

New Forest Notes - August 1998

COLLAPSE OF THE MINISTER'S MANDATE

On the 16th July, the junior agriculture minister, Mr. Elliot Morley MP, visited the New Forest and announced (perhaps without knowing it) that the Forestry Commission is seeking to set aside undertakings as to the management of the Forest's Inclosures which have been in force since 1971. The announcement, in the form of a new mandate, was as unexpected as it was astonishing. A proposal more calculated to plunge the Forest back into the conflicts of the 1960s would be difficult to imagine. It follows closely on the Commission's controversial and illegal fellings at Blackensford and elsewhere, its attempted elimination of character trees at Bramshaw Wood and its destructive work in Islands Thorns. It is difficult to understand what the Commission hopes to gain by this latest attack. At a time when its future role in the Forest is far from certain, it could be considered a very rash move.

When the wholesale illegal hardwood fellings of post war years were finally brought to an end in 1970, the minister of agriculture issued fresh instructions to the Forestry Commission as to the future management of the Forest. They were as important a protection as the New Forest Acts themselves and were reaffirmed at the end of the 1970s and again ten years later. They remain in force today. Their wording was brief and precise. Leaving aside one or two marginal matters, the minister's instructions were that the Ancient Ornamental woodland should "as heretofore" be managed without regard to timber production objectives. In fact this woodland had been severely exploited for timber over the preceding three years, but it was necessary to save the Commission's face so the historical inaccuracy was not challenged. Next, in the Inclosures the balance between hardwoods and conifers would at least be maintained. No more hardwood (with a minor technical exception) was permitted to be felled to make room for softwoods. The rotation (the length of time during which hardwood trees would be allowed to stand) would be increased to at least 200 years. This was crucial because not only did it prevent the elimination of immature hardwoods, widely practised until 1971, but it pushed forward the felling date way beyond commercial maturity allowing for the development of great scenic trees and deferring the ultimate felling date to a distant time at which most people in the Forest believed that it would be unthinkable to carry out commercial cropping. In the 1940s, for example, it was considered quite appropriate for the Forest's heaths to be ploughed up and planted with fir trees: today that would be environmental vandalism. Commercial exploitation of late 18th Century oak, acceptable in the 1960s would, it was widely believed, be unthinkable in the first quarter of the 21st Century. Finally, felling was to be confined to single trees or small groups of not more than one acre. That gave effect to the requirements of the 1877 Act which prohibited clear felling, but was vitally important because there had been no judicial interpretation of the Act and here was an agreed statement of its meaning which was acceptable to all parties. The mandate was (and is) regarded as a solemn compact between the Commission and the Forest. It was the culmination of years of conflict and it is heartbreaking to see the Queen's House now trying to cast it aside like so much waste paper.

So what is the Commission seeking to do with this precise charter for the protection of the Forest's woods ? It is to be thrown out in its entirety and replaced by a toothless document full of trendy jargon promising conservation, protection of "cultural heritage" and so on. It will give the

Commission power to do more or less as it pleases under a veneer of promises to regard amenity and conservation. At least they cannot overthrow the 1877 Act with a stroke of the Minister's pen, but one of the two main supports of the Forest's old plantations will have been kicked away.

Fortunately this does not appear to be the government's last word on the subject, although it undoubtedly represents the Forestry Commission's hopes and intentions. I doubt, in fact, if Mr. Morley has any idea what has been thrown out and perhaps he simply believes that he has been asked to put his name to a harmless and attractively illustrated booklet of platitudes. The new mandate is a consultation draft and the Forest's amenity bodies will need to act fast and effectively to ensure that it never becomes more than that.

SAVING THOMPSON'S CASTLE

In the north of the Forest is a peculiar sandy hill shaped a little like a volcanic crater with one side missing and forming a prominent landmark in Ashley Walk. It is called Thompson's Castle and is not, as might be supposed, recently christened by a junior Forestry Commission official seeking to curry favour with our new Deputy Surveyor of the same name. The hill evidently caught the imagination of long dead foresters who gave it a "castle" place name and a personal name prefix, without any historical or archaeological justification. A similar example exists in Lucas Castle near Minstead.

