

NEW FOREST NOTES AUGUST 2011

Who is to run the New Forest in future ?

The reported call by the New Forest Association for an end to the “rule of the Forestry Commission over the New Forest” will no doubt find many sympathetic readers in and around the Forest. The Commission’s record in post-war management has been distinctly mixed, with seriously damaging actions outweighing its achievements. One has only to remember the attempted elimination of broadleaved trees from the Inclosures in the 1960s, the establishment of the so-called “Verderers’ Inclosures” (conifers on heathland), the clandestine leasing of the camp sites to a commercial group and the recreational free-for-all of recent years to see exactly what is troubling the Association. On the other hand there are some balancing factors in the Commission’s favour which are perhaps too often forgotten. It established the car free zones in the 1970s in the teeth of public opinion not dissimilar to the recreational demands of the present day. It has begun to make amends for the Verderers’ Inclosures by clearing the timber and restoring them. Its scrub-clearance programme in support of grazing has paid great dividends to the commoners in recent years. On the whole, though, the NFA may be right in seeing the Commission’s reign as having had a negative effect on the New Forest. The Commission is certainly trying, unsuccessfully, to serve both God (in the form of Forest protection) and mammon as represented by commercial forestry and recreational income.

If one reads the actual wording of the NFA’s response to the “Independent Panel on Forestry” (which is to determine our future), it is not so precise as a simple demand for the ejection of the Forestry Commission. It is a somewhat woolly consideration of various options with an apparent bias in favour of replacing state control. Only the abandonment of commercial forestry seems a clear-cut objective. There are also some rather dubious statements such as that the New Forest is a “part of the Crown Estate”, whereas in fact it is owned by the state and has been put under the management of the Forestry Commission for the best part of a century past.

Given that there is much to commend the NFA’s vision of a less commercial New Forest, it may surprise many people to find that the Association’s views are deeply at variance with those of the Verderers’ Court. At the time of writing, the Court’s response to the Forestry Panel has not been published, but there is little reason to suppose that it will vary much from the views expressed in February of this year when the Verderers were firmly of the opinion that the Forestry Commission is essential to the survival of the New Forest. This had much less to do with the Commission’s record, good or bad, than its powers and how those might or might not devolve upon a successor management organization. The failure of the Association to see the potential dangers in this outweighs most of its other arguments, including that in favour of the abandonment of commercial forestry. In the Verderers’ Court there is a wide division of opinion on the desirability of continuing softwood timber production, but there is absolute unanimity as to the extreme danger of tinkering with the present

administrative system and especially the New Forest Acts upon which the survival of the New Forest depends.

In simple terms, the way the New Forest works is that the state (represented by the Forestry Commission) owns the land and is given powers by Act of Parliament to deal with it in various ways. Those powers are severely constrained by the Verderers' Court which in turn derives its authority from the New Forest Acts. The Forestry Commission must seek consent from the Verderers for almost all forms of development (in the planning sense) which it wants to carry out in the Forest. Even many non-development land management activities are regulated by the Court. Such restraints are all that has stood against the Forest being turned into a large version of Southampton Common combined with a theme park. If I fail to mention it, I will be reminded that there are also conservation designations, but these have proved themselves weak when ranged against the insatiable demands of the public upon the Forest.

If the Forestry Commission was to be ejected from the New Forest and, for example, the National Trust (which is reported to have cast covetous eyes upon it) took over, what powers would it have? Since the relationship between the Verderers and the Forestry Commission is clearly defined by statute, it would almost certainly be necessary to confer new statutory powers on the Trust, to match or expand those now enjoyed by the Forestry Commission. That begins to look very messy from the government's point of view – not least because it would be hotly opposed legislation and there is supposedly a shortage of parliamentary time. Inevitably there would be attempts to reduce the Forest's protection during this process. "Wouldn't it be nice to have more trails and cycle routes without the tranquillity and beauty of the landscape getting in the way? We could get those Verderers' under control on such matters as the Lyndhurst bypass. We could make it easier for utility companies to exploit the Forest and surely there ought to be provision for a few wind farms in the remoter parts – nobody would see them there!"

