

## **NEW FOREST NOTES DECEMBER 2007**

### **Straight talking on the Forest camp sites**

At the beginning of November the Verderers had a meeting with Mr. Andrew Macleod, operations director of Forest Holidays Ltd. That is the company which leases large parts of the New Forest for its commercial operation of camp sites. The meeting had been arranged at the suggestion of the Deputy Surveyor in response to growing concerns in the Forest about the camps, their management, their effects on the farming of the common land and their damage to conservation. It was an occasion for what I suppose would be described as a frank exchange of views. The Verderers had compiled in advance a list of about eight subjects they wished to discuss, ranging from litter in the woods around the sites, through interference with stock management to the damaging effects of the camps on the structure and wildlife of ancient woodland. Mr. Macleod for his part had a shopping list which included extra electric hook-ups and more sales of goods in the camps.

I think it is fair to say that the Verderers were quite impressed with the operations director. He made no bones about the fact that his objective in the New Forest was to make money out of camping for the benefit of his company. There was no mealy-mouthed pretence that he was really providing social benefits for his customers and was dedicated to conservation. On the other hand, he stressed that he would not serve his company's interests or those of the Forest by riding rough-shod over local sensitivities. Altogether it seemed that here was someone with whom the Court might have been able to do business, because the Verderers too have their shopping list. It includes the relocation (off the Forest) of the most damaging camps and the improvement of compensation for the commoners. No commitments were given on either side, but there was a distinct hope that some progress might be made.

In the light of all this, the Verderers were somewhat taken aback to hear at their November Court that Mr. Macleod had resigned his post only a week after the meeting. In view of the reasonably amicable nature of the encounter, I would be sorry to think that the gentleman had been scared witless by the Verderers and could no longer face the prospect of trying to make money within the Forest. Whatever the reasons for his departure, the whole exercise seems to have been a waste of time and the Verderers will have to start again from scratch – probably with someone who knows nothing of the Forest and who thinks that commoners are some sort of rural bumpkins who dress up for the amusement of the tourists.

Aside from these abortive discussions, things are not going well within the camps themselves. Huge numbers of plastic litter bins which should have been removed promptly at the end of the camping season were still present in the middle of November. Wardens and others were still camping on the sites when the areas are supposed to be completely cleared in winter. The Verderers had agreed a temporary stay for two of the occupants who were supposedly “supervising maintenance”, but that is all. At Roundhill, Forest Holidays Ltd., is trying for three additional seasonal buildings (shower blocks) and the Verderers have been

told that these, inexplicably, do not need planning permission. The Court has sought further information before considering the matter and, since this is likely to be controversial, the application may well need to be made by presentment. At Set Thorns there has been a further controversial application seeking additional electrical hook ups within the inclosed portion of the site. Here the Court has indicated that permission may be forthcoming provided a similar number of hook ups is removed from the Open Forest part of the site. At Hollands Wood a major overhaul of the foul drainage is planned. All in all, it is a good example of what one of my colleagues with experience of such matters described as “planning creep” – a disease to which the New Forest is particularly susceptible.

### **Triangles and cards**

Much has been made of the new road-safety campaign supported by the national park and comprising information cards on Forest animal accidents and triangular roadside signs recording “Animal casualty here within the last week”. Both are entirely well-intentioned and the triangles are certainly eye-catching. A particularly nasty orgy of slaughter took place on the B 3078 Fordingbridge road in the middle of November and the resulting three signs within a couple of miles really brought home how continuous the killing is. At least, it brought it home to those motorists going slowly enough read the signs, but when I first encountered them, commuters were sweeping past at fifty or sixty miles an hour as oblivious of the signs as they are disdainful of the 40 mph speed limit. In the long term I suppose everyone will cease to notice them, just as they do with all other warnings.

