

# NEW FOREST NOTES AUGUST 2017

## The coastal path consultation

In May I wrote about the planned Highcliffe to Calshot coastal path and its proposed incursion onto Forest land at Hilltop Heath. The Verderers then decided to object to the alignment, concluding that it would increase pressure on that corner of the Forest and could lead to more verge parking as users attempted to access the path part way along its route. At the July Court, the Verderers had before them a more detailed plan and in the light of it they decided to reiterate their original objection. The proposal did not vary significantly from the original so far as the Forest was concerned, but it was accompanied by a remarkable map showing what is called the "coastal margin". That may sound dry and technical, but it could be crucial to all owners of agricultural land and woodland designated as part of that margin, potentially wrecking the tranquillity of their surroundings and seriously damaging the capital value of their property. The reason is that to this coastal margin the public would be granted a right of access on foot. Of course some users would exercise this right in a responsible manner, but one can well imagine the consequences of a group of youths wandering about in pony paddocks and other non-crop agricultural land, extreme sports enthusiasts crashing through the woods with or without dogs, and drug-taking parties on the shores of the Beaulieu River. The map makes it clear that we are not considering a few metres between the new path and a field boundary, but a vast swathe of land over half a mile wide occupying everything from the Forest to the Beaulieu River. At the Court the proposal was roundly condemned in a presentment by the New Forest Association. The chairman of the habitats and landscape committee asked the Verderers to: "resist the worst excesses of this arbitrary unnecessary exercise which will bring not a jot of benefit to the Forest."

I think Natural England (the sponsors of this scheme) may have anticipated what a hornets' nest they were about to poke, because the map makes it clear that "excepted land" (land on which there are buildings/houses and their curtilages) would not be opened up to the public and that there might be other (unspecified) "local restrictions or exclusions". I think this is likely to be cold comfort for those living and working within this public access free-for-all area. The owners of one of those quiet secluded houses on the east side of the river are hardly going to welcome the public tramping through the presently private woods all round their boundaries. Moreover, I am told that the Ordnance Survey will be expected to publish the location of this access land on its maps, thus ensuring

maximum publicity and consequent disturbance. The Act under which the coastal margin is to be subjected to public access (the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009) is fairly complicated, but I can see no provision for financial compensation to affected property owners and that seems to me more appropriate to a communist state than to Great Britain. Clearly there are times when public good must override private rights. I doubt if this is one of them, but certainly such compulsion should always be accompanied by proper compensation.

In the case of the Beaulieu River margin, it is not just a case of how farmers and other landowners will be affected. The eastern slope of the valley was classified in the 1996 Tranquil Areas survey as one of the quietest places in the Forest, so it is in all our interests that it should not be exploited in the manner proposed. Here at least, the wildlife driven from the public-access Forest at peak periods can find a quiet refuge. The New Forest Association is entirely correct in its challenge to yet another attempt to ratchet up recreational pressure, carried out in so thoughtless a manner.

### **The vanishing meadow at Queen's House**

At the top of Lyndhurst High Street stands the imposing building called Queen's House, which comprises the magnificent headquarters of the Forestry Commission in the New Forest and also contains the Verderers' courtroom. The building changes its name with the sex of the sovereign, so that on the future King Charles's accession it will revert to its former name of King's House. Almost incidentally, the Verderers occupy as their offices half of an outbuilding, across the back yard from the court.

The Forest has few buildings of the quality of the Queen's House, but perhaps even more remarkable than the house itself is its setting. In the middle of a busy traffic-dominated tourist honeypot, the garden of the Queen's House has long been an area of beauty and tranquillity and something for the village to be proud of. Beyond the formal lawns lies a meadow and small copse which complete the very satisfying whole.