It is Thompson's Castle's misfortune that it lies close to several large riding stables and livery establishments, that it is steep with light and easily eroded sandy subsoil and that it is on a direct route of choice for riders between Hampton Ridge and Latchmore. For these reasons it suffers some of the worst erosion damage by horses to be found in that part of the Forest. Fortunately the stables which uses the area most intensively is among the more co-operative of such establishments and has already worked with the Commission to control damage on the north side of Hampton Ridge. Now the Castle problems are to be tackled.

Last month a sub-committee of the Verderers' Court and Forestry Commission officers met on the site to devise remedial works. It was one of those committees refreshingly free from office-evolved theory which bedevils so much planning in the New Forest. Most of its members ride and are thus able to appreciate not only the physical difficulties, but the psychology behind the actions which give rise to them. Everyone accepted that there is no perfect solution. Remedial measures inevitably urbanise the Forest to some extent and the objective was to control damage with the minimum of intrusive engineering.

Riding damage in the New Forest is characterised by a phenomenon which the Forestry Commission has named "parallel tracking". As an original Forest path is worn down to sharp gravel or deep mud, riders (at least if they care for their horses' feet) will automatically move over and establish a new track. The process may be continued many times. Water runs in the new and abandoned gullies, devoid of vegetation, and deep erosion trenches may result in extreme cases. Moreover, while riding school clients tend to ride nose to tail, private riders are often in pairs and ride side by side in order to talk to each other. This is a secondary cause of parallel tracking.

At Thompson's Castle the objective is to provide a good track along the principal line of desire, surfacing the wet or flinty areas with a good horse-friendly path gravel. At the same time, all

the unnecessary tracks will be physically obstructed. In the past this has proved difficult. Cut gorse is very impermanent, fencing is expensive and of dubious legality. Attempts elsewhere to restrict riders to the new track have been only about 75% effective. Now, by studying the causes of parallel tracking, natural defences will be tried. Since riders avoid the exposed flint areas, this material will be used to discourage further use of redundant paths. Bands of rejects will be laid at the entrances to such routes and at points on their length where there are good natural side deterrents (trees, gorse, bog etc). The old scars will be allowed to recover naturally or will be provided with heathland topsoil where necessary. Fenced plots to promote gorse regeneration, designed as a grazing improvement measure and already planned for the Hampton Ridge area, may also be positioned so as to discourage undesirable flows of horses and to direct them to the prepared path. That track will be of sufficient width to allow two horses abreast, but imported surfacing will be used only to cover flint exposures and in wet areas. By this means, long exposed gravel paths which damage the landscape, should be avoided.

LINWOOD CYCLE PROBLEMS

Linwood residents, whose village is one of the few still almost wholly dependent upon a gravel road for access, have found themselves victims of the cycle explosion which is raging uncontrolled through every corner of the Forest. Their road is one of the official designated routes on which cyclists are quite properly present. That does not mean that the disruption caused to those who live there and to the adjoining Forest is any the more acceptable, and vigorous representations have been made to the Forestry Commission to delete the route from their maps. Not surprisingly, the Commission refuses, although they have suggested a few minor palliative measures.

So far, despite an extensive network of official routes having been agreed last year - many of which are exceedingly damaging to the Forest - trespass seems to be almost universal and the whole "sport" quite out of control in the Forest. The Forestry Commission has shown little willingness to introduce effective policing. The Linwood residents carried out a survey on the afternoon of Sunday 3rd May to assess the pressure near Dockens Water. In one hour 166 cyclists were counted (with 4 horse riders in the same period) and over 70% ignored "no cycling" signs and trespassed off the approved route and over the Open Forest. It is a depressing picture which will be familiar to residents and commoners in all parts of the Forest.