

## **NEW FOREST NOTES DECEMBER 2008**

### **What the Forestry Commission wants from the Park Plan**

Now that the dust has settled, at least temporarily, on the Park Plan consultation, various Forest bodies have helpfully sent to the Verderers copies of the responses they made to the Park. The Court, of course, has no role in determining the eventual shape of the plan, but it will have to sit in judgement on any attempted implementation which affects the commonable lands of the Forest. For that reason it is good for the Verderers to keep a finger on the pulse of Forest opinion and the copies received are, in varying degrees, useful.

The responses range from vast bundles (I think the record is twenty four pages) which I fear nobody will ever read, to short, focussed comments from those well used to dealing with such consultations and who want to have their position understood. Prominent in the second category is the response from the Forestry Commission. It comprises three pages on the recreation plan and four on the main document. It is a response which, in my view and that of many others who have seen it, is quite as frightening and threatening to the Forest as anything contained in the plan itself. The National Park is, at least nominally, supposed to give priority to the protection of the Forest over recreation in the event of a conflict. The Forestry Commission's response seems to recognize no such constraint. It is a very clear expression of a desire to boost recreation and in particular to intensify exploitation of the commonable lands for that purpose.

The recreation management plan response starts very badly. Where the Park has seen the desirability of "quiet" recreation, the Commission regards such qualification as "superfluous and unnecessarily limiting". The nature of its desired unquiet recreation is not spelled out, but one can only assume that it involves all those fringe uses which are already so damaging to the Forest. Next, the Forestry Commission attacks the proposed zoning which, rightly, seeks to give the most protection to the commonable lands. This it says, "gives little recognition that some forms of new development or increased activity levels may be complimentary to or enhancing of the special qualities". Not only is this an absolute contradiction in terms, but in a Forest already degraded by over-use, this seems almost like a request for a death sentence in the interests of developers.

Where the park has, again rightly, suggested the removal of damaging facilities, the Forestry Commission says that only where "the necessary levels of social acceptance and economic support are in place" could it agree. In other words, the closure of a damaging camp would presumably have to be voted-for by its inmates and someone other than the Commission would have to pay !

Later in the response we are given an insight into what type of development the Forestry Commission is aiming for. Far from seeking to control the already excessive use of quiet areas of the Forest, it openly seeks to expand all forms of cycling. How, it asks, "is the desire for adventurous cycling by young people living within the Park to be accommodated – i.e., BMX type facilities ?" To be fair, it does not openly say that this is intended for the Crown

land, but later on we are told that it does want more cycling on unmade Open Forest tracks. This flies absolutely in the face of the Verderers' policies which seek to restore tranquillity to the Forest and to prevent the creation of new sports trails and other recreational facilities on the Crown lands. Providing such facilities of all sorts on the enclosed private lands of the proposed zone 3 is an entirely different matter.

The response to the main document is very much along the same lines, seeking to weaken protection for the commonable lands and to free-up recreational exploitation there. The Commission does not express its wishes in exactly these terms and there is the inevitable green and conservation padding, but I doubt if that is going to fool anyone. The response is, perhaps, the most depressing and damaging statement of government policy for the Forest since the Commission sought to eliminate ancient oak and beech woodland from the Inclosures forty years ago. We can only work to ensure that it suffers the same fate as that policy.

### **Damaging the Forest's historic sites**

I am afraid that this is not a month when I have much good to report of the Forestry Commission, and my next reason for concern is with the past rather than plans for the future.