Many years ago the Nature Conservancy occupied a Portacabin in the grounds. When this was eventually cleared away the car parking area was expanded, although without prejudice to the meadow. Now, however, the Forestry Commission has effectively ruined the meadow by opening it up to parking, because the original car park is overflowing. Instead of the once beautiful area of

grassland, a wide muddy trackway is now lined with rows of landrovers and other vehicles, wrecking the setting of the house. It is an appalling mess and a dreadful piece of mismanagement. This is not just an occasional use as an overflow park, but has been going on continuously for well over a year now. Any other office owner attempting such an unauthorized change of use would have received a prompt and effective visit from the planning enforcement officer, but as usual the planners seem disinclined to notice any transgression of the rules by the Forestry Commission. The New Forest really does deserve better from both its managers and its planning authority.

### **Ordnance Survey 25" maps of the New Forest**

The Ordnance Survey's 1/2500 maps (25 inches to one mile) are a national treasure, although the modern computer-generated and constantly updated sheets lack the quality of earlier editions. The maps show every building, drain and copse and are complete with the National Grid insofar as the sheets dating from the 1950s and later are concerned. The earlier editions can be seen on the website of the National Library of Scotland (including the New Forest), but until recently the National Grid sheets have still been within copyright and are not available from that source.

Some years ago the New Forest District Council donated to the Christopher Tower Library an almost complete set of the 1960s 1/2500 maps. They were presumably surplus to the council's requirements. They were available for public inspection (but not copying) at the library. Now, as the copyright period has ended, the library has been digitising the maps as part of its "Ecademy" project and an excellent job is being done. In an area such as the common lands of the New Forest where development is very limited, many of the maps are as relevant today as when they were first published over half a century ago. That is true of the smaller villages as well. Even where changes have taken place, a little careful adjustment using Photoshop and open-source maps and air photographs can provide a perfectly acceptable updated map and certainly one accurate enough for most local history purposes. The scanning of the whole Forest is not yet complete, but the provision of these maps in digital form is already an invaluable service to researchers in a wide variety of fields.

### **Ashurst Hospital development land**

About two hundred years ago the Guardians of the Poor of the New Forest Union obtained from the Crown the grant of a portion of the New Forest on which to build a workhouse for the poor of

the united parishes of Eling, Lyndhurst, Minstead, Bramshaw, Beaulieu, Fawley, Exbury and Dibden. The site then taken was subject to common rights and the rights were put into abeyance. The total area was about fourteen acres. The grant, like many of its period, was subject to a provision that the land should revert to the Crown in the event of its ceasing to be used for the intended purpose.

In due course the workhouse closed and the land and buildings were taken over by the local health authority. Either a blind eye was turned to the requirement for reversion on change of use, or nobody troubled to investigate too closely. Perhaps it was concluded that nursing the poor (and others) was close enough to educating and feeding them.

Because of the way the New Forest Acts are worded, any reversion of such land goes not to the Forestry Commission, but to their legal predecessors, the Crown Estate Commissioners. About twenty years ago a reversion of part of the hospital grounds did take place following a good deal of argument with the then occupiers who were reluctant to give it up. Eventually the land was handed over to the Verderers and now comprises their sole land-holding. It was opened-up to grazing and to public access and has been a worthwhile addition to the Forest. That might have been the end of the story, but some intriguing possibilities have recently been revealed by a suggested change in planning designations. Part of the hospital and its grounds is now redundant and, in the view of its occupiers, ripe for redevelopment. In planners' jargon it is a "brownfield" site. The land with this potential is nearly six acres in extent and, on the authority of the Farmers' Weekly, such land available for housing in this part of the country can command in the region of one million pounds per acre. Now it might be perfectly possible to force its clearance and return to the Forest in accordance with the provisions of the original grant, but a more sensible approach might be to carry out a land exchange, allowing the development to proceed. The proceeds could then be invested in purchasing other (non-development) land to add to the Forest for the benefit of the public and the commoners – to say nothing of the housing needs of the local community. A lot of land could be acquired for that amount of money. An alternative might be to use the proceeds in the purchase of holdings for the use of the Court's agisters, but that is hardly within the spirit of the reversion provisions of the original grant. The whole future of the site promises a great deal of profitable work for the lawyers and planning consultants.

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