

NEW FOREST NOTES AUGUST 2009

Park changes

After a delay of almost a year, the National Park last month finally got round to appointing a new representative on the Verderers' Court. To be strictly accurate, the Park's appointee is a representative of the local planning authority provided-for by the New Forest Acts and is not an appointment made by the Park because it is a park. The Verderer was formerly chosen by the County Council, but its rights of appointment were ousted when the Park was established. The Verderers have very little concern with planning, and that is a possible explanation of the Park's lack of interest in the appointment. Anyhow, Mr.Clive Maton has succeeded the late Diana Halford in the post. Clive is so well-known a figure in both Forest and local government circles, that he needs no introduction from me. He is, for example, a leading commoner and father of one of the Forest's agisters. He joins the Court on equal terms with the existing members and there will be no need to educate him as to the nature of marking fees, the purpose of pig-ringing and the difference between a Scots pine and Douglas fir. Such education has occasionally been necessary with those whom the government has sometimes judged to be fit persons to manage the New Forest. The Official Verderer welcomed Clive to the team at the Court on 15th July and the Verderers are now once again at full strength.

Of less immediate concern to the Verderers, although perhaps of wider interest, has been the appointment of a new chief executive for the Park in the person of Mr.Brian Foley, an industrialist and local resident. Perhaps an expert in big business is just what the Park authority needs to resolve its savage internal squabbles, but from the Forest's point of view I think that other qualifications might have been looked-for. My own preference would have been for expertise in land management, particularly farming, and experience in protecting threatened landscapes along with what are usually described as the special qualities of the Forest. Moreover, the lately retired chief executive was, on *her* appointment, said to have been a DEFRA expert on waste management, so those who make these appointments evidently have different ideas from many Forest people as to what is required here.

It is early days to judge the new direction (if any) of the Park authority, but the chief executive's statement that the Forest "is open and available for everyone to enjoy" while balancing the need to "protect its cultural heritage and wildlife", does not inspire a great deal of confidence. To start with, it comprises a rather irritating platitude, but insofar as it means anything at all, it is simply wrong. The Forest cannot accommodate all the demands which are made upon it and many of those demands are in violent conflict with the primary purpose of national parks and the statutory priority required of park managers in securing that purpose. It may be politically comfortable to ignore the priority of protecting natural beauty, cultural heritage and wildlife in preference to recreation, where there is a conflict, but that does not make it any the less wrong. The wording of the Act is clear and precise. Forty years ago, a leading ecologist (Colin Tubbs) wrote of the New Forest that "it cannot be all things to all men for all time". In the intervening years, demands upon the Forest have increased dramatically, yet still the brakes are not applied and still the meaningless talk of balancing and compromise goes on.

Rabbits and bracken

In their July Court the Verderers heard a vigorous presentment from the Commoners Defence Association on the subject of two of the Forest's great hates – bracken and rabbits. The essence of the presentment was that we have far too much of both and that something ought to be done about it. There can be little doubt as to the accuracy of both complaints, but this is the sort of presentment which it is very difficult to answer in a way which will be satisfactory to the presenter. The Verderers were sympathetic, but of course have no power themselves to touch either rabbits or bracken. They promised to raise the matter with the Deputy Surveyor. The Deputy Surveyor was sympathetic, but told the Court that he has no funds to increase control of either pest, without drawing money from elsewhere in the Open Forest maintenance budget. However, he promised the Verderers that he would ask the keepers for a report. No doubt the keepers too will be sympathetic.

All this sympathy is a far cry from what the Commoners' Defence would probably like – perhaps a firm commitment to a 400% increase in bracken spraying and a mass gassing war on rabbits. Unfortunately we live in a real world of ever tightening budgets.

