

NEW FOREST NOTES DECEMBER 2004

The hunting ban and the Forest

People of a poetic nature may see the end of 2004 as a turning point in the history of the New Forest. After more than nine hundred years, the sun is finally setting on the old hunting Forest with its traditions and community spirit, for hunting (if of a different kind from today's) was the reason for the Forest's existence from the beginning. In its place comes the dawn of the people's recreation area – the national park. Here the yell of the mountain biker will replace the sound of the hunting horn, while tyre grooves and plastic bottles are substituted for the impress of horseshoes in the turf.

Those of us of a more prosaic turn of mind may not see it in quite that way. Even after the last hound has left the Forest, there will still be the same constant round of bureaucratic battles to be fought, the same insatiable demands on the Forest to be countered and, if we are lucky, the same quiet moments in some forgotten corner which no-one has yet devised a good reason for spoiling. I have never hunted or felt any inclination to do so, but to me, as to even the most ardent anti-hunting campaigner, it is obvious that a treasured way of life is disappearing and that for many people the New Forest will never be the same again.

Over the last few decades the hunting community, once dominant and pervading every corner of Forest management, seems to an outsider to have become increasingly withdrawn and secretive. I can remember as a child that the Forest was very much as Exmoor is today. If you chose to live here, it was simply assumed that you supported hunting or at the least did not oppose it. Then, just as public pressure is now strangling the fabric and peace of the Forest, anti-hunting sentiment increasingly choked the life out of hunting. The Buckhounds fell on their own sword in 1997 and now the legislature has dealt a death blow to all that remains. I make no judgement as to the cruelty or otherwise of the sport. That is a matter for individual (and apparently legislative) conscience. What is perfectly proper in one generation may be seen as an abomination in the next.

In the New Forest it remains to be seen if we shall be spared the last-ditch stands of law-breaking, followed by counter-measures from the authorities. Here hunting, once the gift of the Crown, is by licence of the government. When the licence is cancelled perhaps that will be the end of the matter. The national park will inherit a politically correct and law-abiding resource to exploit, but to the already disillusioned community of commoners will be added yet more resentful and unhappy people. It is an easy matter to provide recreational facilities, encourage economic growth and "sustainable" development, but putting the heart back into beaten and beleaguered local people may prove beyond the powers of even a national park authority.

The great campsite debate

After months of secrecy, during which draft plans were occasionally shown to the Verderers and then collected up at the end of each meeting in order to ensure that their detail could not be discussed outside the Court, the Forestry Commission has at last published its

plans for Roundhill and Hollands Wood camps. It has also applied for planning permission and has made a presentment to the Court asking for its consent under the New Forest Acts. The volume of paper involved is amazing. There are four main documents comprising over forty chapters, together with endless maps, plans and photographs. The only convenient way of handling this material is on a CD (total 213 megabytes). One of my colleagues on the Court suggested that the public should be told how much this lot has cost the taxpayer, but I have no doubt that will remain a closely guarded secret – “commercially sensitive”. I have to admit that, at first sight, the bundles of highly coloured plans seem impressive. It is only when one comes to study them in detail that doubt creeps in. For example, the land use map shows private fields behind Balmer Lawn Road as “open space”, enclosed property at Martins Road as “heathland” along with a strip through New Park and one of the primary grazing lawns of the Forest at Sporelake. If such mistakes occur on an easily-interpreted map, what others lie concealed in the highly technical diagrams throughout the papers ?

With the exception of the Lyndhurst Bypass, the plans for Hollands Wood and Roundhill constitute the largest development proposal for the use of the Crown lands since the 1970s. Trying to understand the complexities of the application is no easy task, yet the matter will come before the Verderers for public comment in mid-January. In the meantime I have been spending such a lot of time tramping around the two sites that I shall know every bracken stem by the time a decision has to be made. I am sure other Verderers and members of the Forest societies are doing the same.

