

New Forest Notes - August 1991

A small victory for the Forest

During July the Forest achieved a significant but largely unnoticed victory. Consultants to the Department of Transport published the long awaited alternative routes for the West Wellow bypass, both of which are shown running north of the A36, well clear of the forest boundary. Widely leaked drafts of the plans had shown two further routes cutting deep into the Forest between Bramshaw and Wellow. The consultants say that such routes would have a severe impact on this area of international importance. They stress the value of the Forest as an SSSI and an area similar to a national park. They add that it is government policy to ensure that, as far as possible, these sites are protected from damage or destruction.

This is a marked departure from previous official attitudes to road schemes which could affect the Forest, although it does represent only the views of the consultants and not necessarily those of the Department of Transport. Perhaps at last it has been understood that the New Forest is not always a cheap and easy alternative to taking agricultural or suburban land within or near its boundaries, Certainly this was the message pressed home by the Verderers, the NCC and other bodies consulted on the early drafts and it seems to have made an impression. However, I suspect that the deciding factor was the attitude of the National Trust which holds much of this part of the Forest as inalienable property. The Trust made it clear that it would resist any attempted incursion onto its commons by every means at its disposal. The prospect of a major parliamentary confrontation with the Trust in an election year was no doubt unattractive to the Department.

Of course the publication of the consultation document is not the end of the story. Those opposed to the northern routes may well try to force the road south across the commons. I suspect that the Forest societies will not escape the costly and time consuming business of appearing' at a public- enquiry in due course, but at least a good start has been made.

Heritage Area Report

Consultants have been busy in another field this month with the publication of a vast and meticulous assessment of what should or should not comprise the New Forest Heritage Area. It will be remembered that the New Forest Review recommendations were objected to by the government in so far as they related to the extent of the Heritage Area. The government considered that the proposed area contained a good deal of land which did not merit the protection which was to be afforded to it. It called for a review of the boundaries, presumably intending that the unworthy areas should be excluded. The somewhat perverse response of the consultants (from the government's point of view), is to recommend a net increase in the Heritage Area of over 7,000 acres — more than 6% of the original area. The small area of deletion within this net figure is already being hotly contested by those who live there while the residents of some of the proposed extensions seem equally unhappy. They are, at least in the Redlynch area, apparently under the impression that ponies will be allowed to

wander the streets of their village if this strictly planning designation goes through. In short the whole vexed subject of the Heritage Area continues to breed confusion while the benefits which it confers remain extremely ill-defined.

Internal conflicts

The Forest usually manages to put on a united front against major external threats from such things as road development and excess tourism, but under the surface there are local frictions which boil over from time to time. One such problem is the unending disagreement between the Commoners and the NCC (now English Nature) over the maintenance and / or improvement of the grazing. The arenas for these conflicts are the; Open Forest and Drainage committees. These; bodies act as advisers to the Commission on what work should be undertaken and both conservation and commoning interests are represented on them.

The Commoners' case is that they depend upon the proper maintenance of the Forest for an adequate supply of feed for their stock. This, they argue, means that the Forest drains should be kept clear, that encroaching scrub should be controlled, and that bracken and Scots pine removal should be undertaken. They point to the provisions of the New Forest Act 1949 which obliges the Forestry Commission to carry out this work subject to various conditions of the same and later date. Now although I see this from the Commoners' side of the fence, I believe that the NCC would not quarrel with any of these objectives as bare statements of what should be done. The difficulty arises over questions of extent and location. How much drainage should be done, and where? They see the Forest as an invaluable reserve of rare habitat and the plants and animals which they support. Too much drainage, or clearance work in the wrong place threatens the survival of their New Forest.

The results of the committees' deliberations are increasingly that the Commoners' requests for work which they regard as necessary and reasonable are vetoed by the NCC using its powers and influence under the Wildlife and Countryside Act and its management objectives agreement with the Forestry Commission. The Commoners become, increasingly angry and frustrated. Recent disputes along these lines have led to growing calls that the impasse should be referred to the Minister of Agriculture for resolution — presumably in consultation with the Department of the Environment. This was done once before resulting, in the Commoners' view, in some temporary improvement. This time tempers have been getting very frayed with some disputed birch encroachment having mysteriously disappeared and with threats flying back and forth. Perhaps the time has come for some ministerial intervention, although the preparation and presentation of the Commoners' case is no easy matter. Those who farm the Forest know that old drains have become choked, lawns overrun with scrub and that bracken is spreading. Proving it to the satisfaction of some London based ministry inspector is quite, another matter. This is a subject where written or photographic records are scanty and imprecise. Even if this first hurdle is overcome, it may not be enough. If the NCC maintains that the clearance of a blocked drainage system will threaten some rare plant or animal once common in Southern England, but now confined to the Forest and the fragments of Dorset heath, how is the Commoner to prove otherwise? The scales are heavily weighted against New Forest farming.

Some unfortunate minister may eventually have to deliver a judgement of Solomon and in the meantime the disputes will continue. They tend to overshadow what has been achieved in recent years — in Scots Pine clearance for example. The Forestry Commission officers who carry out the work on the ground sit in the middle of the battle and try, not always successfully, to keep their heads down. They are probably thankful that in this controversy at least they are effectively bystanders.

Anthony Pasmore