

NEW FOREST NOTES AUGUST 2007

Trouble in the camps

It has not taken long – under two years – for the new management of the Forest's camp sites to stir up quite a hornets' nest. It will be remembered that there are ten camps in the Forest, built almost wholly on the Commoners' grazing and formerly managed by the Forestry Commission. In 2006, the Commission leased the sites to Forest Holidays without any consultation with the Verderers or the Commoners. Indeed, it was done entirely in secret and was thus highly reminiscent of the bad old policies of the 1960s. Anyhow, the new management, which is a private company in which the Forestry Commission has a minority share, has been sharpening up its commercial knives in recent months. The latest manifestation of this policy is a letter sent out to regular customers promoting "limited availability for some seasonal pitches at a selection of our sites in the UK". In other words, customers are invited to hire a pitch for the season. The promotion is under the enticing heading: "Would you like your own place in the country?" You can have a pitch at Ashurst for the sum of £1025. Your "country place" at Hollands Wood will cost you £1271 or you can go down market at Ocknell or Long Beech for a mere £696. A premium pitch in Set Thorns is for the wealthy at £1527.

At the July Court, the Verderers were told that this is merely a continuation of a longstanding sales policy, but if that is correct, it is a policy which has very successfully evaded the notice of the Forest community. In fact the Commoners Defence was so annoyed that a forceful presentment against such sales was made in open court. The Deputy Surveyor pointed out to the Verderers that the seasonal pitch scheme is subject to strict rules. No one visit may exceed three weeks. It must be followed by three nights vacant, before a further three weeks is allowed. Forest Holidays "may" ask purchasers to move pitches every 28 days to protect the grass. Exactly how much already trampled and weakened grass is supposed to survive beneath a caravan after 28 days is not made clear.

All this seems a long way from the original intention of Forest camping, in which a family might enjoy a few nights staying in beautiful surroundings with minimal facilities. It may be within the letter of the law, but it certainly flouts its spirit and greatly exceeds anything intended by the Court when it granted permission for the sites thirty five years ago.

Unfortunately, the marketing of places in the country does not seem to be the extent of ambitions for the camps. There are persistent rumours that pitches have been offered to local authorities for semi-permanent accommodation of homeless people. Homelessness is a terrible thing and I would certainly not wish to see anyone denied accommodation out of hand, but if it is to be done at all, it should be done in the open after full consultation with all interested parties. There are also stories of a bit of private enterprise in which local people have secured relatively cheap accommodation on the camp sites for the summer, while letting their own seaside houses at a handsome profit! Neither claim is, I think, admitted by the Commission, but then neither has been categorically denied.

It was inevitable that the financial screws would be tightened once an out-and-out commercial enterprise took control of the camps. There is nothing improper in that, but to judge from the vigorous complaints of campers that their visitors have been charged excessive parking fees, Forest Holidays has been able to annoy not only the locals, but some of its own customers. My own view is that the legality of such charges without the consent of the Verderers (which has not been given) is highly questionable.

It would be interesting to know exactly how much money the Forestry Commission is making out of its lease to Forest Holidays and how much Forest Holidays is making out of the Forest. All financial information was carefully blacked out of the copy of the lease which was eventually given to the Verderers. This was presumably done on the excuse of commercial confidentiality. That in itself is a very dubious notion. There is no open market in letting off bits of the New Forest and no competitor could possibly benefit from a disclosure of the information.

All in all, the camps are becoming an increasing thorn in the Forest's side. In an attempt to calm fears, the Deputy Surveyor has agreed to bring a representative of Forest Holidays to the Verderers' Court, so we may then learn a little more of the future direction of camping policy.

The planning Verderer

Prior to the July Court, the Verderers were informed by the National Park that Mrs. Kathy Heron would be replaced as the Park's representative. Mrs. Heron was a highly valued member of the Verderers' team, but quite apart from that she was also a member of the County Council and formerly represented that body on the Court. After the park was set up, she was appointed on an interim basis as their representative, but she also remained a member of the County Council. The law requires that one Verderer must be appointed by the planning authority and since the Park is now that authority, it has taken over the appointing privilege formerly exercised by the County. This may all seem rather dry and technical, but it has severe implications for the Verderers and for the Forest.