It would be interesting to have some accurate figures as to the extent of bracken spread over the Open Forest in recent years. The perception of all of us is that there is far more of the plant than, say, half a century ago, yet the comparisons so far done between very detailed wartime aerial photographs and those of today do not always support that view. I am sure there must be scope for a research project on the subject and that might give some hard evidence on which to argue the case. The Verderers were told that Natural England is not worried about bracken. It appears that no “units” are in unfavourable condition on grounds of bracken infestation. Natural England looks at the Forest as units, while the rest of us see grazing and landscape. Aside from the area of bracken, the one claim which does seem to be incontrovertible is that until the Second World War, huge amounts of bracken were harvested by the commoners for stock bedding. Some years ago in these notes, I quoted the Deputy Surveyor in 1875 who gave evidence in relation to bracken: “It is very much sought after. The whole of it is taken and the parties who have it are exceedingly jealous of one another and eager to get the best fern that they can get.” Today the Forestry Commission harvests some for peat-substitute compost and one or two contractors take a little, but most is simply left to lie, building up a deep unproductive litter which destroys the grazing.

As to rabbits, they have been an unmitigated pest in the Forest for centuries, even destroying entire Inclosures of young saplings on occasions. Myxomatosis eased things for a time, but is no longer an effective control. This year the population seems to have exploded. There is even a particularly cheeky and well-fed specimen grinning at me through my office window as I write this !

The future of Forestry Commission land

The Forestry Commission is undertaking a national consultation on the future management of its land or what it calls the “Public Forest Estate in England”. It sounds (and is) rather dull, but its results could have serious implications for the New Forest and therefore it cannot be ignored. The consultation is presented as a way of planning the delivery of what the public wants from forestry land, together with the ways in which that delivery can be paid-for. That may appear harmless enough, but what lies behind it seems to me to be an analysis of how the Commission can make its land more profitable (in the national interest of course) or, in the case of loss-making areas, how

expense can be cut. Since the costly elements of land-management tend to be things like landscape and wildlife protection and the profitable ones everything from mineral extraction to housing, the implications are obvious.

The consultation document, which can be found at www.forestry.gov.uk/england-estatestudy is dense with trendy management jargon which makes it rather tedious to read, but there are some bits which are clear enough. For example, “commercial opportunities” are listed as timber production, sale of surplus land, sale of minerals, establishment of leisure businesses like Forest Holidays, charging for leisure, concerts (presumably pop concerts) and sporting events, housing and so on. It is therefore immediately obvious why the consultation presents a potential threat to the New Forest, although at the moment it is simply trying to determine a broad national policy. That is the great weakness of the process – the assumption that a general policy can be satisfactorily imposed on an extremely diverse set of land-holdings. A conifer plantation on a reclaimed area of mining land on the outskirts of a big Midlands city has nothing in common with the New Forest and management which is appropriate there might be utterly wrong here.

The New Forest is ringed round with special protection, notably the New Forest Acts, various wildlife conservation designations, the “Minister’s Mandate” (which instructs the Forestry Commission on appropriate management in the New Forest) and, at to the extent that it provides protection rather than encouraging exploitation, the classification as national park. Theoretically the imposition of a cost-cutting and development-directed national forestry policy should not be able to overcome such protection. Practically it could increase the ever-growing pressure on the Forest. For that reason we all have to brave the jargon and the politically correct questions (you will be invited to state your sexual orientation and ethnic background) and make a response to the consultation before the end of September.

Oakley Inclosure

Last month the New Forest Research and Publication Trust completed a two-year archaeological and landscape survey of three Inclosures, centred on Oakley, between Burley and Bolderwood. The work was undertaken for the national park and a copy of the report may be seen in the Christopher Tower library.

The area is dense woodland, much of it semi-commercial conifer plantation and certainly not among the more beautiful parts of the New Forest, although it was until the late 18th Century ancient oak and beech, interspersed with lawns, streams and holly clumps. It is one of those parts of the Forest where little was know of the history and former land use. The survey has shown just how much there is to find out about such “blank” areas of the Forest, by slow and patient fieldwork. A particularly interesting element of the survey comprises a study of the few surviving ancient trees in the area, including those bearing the government arrows from the 19th Century and earlier which are very numerous along the southern edge of Beech Bed. The more recent notable trees have also been recorded and especially the great Douglas fir avenues at Blackensford in Oakley. One such tree, near Undersley Wood, has a girth of 20ft 3ins and may be the largest (but not tallest) of its type in England.

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