

## **NEW FOREST NOTES AUGUST 2006**

### **Changing the course of the Lymington River**

This Autumn is likely to see a complex and far-reaching debate over a single aspect of Forest management – whether or not to divert the course of the Lymington River. At the July Court, the Forestry Commission told the Verderers that they would be making a presentment on 20th September, asking for permission to change the route of the river north of Brockenhurst and at the same time to alter the alignment of the River Blackwater (otherwise called Fletchers Water). Both the Commoners Defence Association and the Verderers have been given the advantage of a preliminary site visit.

Anyone (and there are many, both locals and visitors) who walks northward from New Park along the banks of the Lymington River, through ancient woodland, past the deer-filled Queen Meadow and on into the mysterious and beautiful depths of Brinken Wood, no doubt assumes (as I did until recently) that they are following a natural watercourse. Old trees grow from the banks and lean across the river. Ferns overhang the water in places, shading pools and gravel beds beneath. There are even, despite considerable human disturbance, occasional kingfisher holes. The river here is as integral a part of the Forest and almost as well-known as Rufus Stone or the Knightwood Oak. It has certainly escaped the disfiguring tourist enhancements suffered by those two Forest icons – but it is not “natural” and therein lies its vulnerability. Because of this technical lack of “naturalness”, it is unacceptable to English Nature. I am probably not the best person to explain why English Nature is so keen to promote a diversion, because I find their ideas in this case very difficult to accept. The site meeting was told that they have a schedule which records every parcel of the Forest and which grades each area for conservation purposes (for details visit: <http://www.natureonthemap.org.uk/map.aspx>). A parcel may be classed as in favourable or unfavourable condition (with various intermediate grades such as “unfavourable improving”). The classification is often determined by whether or not the area has been developed for human use. For example, if a deep drainage trench was dug up the centre of a bog in 1970, drying and altering the vegetation, the area through which it passes may be classified as unfavourable and English Nature will seek to have the drain filled-in. Whether or not one agrees with such a plan depends upon what one expects from the New Forest, but it is at least possible to understand the reasoning in so straightforward a case. My own view of the classification system is that there is too much politics dominating the science. English Nature demands “restoration” of soft targets where, for example, only the commoners’ grazing or the landscape are affected, while allowing recreational facilities in A&O woods or other damaging public use to go effectively unchallenged. It records them, but that is all. Action would be unpopular and politically incorrect. Be that as it may, by launching an assault on the alignment of the Lymington River, they are opening up an entirely new front. Nothing on this scale has been tried in the New Forest in recent times and they may not find that the scheme is quite so easy to push through as they suppose.

What, then, is wrong with this beautiful part of the Lymington River and what does English Nature propose to do about it ? About one hundred and sixty years ago the railway came to the New Forest, nowhere near Queen Meadow or Brinken Wood, although it did, indirectly, affect these areas. A large sum of money was set aside as compensation and was to be expended for the mutual benefit of the Crown and the Commoners in improving the drainage of the Open Forest. Between 1847 and 1852, many drainage projects were undertaken creating or improving lawns for the benefit of grazing animals. Among the best known of these are Balmer Lawn and Burley Lawn, but there were also some large cuttings made deeper in the Forest, such as that at Warwickslade. For a few years, no doubt, such cuttings looked raw, but one and a half centuries of natural processes has made them indistinguishable from the surrounding Forest – except in the improvement of streamside lawns and at least to the eye of the non-specialist. By 1852 the Crown and the commoners were at each other's throats and the former managed to prevent further drainage works for the benefit of the Open Forest for about a quarter of a century. However, although it cannot be identified precisely in the published records, it seems likely that a significant modification of the Lymington River was undertaken before the ban took effect. We know that in 1787 the river meandered through Queen Meadow and Queen Meadow Leys (otherwise Driver's Nursery) to the corner of New Park. Probably in 1849-50, the river was diverted out of Queen Meadow to its present course, picking up the flow from Warwickslade Cutting as it went. The old course in the meadow became grassland, while in Driver's Nursery a thriving oak plantation occupied its line until the Forestry Commission neglected the drainage so badly that many of the finest trees died through waterlogging. Their skeletons remain today as a sad monument to this neglect.