Back in 1949 when the constitution of the Court was established, either the foresight of the legislators (or more probably luck) secured a very close tie between the Court and the highway authority – Hampshire County Council – which also dealt with planning. In the 1970s there was a great row between the County and District Councils, both of whom were then “planning” authorities, as to which of the two had the right to appoint the planning Verderer. Since neither was prepared to back down, the post remained vacant for a long time. Eventually the County Council prevailed. Now the Park, through its constitution (and perfectly innocently) has succeeded in undermining a longstanding and crucial relationship between the Court and The Castle. Having met the new Park Verderer, Mrs. Halford, I am sure she will make an amiable and efficient member of the Verderers' Court, but that is beside the point.

The problem is that the Verderers have come to rely on the close ties with the County Council provided by the planning Verderer. Hampshire's actions affect the Forest deeply and directly almost every day. It maintains and widens roads; it controls speed limits; it erects

notice boards; it regulates road safety; it maintains fences, builds grids, clears culverts and so on. Never a Court passes without at least one highway matter under consideration. The Park, on the other hand, is much more remote. It can influence the Forest's future for good or ill, but beyond that it chiefly provides huge quantities of paper for the Verderers to wade through and hosts interminable committees which they must attend. The nuts and bolts of Forest management continue in the hands of the Forestry Commission and, to a considerable extent, the County Council. That is why the loss of the County Verderer is so unfortunate. Mrs Heron has kindly said that she will continue to help the Court in its dealings with Winchester, but the close link provided by a direct appointment has been broken.

The commoning review

Last month I attended a meeting at Lyndhurst in which the Official Verderer and a team of commoners reported on the "commoning review". That is an assessment of the problems faced by New Forest commoners and the possible solutions to those problems. It was at once clear that a great deal of hard and very creditable work had been undertaken by a lot of people. The problems were all clearly identified, even if the solutions were not always so obvious.

Despite all the effort which had been expended, I have to say that I found the whole process particularly depressing. Almost every problem identified existed in some form twenty years ago at the time of the New Forest Review Group report. Worse than that, most of them would have been perfectly familiar to the audience of any Commoners Defence general meeting when I first became a member half a century ago. If the present exercise has done anything, it is chiefly to prove how intractable are the Forest's difficulties and how little has been achieved in tackling them. The same old topics came up, including the need to subsidise commoners, the importance of grazing maintenance, the terrible toll of animals killed on the roads, the bad behaviour of visitors and the hostility of some residents and motorists. Only the emphasis put upon different problems seemed to change. Road accidents are a good example of how little progress has been made. They were cut dramatically by the fencing of the A roads in the 1960s and 1970s as a result of pressure from the commoners. Today numbers are stubbornly high on the two remaining killer B roads – Dibden Purlieu to Lymington and northwards from Cadnam. One might as well be frank and admit that these totals will never fall significantly, short of fencing, whatever campaigns are run and however loud the protests.

Perhaps this review has placed greater emphasis on land and house availability and prices than was done in the 1960s. Then a little holding for a commoner, with a few acres of land, could be purchased for perhaps £30,000: today the same place is worth over a million. No wonder rural communities across the whole country have been cutting their collective throats by selling to outsiders and pocketing the resultant fortunes. One of the presenters of the report wisely remarked that he did not suppose there was anyone in the room who would sell his place for less than market value, just because there are young commoners who cannot afford to buy !

There was much emphasis upon the need to educate both visitors and residents about the complexities of common land farming. I wish I believed that would actually achieve anything, but I think there is little evidence that it does. For years I was involved in adult education for voluntary groups such as WEA and for the County Council. Enthusiastic and sympathetic residents turned out in numbers to learn about the Forest, but they started (and ended up) as responsible citizens. You can throw "education" at an uninterested public until your resources and patience are both exhausted, but I doubt if you will achieve very much.

Anthony Pasmore.