

New Forest Notes - August 1999

Planning for life after the hunt

Whether the government really means business over banning hunting still seems uncertain. There is talk of local referenda and other partial measures, but opinion overall seems to be that the noose is tightening. The consequences for the New Forest so far as the clearance of dead animals is concerned are extremely serious. For many months past the Verderers, Commoners Defence, Forestry Commission and others, have been trying to work out how the problem is to be dealt with if the extremely efficient hunt collection service collapses following a hunting ban. A few weeks ago, the government's talk of general legislation banning hunting made it seem that the Forest would be in almost immediate trouble. It seemed that there would be an inconsistency in an announced government policy to stop hunting on the one hand, and the issue of a government permit (the annual hunting licence) to hunt over national property in the New Forest on the other. That licence is normally issued about this time of year. However, I am told that this is not how the matter is seen in official circles and that the authorities confidently expect the licence to be re-issued as usual for the 1999/2000 hunting season. The New Forest thus has a reprieve so far as the collection of carcasses is concerned, but it is probably no more than a breathing space. All the talk of how to replace the hunt collection service has now to be translated into action. It would be nice to think that government money and expertise would be freely available to solve a government-created problem, but perhaps that would be expecting too much.

Until now, the favoured option has been for a small privately operated incinerator. The carcasses would be collected and delivered to the burner. They would be dismembered until small enough to be fed into the machine and then burnt. No-one underestimated the problems associated with such a scheme. The capital cost, running cost, and staffing were only the start. Who would want a collection yard for corpses and an incinerator for a neighbour and who would provide a site for such a facility? A remote site would be out of the question because mains services would be essential. "Ban the Burner" campaigns against proposed refuse incinerators are now common and burning flesh is hardly likely to be more popular. Moreover, the New Forest's protective planning policies were a further problem. The type of facilities proposed might not fit comfortably within them. Now, to add to all the other difficulties, I understand there is a serious question over the acceptability of the emissions from such a burner. Ameliorating filters are likely to be prohibitively expensive. Altogether, a small local incinerator is beginning to look increasingly difficult.

The latest idea is rather more promising. The number of carcasses in and around the Forest may seem large to the public. Probably the only place most of us ever sees a dead horse or cow is on a Forest road verge early in the morning - before an anonymous hunt truck whisks it away. Certainly Forest motorists are prolific providers of dead ponies and cattle, but to the large commercial operators the quantities are too small to make collection worthwhile. The new idea is therefore to establish a freezing depot in which carcasses and Forestry Commission deer offal would be accumulated until a commercially acceptable quantity was available for disposal. It looks like an idea with much to commend it. There would be no emissions, presumably less smell and perhaps less local and

planning opposition, I have not yet heard any estimate of cost and perhaps cost is the Achilles heel of the scheme.

ALDERHILL BRIDGE

Following a recent scare over the safety of some Forest bridges, the Forestry Commission is engaged in a review and reconstruction programme. In engineering terms, the structures being proposed (and actually built) are no doubt beyond criticism. The Commission employs competent engineers, but it does not employ architects - at least so far as its New Forest bridges are concerned. The result is that we are being provided with structures which would be quite at home in Southampton's dockland, but which are very out of place in remote parts of the Forest. One such bridge, in Alderhill Inclosure, has just been completed. It is a triumph in the manipulation of steel and concrete, capable of bearing immense lorries loaded with timber, but certainly no asset to the landscape. The superstructure is of wood and acceptable. Riders will particularly appreciate the new non-slip central section of the bridge, as wet planking is like ice to horseshoes. The lower parts, however, comprise expanses of smooth white concrete - no colour, no texture and no use of brick which is the standard "local" material and which ought to be the starting point of good design. It would be a great pity if this soulless bridge is reproduced throughout the Forest and the Deputy Surveyor has agreed to look again at the question of design.

The Forestry Commission is not the only culprit in this respect. The railway authorities have carried out some fairly dreadful work on bridges near Beaulieu Road in the past and the highway departments litter the Forest with inappropriate road signs and standard urban forms of construction. I remember that when the road underpasses were built in stark white concrete, dominating beautiful views from across the Forest, the County Council was concurrently at work on quite an attractive brick faced underpass leading into a Totton housing estate ! I suppose it is all a question of cost. Ugliness is cheap while natural materials and good design cost money.

NEW LIFE FOR "EAST BOLDRE"

The many people who failed to secure a copy of Jude James's fascinating history of East Boldre village will be pleased to know that a reprint has now been issued and is available from the New Forest Research and Publications Trust, 4, Clarence Road, Lyndhurst at £3.50 including postage. The Trust had greatly underestimated the demand in the original printing and a further five hundred copies have now been produced.

The Publications Trust (a registered charity), is now in its fifth year. Its purpose is to publish important material relating to the New Forest which might otherwise not see the light of day because it would be unattractive to a commercial publisher. "East Boldre - A New Forest Squatters' Settlement" is a good example of the type and quality of research which the Trust is keen to support. Copies will also be available at the St.Barbe Museum in Lymington, the New Forest Museum in Lyndhurst and in specialist local bookshops.

MIRE RESTORATION BOGGED DOWN

The Mire Restoration programme, financed by the European "Life" fund, continues to run into problems. Essentially the scheme comprises the blocking up of 1960s and 1970s drainage ditches to restore the pre-existing bog systems of the New Forest.

Because this was always likely to be a controversial programme, the Verderers and the undertakers of the work (the Forestry Commission) agreed to look carefully at each scheme before anything was done. A series of site visits took place throughout the Forest early in the Spring. In the north of the Forest, after some hard and not always entirely amicable bargaining, compromise work was agreed for all the proposed sites. In the south, however, things have proved more difficult with particular problems at Brockenhurst Weirs and Silver Stream off the Rhinefield Road. In the latter case, Verderers are to meet the Deputy Surveyor in a final attempt to resolve the impasse. It seems to boil down to this: if an attractive and now apparently natural feature (such as Silver Stream), valued by the public and used by livestock, was once in the distant past a bog, should it be retained in its present form or flooded in a far from certain attempt to restore what is supposed to have been lost ? The naturalist will vote for flooding, the commoner for retention. I suspect the Verderers are going to take some convincing that, in this case, the naturalist should win.

NEW FOREST ASSOCIATION WEBSITE

The New Forest Association is the latest Forest body to have its own website. It thus joins the New Forest Section of the Hampshire Field Club and the Publications Trust while, so far as I know, the Commoners Defence and Pony Breeders and Forestry Commission are still working on theirs. The Association's site is professionally produced and of a high standard. It is illustrated with Barry Peckham's beautiful Forest pictures. The site is, perhaps, a little short on informative content and carefully side-steps the burning issue of whether the Forest should or should not be a national park, but it is a creditable start and will no doubt expand in the future. It can be found at www.newforestassociation.freeserve.co.uk.

Meanwhile, the Verderers' projected site is still awaiting the necessary funds, although some preliminary design work has been done.