Huge effort and expense has been put into the application and it is widely rumoured that should the Verderers refuse their consent, the Commission is minded to seek the overturning of the Court’s decision by going to law. If the planners refuse consent, or if the application is called in by the minister, then I suppose a public enquiry will follow. The timing of all this is uncertain, although the Forestry Commission’s consultants have indicated that they expect a planning decision by mid-February. Under normal circumstances a minor application (perhaps for a bus shelter or small car park) would be decided by the Verderers in their January Court, but because this is so large and difficult a matter, some delay could occur. I am told that the national park will not formally “exist” until April and how, if at all, that affects the decision process is not clear. Should the councillors who will control the park decide they must foster economic well-being and sustainable development, the Commission could gain an important ally. On the other hand, park status would place new duties on the Verderers (and, indeed, the Commission) which might make approval of the scheme more difficult.

At the moment it seems that many different interests in the Forest are opposed to one or more aspects of the scheme but are ambivalent about the remainder. Thus, the Commoners oppose electric hook-ups, the naturalists dislike the continuation of Hollands Wood in any form, the archaeologists are worried about the destruction of the setting of ancient features at both sites, and those who are concerned with the quiet of the Forest are anxious about the extension of camping into Stockley and Perrywood Ironshill Inclosures.

None of these individual groups is likely to secure its objectives in isolation. They also face openly antagonistic forces which see the maximum development of camping as an excellent commercial opportunity of the type which the Forest exists to supply. Campers spend money locally. Their importance as supporters has not been lost on the Commission. Altogether the best policy for Queen's House to pursue is therefore the tried and tested one of dividing to conquer.

In a sensible, if perhaps over-optimistic, effort to formulate some common approach to the plans, the New Forest Association is calling a meeting of interested Forest parties. From this we may get a clearer idea of how opposition or support for the scheme will develop. Forming a common policy is not made any easier because the proposals cover two sites a couple of miles apart and involve the taking of new land in places and the "restoration" of old camping land in others. Some of the acreage figures being bandied about are, I must say, very misleading, taking no account of quality, present vegetation, current legal status and likely future recreational use. All this confusion inevitably adds great strength to the Forestry Commission's position. The New Forest is very good at dealing with clear-cut challenges like oil drilling or bypass construction, but tends to be woolly and indecisive in approaching matters such as the camp site plans.

Markway Swamp

At the beginning of last month, a sodden group of Commoners and Verderers stood on Markway Lawn with ecologists from English Nature, the Environment Agency and the Forestry Commission. As a steady flow of water from the choked river channel and long-abandoned side drains lapped about their boots, they told the officials that they had finally had enough. For years they had watched this most prized grazing lawn of the Forest degenerating into a filthy swamp – useless for grazing animals and disagreeable to look at. As one Commoner rightly pointed out, everyone there could remember when the lawn was a favourite picnic place for visitors, attracted by the smooth turf, the stream and the grazing ponies. Now all that is gone.

The response to these complaints was confusing, but predictable. There was the usual talk of the need for "more study". That is always a good first line of defence against any practical maintenance proposal in the Forest. It was then said that the problem lay elsewhere in the river system and that of course, after due study, that would have to be dealt with first. No doubt the hidden corollary of this was that with a bit of luck that should put off action for fifteen to twenty years, by which time some of the present generation of trouble-makers might no longer be around. Finally, and no doubt the genuine underlying reason for inaction, the saturated and ruined lawn is thought to be ecologically interesting.

It is perfectly clear that, whatever long-term studies and other projects are undertaken, the Lawn needs immediate maintenance to clear the main channel. The Commoners argued that two days work with a digger would be quite sufficient and the cost would be minimal. It would need to be repeated from time to time, but the Lawn was always

subject to periodic maintenance in the past. The network of old drainage ditches testifies to that.

Although the matter has yet to be formally considered by the Verderers, this time I think the Commoners, their elected representatives on the Court and other members really do mean business. They point out that all have co-operated fully (often against their inclination) with the various schemes for stream obstruction and bog re-creation beloved of the scientists. The time has now come for something to be given in return. If nothing is done at Markway, the scientists may in future find it impossible to obtain any sort of cooperation or approval for their projects.

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