The accident information card is rather a different matter. It unfortunately contains a very serious omission which really should have been spotted by its designers. Its wording starts: It’s the law; report all accidents involving . . .(animals) . . .to the police as soon as possible and within 24 hours”. As a statement of traffic law that may be perfectly adequate. As a representation of the motorist’s obligations under animal welfare legislation, it is wholly inadequate and perhaps worse than inadequate – even downright misleading. A driver who, after shattering a pony’s leg at 7.00 pm on a Monday, reports the fact to the police at 6.00 pm on Tuesday may meet the requirements of traffic regulations, but he is in flagrant breach of Section 4 of the Animal Welfare Act of 2006 which deals with unnecessary suffering. Indeed, if he is not on his mobile phone to the police immediately after the accident he is extremely callous and with every minute which passes he becomes increasingly liable to prosecution. One or two instances of such cruelty are under consideration at the present time. Surely the card could have said: “It’s the law; you must report an accident involving an animal to the police immediately to prevent unnecessary suffering. Failure to do so may make you liable to prosecution.” ? Traffic regulations are to my mind a secondary consideration, but they no doubt figure prominently in the bureaucratic mind.

### **An inevitable leak ?**

Last week I received by email a copy of a letter written by the Deputy Surveyor to all his staff, setting out his views upon the Verderers policies for protecting the New Forest as outlined in their recent publication “Precious wilderness or suburban park ?”. The email was

from someone outside the Forestry Commission and I have no idea of the original recipient of the letter.

The Deputy Surveyor is well versed in the ways of the Forest and perhaps it should have occurred to him that, with so wide a circulation, his letter would be leaked to the farthest corners of the Forest within forty eight hours. Still, whether inevitable or not, the leak has provided him with an opportunity to strike a blow at "Precious Wilderness" without dignifying it by official notice. After saying that he welcomes some aspects of the report, he goes on to explain that he does not agree that the recreational use of the Forest is such a great threat as the document suggests. This brought to my mind the comments of tobacco manufacturers when health risks were first linked to smoking: the Forestry Commission, of course, makes money from recreation.

The Deputy Surveyor goes on to object to the presupposition that new recreational uses should be accommodated outside the Forest - a central plank of the Verderers' contentions. He has never liked the Verderers' policies for protecting the Forest and he reiterates this in the letter, questioning their statutory basis and in effect saying that the Court should confine itself to protecting common rights. Since there is no more statutory basis for them doing that than there is for them seeking the wider protection of the Forest, his argument is far from convincing, but it is an old and complex sore between the Verderers and the Deputy Surveyor, too lengthy to examine here.

There is perhaps a little wishful thinking in the Mr Seddon's expressed belief that the policies "will need to be adapted in time as the national park management plan needs to set out a vision and objectives for the area that can be shared by many." That, I take it, is code for saying that the park will need to knock the stuffing out of the Verderers' policies to aid recreational development. In this I hope and believe the Forestry Commission underestimates the will of local people and the determination of the Verderers to protect the Forest - Commission and park ambitions notwithstanding.

### **Pay early for the discount**

As is customary at the November Court, the Official Verderer announced the marking fees for the coming year. To no-one's surprise, the fees remain unchanged. Cattle and ponies stay at £20 per annum, except for those on the Adjacent Commons which pay at reduced rates. What is new relates to the so-called "prompt-payment discount". This is a 10% discount allowed to commoners for payment by a fixed date in respect of continuously depastured animals or before they are turned out in respect of other stock. In the Forest it amounts to £2 per head for ponies and donkeys. There is no discount for cattle. On the Commons the discount for ponies and donkeys is £1. These concessions were formerly available to anyone paying before the end of March, but in future will be confined to animals paid-for before 1<sup>st</sup> February or before turning-out where relevant.

Figures provided to the Verderers show that the total numbers of stock on the Forest have marginally exceeded the 7000 ceiling figure upon which the Stewardship subsidies are based. At the Bramshaw Commoners Defence local meeting, the Stewardship Manager

Colin Draper, drew everyone's attention to the importance of controlling rising stock numbers if the immense financial benefits of the scheme are not to be lost by over-stocking as defined by Natural England. An increased area of Open Forest grazing (to reflect those Inclosures which are being abandoned) has been acknowledged by DEFRA and additional money is forthcoming in respect of it. However, the ceiling has not been raised and the danger of breaching it to a marked extent must be obvious to everyone.

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