

New Forest Notes – December 1998

NEW FOREST STAKEHOLDER CONFERENCE

What had been billed as the big event of the Forests autumn took place last Saturday (28th November), when the New Forest Committee held its "Stakeholder Seminar" on the future management of the New Forest. Behind this rather horrid bit of jargon lay a day-long discussion of the Committee's proposals for a tailor-made national park. It was attended by close on a hundred people divided into eleven discussion groups which were presented with a series of carefully worded questions and propositions to consider. The organisation (in the hands of paid consultants) was impeccable - but then it needs to be if one is to secure a predetermined set of acceptable answers from a diverse collection of individuals. It would hardly do to pour money and time into such a conference and risk it giving a response other than that intended. There is little problem where the questions for discussion are as straightforward as "do you support the conservation of the New Forest?" or "do you support fostering public understanding of the Forest?". Most of the questions were just that simple, but the real skill of the organisers comes in preventing maverick commoners or others from introducing sensitive subjects such as the constitution and powers of the national park type administration the Committee is seeking to impose on the Forest. Such trouble was effectively avoided by a careful choice and mix of invitees and a dilution of potential dissidents in each group by ensuring a preponderance of people who either support a national park or who have no specialist knowledge of how parks work in general, or of the New Forest in particular. A rough analysis of the attendance list suggests about 32% of known pro-parkers, 52% without particular knowledge of the subject and/or no previously expressed view and 16% broadly opposed to the New Forest Committee's ambitions. This last group could thus be (and were) outnumbered by about four or five to one in each group.

The discussion groups duly delivered all the required responses throughout the greater part of the day and very woolly in content and reasoning those responses were for the most part. Only in the last session of the afternoon did things go a little awry, with some questioning of how the park type authority would be constituted and its powers to impose its will (via management plans) on such bodies as the Foms" Commission and Verderers. No doubt this minor hiccup was smoothed out in the editing of the promised conference report. Somehow, and much to his credit, Mr. John Broughton was able to reiterate the point that the Forest societies and Verderers are wholly opposed to the Committee having any statutory power over the New Forest, but I do not expect that to figure prominently in the record of the day.

Late in the afternoon, when most of us were beginning to feel that we had done all we could to promote or frustrate (depending on one's point of view) the Committee's plans, the probable irrelevance of the entire proceedings was brought into sharp focus by Dr. Julian Lewis MP, Fresh from his contribution to the national park debate at Westminster, he suggested that the New Forest Committee's plans really have very little chance of making progress. They would need a Bill consuming scarce parliamentary time and that bill, of course, would be tremendously resisted, even in the unlikely event of time being made available. For the reasons the real choice is between an imposed full-blown national park system of government with all that would imply for increased tourism, council

domination and weakening of the Forests protection on the one hand, and an unfettered continuation of the existing management of the New Forest by the Forestry Commission and Verdererers. I think that Dr.Lewis's assessment is both very accurate and very depressing. Unfortunately his request to put this rather important choice to the conference was denied. No doubt the organisers would have secured a pro-park majority, but were frightened of demonstrating a sizeable opposition - even in that hand-picked audience. Leaving aside the disagreeable politics of the occasion, it provided an opportunity to meet many old friends. I have to admit that I had the good fortune to sit next to Arthur Lloyd during one of the coffee breaks and his account of recent Domesday research was a good deal more stimulating than some of the formal business of the day. This was also the third occasion this year on which I have consumed an excellent new Forest Committee lunch which must, I suppose, lay me open to investigation for corruption.

COMMONERS DEFENCE ASSOCIATION

The New Forest Commoners' Defence Association has a new image which has been demonstrated to its members at fowl meetings held in different parts of the Forest in November. During the thirty years or so in which I served on the committee, mod of the associations work was undertaken by the officers - notably the chairman, vim chairman and secretary. As a consequence, these people were always overburdened with tasks while many of us ran of the mill committee members were able to contribute little beyond reporting the concerns of the membership and in turn letting the members know what the committee was doing. Now, however, specific functions have been allotted to individual committee members. This serves the dual purpose of keeping everyone involved and of easing the pressure on officers. There are now, for example, representatives dealing with the Adjacent Commons, public relations, Open Forest management and so on. It is still early days, but it looks as though the system might work quite well.

The local meetings provided the first public ailing of the new structure, Local meetings used to be held at about half a dozen locations throughout the Forest, but this year they have been reduced in number to three - Brockenhurst, East Boldre and Bramshaw. I was able to attend only the last of these where members are confronted with a formidable agenda which allowed each 'subject representative' to make a report on his or her recant work. The theory of doing w is fine, but the practice proved rather cumbersome. The meeting started at 7.30 pm and by 9.00 pm, with only half the agenda covered, the audience was thinning steadily. By 10.00pm there was a great deal of shuffling and looking at watches. At least a third of the members present bad melted away and the meeting was deep in a highly technical consideration of European intrusion into the running of pony breeding stud books ! Several agenda items remained to be dealt with and at this point my stamina failed and joined the absconders. Some of those I left behind may have remembered with affection the days of the late Major Colin Ziegler's iron rule as chairman. Then the Burley local meeting (invariably dull) would often open at 7.30 and close by 8,00 pm. Certainly the Commoners Defence is going to have to restrain the verbal enthusiasm of its various representatives - however useful the contribution they are making to the association's work.

MANDATE SETTLEMENT

At the end of a depressing year in which the Forestry Commission has at times seemed intent on squeezing the New Forest for every possible commercial advantage, it is good to be able to report a step in the right direction. The 'Ministers Mandate' (the government's instructions to the Forestry Commission as to how to run the New Forest) has been restored, almost to its former glory, after an attempt earlier this year to expunge from it most of the safeguards for the old broadleaved Inclosures. It must have become increasingly apparent to the Commission that they were not going to succeed in emasculating the Mandate as the first new draft attempted to do. Objections came from all quarters, not least from the Forests MPs. In October a meeting between the Deputy Surveyor and representatives of the New Forest Association (with the valuable if unexplained assistance of Fordingbridge parish council) resulted in a restoration of the safeguards.

The salvaging of the Mandate promises does not, of course, represent any sort of great victory. It is no more than a holding of one important piece of ground against a flood of new commercial and recreational pressures on the Forest. That is a rather sad state of affairs for the end of the 20th Century when one might have supposed amenity and conservation considerations would be of greater value than at any time in the past. The verbose padding which comprises the first three pages of the Mandate does in fact acknowledge such a hierarchy of values, but that is words only and actions on the ground continue to prove very different. This time last year I lamented the wrecking of Islands Thorns Inclosure. Twelve months on tractors continue to wallow through boiling seas of mud throughout the wood - producing conditions which would do credit to a set for a First World War film.

How it came about that the Forestry Commission determined to try removing the hard-won protection of the Inclosures, is an interesting question to which I have no answer. They may have believed that the amenity lobby was so weakened that changes could be bludgeoned through, but I rather doubt that was the explanation. More probably it was simple ignorance of the Forests history among officers who have been here for only a few years and who found such irritating restrictions on commercial production quite inexplicable. The battles which resulted in the original Mandate may have been nearly thirty years ago, but silviculturalists of all people (used to thinking in tens of decades) should have regarded an agreement of 1970 as both recant and relevant. That is the view of the Forest societies and fortunately it has prevailed.