The Forest would be in real danger and that is why, above all else, the Verderers decided back in February that they wanted to continue living with the devil they know - a devil which is more or less controllable.

Danger to the Forest's statutory protection is thus the primary reason for not upsetting the present administrative system, but there are other problems as well. Whoever might be appointed to succeed the Forestry Commission would require vast sums of subsidy to run the New Forest and quite probably more than is at present spent out of public funds. Inadequate funding would simply lead to the Forest being squeezed for more and more recreational income. There is next the question of competence of the new manager. I personally believe that the National Trust does a fine job in protecting great county houses, but that it is much less good at land management. Its existing land management in the New Forest is a clear example of this. It cannot control overgrazing, dumping, and other abuses of various types. Its maintenance of car-free protection (ditches and dragons teeth) is poor and its management of its historic sites is no better. Only when it comes to cutting down trees does it

excel. If it cannot get such matters right on a small scale, what hope has it with a property the size of the New Forest ?

I suppose that the final, but not least contentious, element of the NFA's proposals is for an end to commercial conifer growing in the New Forest. That is undoubtedly a difficult and perhaps finely balanced question. I hate the careless and often horrific damage caused by ill-timed extraction of timber, the seeming inability of the Commission to control its contractors and often the heaps of forest waste left lying about with no attempt at clearance after felling. The Commission is also incapable of understanding the landscape implications of what it does and frequently does not bother to consult those who do have a knowledge of the subject. Then also I suppose few people would have much time for the dismal featureless expanses of Corsican pine which disfigure many parts of the Forest. On the other hand a New Forest shorn of all its conifer would be a much poorer place. The old Scots pine clumps and individual trees on the Open Forest are superb landscape features, just as are the great Douglas fir avenues of Shave Green and Oakley Inclosures. In many cases such trees are the equal of the old pollarded beeches. There is also much to be said in landscape terms for the mixed plantations such as Hursthill and Sloden. The timber industry has undoubtedly done a lot to scare the local workforce with largely unjustified threats of imminent redundancies if commercial forestry is phased out, but the NFA's "cut it all down" policy can only serve to fuel such fears. We have biodiversity forced down our throats until many of us are sick of it. Perhaps there is a good a case for woodland landscape diversity as well.

Pannage – new enforcement for old rules

One of the Verderers' byelaws requires that pigs must be kept on their owners' holdings for fourteen days after they have been ringed and marked, before being turned out to collect acorns during the pannage season. It is a byelaw which has been largely ignored in the past, but the Court has given instructions to the agisters that it must be carefully enforced from now on. The reason for it is that commoners buy in pigs to turn out during the pannage season. There is a danger that such pigs may be infected with some disease, and only by a fourteen day quarantine period is there a reasonable chance of preventing its spread to other Forest stock.

The problem with all of this from the commoners' point of view is that the announcement of the pannage season dates has tended to be a last minute business. The dates are determined by the acorn crop and the likely time that the crop will fall. Effectively this has meant that pig purchase is delayed until the dates are announced and fourteen days of the statutory sixty day period would be lost by enforcement of the byelaw. This year the Verderers hope to overcome this with a much earlier announcement (sometime in August) which will be placed in the press and on the Court's website, rather than waiting for the September Court. The Forestry Commission, whose business it is to determine the dates after consultation with the Verderers, is sympathetic to this objective.

Rubber oak tree, sand pits and other nonsense

I have just returned from a pleasant if exhausting visit to the New Forest Show. It was interesting to contrast the approach of the two management agencies – Verderers and Forestry Commission – and the national park, in the design of their display stands. The Verderers, as always, are there for business – explaining their work and policies – with two agisters, the clerk and assistant clerk, the stewardship manager and at least one Verderer always on duty. The Commission also has knowledgeable people on hand, but their display is lack-lustre compared with past years. I was invited to embrace a rubber oak tree, apparently containing some unfortunate and unidentified staff member ! As for the national park stand, it must have been a grand place for a romping family group but not much else – equipped with sand pits and building bricks. It is strange that the Park chooses to portray itself in this way, rather than as a serious contributor to the protection of the Forest.

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