

## **New Forest Notes - December 1994**

### **A TALE OF TWO RESERVOIRS**

Many years ago, in the bad old days when local authorities and public utilities invariably looked upon the New Forest as a mere source of cheap land for their development schemes, reservoirs were constructed on the Open Forest at Sway and Nomansland. The attitude of some of them has changed little with the passage of time, although nowadays their plans tend to run into an immovable obstacle in the shape of the Verderers Court. Anyhow, the reservoirs were built, rightly or wrongly, and were covered over and landscaped. The commoners animals continued to graze happily over the sites and they began to melt back in to the Forest background.

In 1990 however, it was suddenly announced by the water company that the two sites would have to be fenced as a matter of urgency to prevent possible contamination of the water supplies by cryptosporidium. Government regulations had, it was said, dictates such fencing as an essential public health measure. The Verderers disliked the idea of fencing, particularly, since, at the time of construction, an undertaking had been given that both sites would remain open for all time. They asked if alternative works could be carried out to secure the water quality and were told this was impossible - fencing was the only solution. The Court then reluctantly suggested that the water company put forward a proposal for enclosure, accompanied by an offer of adequate exchange land to be added to the Forest, and that these proposals should then go out for public consultation the usual way. Because of the danger to public health, it seemed likely that such a scheme would be accepted.

There followed a long period in which nothing happened. The pressing requirements of public health seemed to become rather less pressing when weighed in the balance against the cost of exchange land. Ponies and cattle continued to graze the reservoir sites spreading I suppose potential pestilence in their wake. Three years passed, and in the summer of 1994, various restoration works were carried out on the reservoirs. Then, almost by accident, it came to light that the water company had installed a sealed membrane on top of the reservoirs and that this made fencing unnecessary.

Now if the Verderers had accepted the stated need for fencing back in 1990 and had not demanded exchange land, the sites would have been lost to the Forest, with or without nominal compensation and with great damage to the landscape. The moral of this story would therefore seem to be that never should the applications of public authorities (or large companies) be taken at face value where the New Forest is concerned. The old idea of "put it in the Forest because that will be cheap and easy" is clearly alive and well. Developers must be taught that siting their schemes on Forest land is so difficult and costly in time and effort, that it is a last and not first resort.

### **Lyndhurst By-pass - the next Round**

I have often been very critical of the local authorities double standards in relation to the New Forest. They have extolled the virtues of the Forest and demanded its protection through their planning documents, while at the same time pressing development projects which would have a ruinous effect upon it. The District Council has been a particular offender, preaching conservation and protection while acting very differently. The Councils new policy on the Lyndhurst By-pass, as outlined in the draft planning document last month was therefore like a breath of fresh air. Gone is the old

dogmatic insistence on a by-pass route deep in the Forest. For the first time the Council acknowledges that the formerly preferred route, route 5a, would be disastrous. The "protected" status of the route is abandoned.

I remember when the current plan was at its draft stage, spending many days in the public enquiry during which the District Council officers fought to secure an outer route, explaining to the inspector that it would really not damage the Forest. On reading the new policy, therefore, I had visions of planning officers being dismembered by Lyndhurst residents in the gardens of Appletree Court. However, I now wonder if my delight was somewhat premature. The consultation document has yet to be transformed into a draft plan and those who demand an outer by-pass will, understandably, now move heaven and earth to shatter the Council's new pro-Forest attitude. Thereafter, even if the Council stands firm, the issue will be fought through yet another fearfully expensive public enquiry. But what a pleasant change it would be to find the Verderers, Forestry Commission, English Nature, Countryside Commission and the Forest societies being called as Council witnesses against those who would despoil the Forest. Whatever happens, the Council can never again go into a public enquiry on the by-pass unshackled by its own words acknowledging how great would be the damage caused by an outer by-pass.

### **Diseased sheep**

The New Forest has traditionally been regarded as a very healthy place for livestock, with its wide open spaces and low stocking densities. Of course there are problems with worm infestation, although probably less severe than on the average holding, but in general the Forest stock is remarkably disease free. It therefore came as a considerable shock to discover a widespread disease outbreak of disease among sheep during the latter part of November. As soon as the first complaints were received in the Verderers office, a veterinary inspection was carried out and orders were issued to clear the Forest of sheep within days. Further details of the outbreak were given to the Verderers in a presentation by a Fordingbridge farmer. If, as he alleges the disease turns out to be sheep scab the folly of the government's decision to abandon compulsory dipping has been made very clear. Whether or not the rules of good husbandry dictate regular dipping is quite another matter and beyond the Verderers control. They have the powers only to require the removal of infected stock - not to compel treatment or other management practices on the holdings of those who possess sheep rights. However, they can require (and have done so) that the animals are not returned to the Forest until the animals are no longer suffering from the disease.

The exercise of sheep rights in the New Forest is a very recent phenomenon, although centuries ago there were probably large numbers turned out, particularly in the Beaulieu area. No doubt government subsidies now figure largely in the decision of some right owners to turn out sheep. Fiercely opposing views are expressed on the reasonableness of reviving these almost forgotten rights. For the sheep owners it is said that they are doing no more than exercise a legal right attached to their property; that the non-exercise of the rights for perhaps two centuries is irrelevant and that if adjoining or adjoining farmers and residents suffer large extra fencing costs as a consequence of the rights revival, that may be unfortunate, but it is merely part of the experience of living in the New Forest. The sheep owners reverse the old saying so that in their view "right is might". The contrary

argument is that large scale sheep farming on the Open Forest ceased perhaps ago and its revival is inappropriate to the traffic dominated 20th Century; that sheep are depastured in some parts of the Forest where pig fencing is not traditional and that one or two commoners have thus imposed immense expense on surrounding landowners. It is a dispute, like so many others in the Forest, which seems likely to run for a long time - at least while the subsidies continue to flow.