Just as the New Forest is renowned for its wild animals and plants, so it is also for its fragile and important archaeological remains. The Forestry Commission has within its "care" close on two thousand sites or groups of sites. As research progresses, the Commission's records of these features are updated by the fieldworkers concerned. Some remains such as small Bronze Age water heating sites (four thousand years old) are very numerous and have often been damaged in the past by man or natural agencies. Others, such as the royal hunting lodges of the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> Centuries are in much better condition. A very small percentage, mostly comprising sites which have been known for half a century or more, are scheduled ancient monuments. These are protected by law and to damage them is a serious offence. It was therefore bitterly disappointing that one such site in the north of the Forest has last month suffered severe damage from timber hauling. Deep wheel ruts have been cut across it, damaging buried layers, throwing up archaeological material and spoiling the profile of the earthworks – all in violation of the law. The site had hitherto been completely undamaged (disappearance of the lodge excepted) since its construction in the 1350s. It was clearly identified in the Commission's records and in the scheduling under the Ancient Monuments Acts.

As if all this was not enough, a few hundred yards away and within days of the initial incident, the Commission proceeded to drag timber about and stack it upon a probable Iron Age field system. Again the site was already clearly notified to the Commission. Finally, these two pieces of damage took place within less than a mile of where a Romano-British village site received similar treatment exactly ten years ago.

I wonder what would have been the reaction if the Commission, instead of damaging historic sites, had wiped out a dozen woodlarks' nests or ploughed-up two or three acres of

wild gladiolus. I imagine that Natural England would have been rather annoyed, but with the present problems I do not expect the relevant authorities to rouse themselves from slumber.

I know that the National Park's archaeologist is taking up the matter strongly, but if being in a national park means anything at all, it must surely be more than just good intentions, whether in preventing a proliferation of ugly signs, restoring tranquillity or preserving historic sites which today's trendy jargon requires us to describe as cultural heritage. So far there has been a lot of talk, but very little achievement in many fields.

### **Commoners' Defence membership**

I joined the New Forest Commoners Defence Association forty seven years ago when I first started to run animals on the Forest and during that almost half century the Association has provided consistent and invaluable service not only to the Commoners' community, but to the wider Forest as well. It has always been the most active and influential of the Forest organizations, including in its membership benefits a liability insurance in respect of livestock lawfully depastured on the Forest. Many of the larger farmers have their own comprehensive farm insurance, but to the smaller operator the liability cover is of great value. Without CDA protection it would be extremely dangerous to turn out stock. Full membership has always been open to anyone with common rights and associate membership to anyone else who is in sympathy with the objects of the association. Associate members do not have a right to vote.

This autumn a curious situation has arisen in which the Association has closed its doors to new members, at least until the annual general meeting in 2009, with potentially serious consequences. Although this has been common knowledge for some weeks, the new policy was formerly announced by the chairman at the Bramshaw autumn meeting on 18<sup>th</sup> November. At a time when small voluntary societies are crying out for new members, this policy is at first sight rather difficult to explain, although clearly the committee has acted entirely within the rules.

What lies behind the committee's decision has its roots in the national park plan wars which dominated the late summer. Apparently there was a sudden surge in membership applications from people not previously known to the CDA. Vague feelings that the Forest community was under attack from the Park, that Park policies were set on wiping out recreational horsekeeping and that somehow the Park might be about to close the door to new commoners – all more or less unfounded fears – were behind the surge. There was a feeling that "If I become a commoner, perhaps the Park will not be able to interfere with me". Anyway, the Association has responded by temporarily refusing new membership applications. That is certainly hard on genuine new commoners, and the Forest needs new commoners. You cannot stop the old ones from retiring or dying, but I think the problem goes rather deeper than this. There has always been a slight prejudice against those not considered "real" commoners – the man with one or two ponies who gives up after a year or so – but I am not sure that the Association can really afford to spurn public support. Articulate and forceful people (however misguided their immediate motives) are likely to be an important tool in the CDA's armoury if at any time the Commoners again have their backs to the wall.

Perhaps we should remember the 1960s when anti-commoner societies thrived and there were regular calls for the Forest to be cleared of livestock. It is not as though the Commoners were in some non-controversial business like growing potatoes. They are a high-profile group with an influential position in the Forest, often in conflict with speeding motorists, ill-informed visitors and greedy public authorities. As such they need the strongest local backing possible, even in the form of associate members and those who do not turn out.

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