The early Victorian alterations are, we were told, sufficient to render the area unfavourable from a conservation point of view. English Nature's great new scheme is that the river should be put back on its 18<sup>th</sup> Century course and that the present river should be partially filled. It would still carry a small flow, at least in winter, from Warwickslade. Large sums of public money would be spent on the project for a gain which I suspect very few of us would be able to appreciate and at a loss of well-loved landscape which many would mourn. I have no doubt that the Forestry Commission's engineers would make a very neat and efficient job of the diversion. They have proved elsewhere that they can do so (visit the area east of Red Rise near Burley for an example), but whether it should be done at all is a very different matter. Will we next be required to destroy the Roman kilns near Fordingbridge because they have enriched the soil of an SSSI unit ? How ancient must a change be before it escapes the restoration zeal of English Nature ?

Once the Commission's presentment has been made in September, the public and commoners will have the opportunity to put their views to the Verderers on 18th October.

Unfortunately the ambitions of English Nature and the Forestry Commission are not limited to the Lymington River north of Brockenhurst. In the same area they wish to disrupt the present free-flowing and lawn-fringed alignment of Fletchers Water. Once again, we do

not know exactly when this watercourse was made. It may have been immediately following 1845, but more probably in 1859 to assist in draining the newly formed plantations further west. Anyhow, the idea is to return the river to an earlier course, filling or partly filling the existing channel. The margins would become wetter and in all probability the grazing lawns would deteriorate. The free-flow of the existing stream would be impeded and, in due course, the hated debris dams would be allowed to develop, encouraging flooding of the surroundings. On the other hand, aesthetically there could be some gains, at least until the debris dams take effect. It would represent another fundamental change in the Forest as we know it and this project also will be considered by the Verderers in the autumn.

There is an interesting postscript to this story. Neither the Victorians nor English Nature were the first to have the idea of tinkering with the river courses around New Park. There is growing evidence that in Mediaeval times, a series of leats “borrowed” the flow of both Fletchers Water and Ober Water, throwing their produce into the Lymington River at Driver’s Nursery, probably to augment the supply to a long-vanished mill near Bolderford. Fortunately the scheme was short-lived and nature reasserted itself without the expenditure of public funds.

#### **The Great Hole of Sluffers**

There is no escaping mire restoration at present. There seems no end to the appetite for (in plain language) re-bogging and stream impedance, but there is also a growing unease amongst the commoners. The lawns so crucial to the livestock’s welfare, can become early victims of the process. On the other hand, there are some of these schemes which can be welcomed by just about everyone and a good example is to be found in Sluffers Inclosure north of the A 31 road. This Inclosure, made in 1862, was largely planted with conifers. The north part was cleared before my time, perhaps to improve safety on Stoney Cross aerodrome. Then, in accordance with the wayward fashions in forestry, it was reinclosed and replanted in about 1960. Now those trees in turn are being cut down and this part of the plantation is to be abandoned.

A stream runs the length of Sluffers Inclosure, un-named at this point, but later called Bratley Water, then Blackensford Brook, and finally the River Blackwater otherwise the same Fletchers Water which is under threat at Brockenhurst ! Over the years, the stream excavated for itself at the north end of the inclosure an immense chasm, cut deep into the underlying clay. It was an impressive natural feature, even if its existence was initially triggered by artificial drainage, but it was deep and dangerous. Over the last year or so it had attracted the name of the “Great Hole”, but last month it finally disappeared. Immense quantities of clay, hoggin, heather bales and timber were poured into the ravine. Downstream of this filling an artificial gravel stream bed (looking at present just like a forestry road) links with the uneroded stream course further down. The whole filled area was neatly levelled and covered in topsoil, so there is nothing now to suggest that a stream ever existed within the narrow strip of oak woodland. The water is somewhere deep underground. Over the coming months the filling will silt up and sooner or later the stream will reappear at ground level.

The hole-filling has been an excellent and sensitively-done engineering project, carried out to a high standard and with no threat to grazing. Only the lack of consolidation (of which the Commission is aware) could present difficulties for livestock in the short term. Goodness knows what it has cost, but there seems absolutely no limit to the funds available for such work in the New Forest today and for the foreseeable future. It will be fascinating to see how the new watercourse develops.

Anthony Pasmore