars. A seamless metamorphosis into the core staff of the park authority would seem the ideal solution, with the New Forest Committee Officer becoming the National Park Officer and perhaps (if the law allows), the Committee’s chairman taking over as chairman of the park. Then we will all know exactly where we stand.

### **Commoners Passage**

It is a growing tradition that the Forest honours its dead heroes by dedicating a bridge or passage to their memory. Until now the emphasis has been on “dead”, so it was with some concern that I learned of the latest proposal – to commemorate the work of someone I had thought to be very much alive. Fortunately it turned out that the Commoners Defence Association intends a variation on former practice and wants to honour the work of its former chairman, Tim Moore, while he is still an active member of the Forest community! The Association is, however, coupling that dedication of a refurbished passage, with the memory of Freda Harding who died last year and who was secretary of the Association under Tim Moore’s chairmanship.

For commoners seeking or driving stock, the network of paths and bridges which stretches across the Forest is crucial to efficient management. There can be no more fitting tribute to the work of these two Forest stalwarts than to restore the passage across the western branch of Harvestslade north of Burley. It is a remote and relatively undisturbed part of the Forest, far from the nearest car park, camp site or cycle trail, although it is rather spoiled by the roar from the A 31. In Forest terms, a “passage” is a causeway across a bog, usually incorporating a bridge. The recently reconstructed passage at Harvestslade

comprises a gravel causeway beneath which runs a series of large plastic pipes to take the normal discharge of the bog and also flood water. The workmanship is of the usual high standard provided by the Forestry Commission's engineering teams, although the coarse gravel finish is not exactly horse-friendly.

The passage will be officially opened at 11.00 am on Saturday 18th September and all commoners and other colleagues of the dedicatees are invited to attend. For those not familiar with this part of the Forest, the causeway lies on the track from Soarley Beeches to the north end of Ridley Wood.

What the new passage is to be named, I do not know. Precedent rightly suggests a short and simple name such as "Murray's Passage" at Withybed or the "Zeigler Bridge" at Foulford. I hope we can avoid the "Moore and Harding Passage" which is tongue-twisting and suggests the premises of a toothpaste manufacturer or solicitor. Perhaps the "Commoners Passage" would be appropriate for two people who dedicated so many years to the service of the Forest's farming community.

### **Private capital for the Forest's camp sites ?**

Buried in the mountain of paper which arrives before every meeting of the Verderers' Court there was last month a single sheet which left me with a great sense of foreboding. It was a notification from the Deputy Surveyor that the branch of the Commission which runs the camp sites is seeking "a private sector partner (who) will bring capital to invest into the sites as well as management and expertise". This, it appears, has been demanded by the Treasury. I find the idea of a private developer exerting pressure on the Forest from within the camp sites extremely disquieting, but until the last few weeks we could have been confident that the Verderers would have been able to veto any damaging development which might have followed the establishment of such a partnership. Now everything is changed. We are a national park and the consequences of this could strike home much more quickly than anyone had expected.

The Forestry Commission is engaged in planning the upgrading of Hollands Wood and Round Hill camp sites, including replacing existing buildings, installing electric hook ups, relocating camping areas into adjacent woodland at Stockley and Perry Wood and reducing capacity at Hollands Wood. Informal discussions have been taking place with the Verderers for some months and, when finished, the plans will come before the Court by presentment for public comment. I cannot, of course, predict whether the Court will eventually approve or reject the scheme, but I think it is fair to say that none of my colleagues has so far expressed unrestrained enthusiasm for the Commission's ideas.

If, after full public consultation, the Verderers decide to reject the plans, that would have been an end to the matter under the old regime. The intended upgrading would not have taken place. Now, however, there is a clear avenue open to Forest Holidays, perhaps backed by a thrusting new private developer partner. They may simply ask the national park authority to use its compulsory powers to take the land and bypass the Verderers' control. It appears that English Nature is not objecting to the plans, so there will be no conservation

block. The park may decide it is free to support the increased trade, job creation and general economic well-being which upgraded camping in the New Forest will bring.

There remain two questions. Firstly, would the Verderers' refusal constitute the sort of "exceptional" circumstances in which the government has indicated that the park should override the protective powers of the Court? The Commission, some campers, and business interests would certainly argue "yes" and, with English Nature in support of the development, there can be little doubt that compulsion would be considered appropriate by the park once the development principle had been established.

The second question relates to the attitude to the proposal itself likely to be adopted by a council-controlled park authority. Here we have a clear and recent precedent. Earlier this year the Pembrokeshire Coast National Park Authority supported the developer of a leisure complex within the park, presumably in pursuit of just those economic and social benefits which the Forestry Commission is here seeking to promote. It caused much unhappiness in amenity circles. The Commission and its future private finance partner should now be able to push ahead with its New Forest camping plans with increasing confidence of ultimate success.

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