

NEW FOREST NOTES February 2003

Upgrading the Forest's Campsites

Last month the Forestry Commission issued a paper outlining its proposals for upgrading Hollands Wood and Roundhill campsites and instituting some unspecified but potentially worrying development at New Park. The pill is to be sweetened by a reduction in the area of Hollands Wood and the grant of a long lease to the New Forest Show for its activities in the Park. The proposals are vague – probably deliberately so – but seem designed to test the temperature of the water before more formal plans are submitted. To judge from the number of phone calls and other approaches I received after the plan was issued to the Consultative Panel, the temperature of the water is very hot indeed. Most of these representations were along the lines of “You Verderers must not let them get away with it”.

So many disparate strands are drawn together in the Commission's paper that it is difficult to know where to start assessing it. Last year the Commission backed off a plan to develop New Park while closing down all or part of Hollands Wood, Denny and Long Beech. All three of these camps are damaging to the Forest to some extent. Since the present scheme makes no reference to Denny and Long Beech, we must assume that the Commission now intends to hold on to them, whatever their effect. Hollands Wood, on the other hand, remains on the agenda. Here the scheme is for a 7ha reduction in area and a halving of the present number of pitches. Since Hollands Wood is stated to have a 48% occupancy rate and since 100 of the displaced pitches (300) would be relocated at Round Hill, the overall provision of camping will be little affected. Moreover, the Commission wants to upgrade the retained part of the site with new buildings and electrical hookups. Hookups are an emotive subject in the Forest. They are the electrical connection points which allow campers to spend their New Forest holidays in front of the colour television, playing computer games and generally enjoying all the comforts of home in a “wilderness” environment. The Commission says 90% of its visitors want hookups and other facilities. A hardy 10% of probably unbalanced aesthetes are, apparently, content to take the New Forest as they find it.

Whenever hookups have been proposed in the past, local people have put up a vigorous resistance. It is, perhaps, not so much their physical presence which offends, but the attitude to the New Forest which they demonstrate. The argument has been that if you want a quiet, unsophisticated camping holiday in the New Forest, appreciating its natural beauty and animals, then you are very welcome. If, on the other hand, you expect the Forest to be developed and moulded to provide for you all the comforts of urban living, perhaps you would do better to stay in one of our excellent hotels or visit one of the private camps outside the Forest where such facilities are on offer. It is an argument which is hard to fault.

As to the long-term future of Hollands Wood, there is a school of thought which says that European conservation laws will close it down anyway in a few years time so, irrespective of its merits, the development now proposed is a waste of time and money. I am inclined to think that this is wishful thinking. The conservation lobby (English Nature or otherwise) has

never yet shown itself to have the guts to take such politically brave action as closing down a popular recreation facility. In my estimation, the Verderers will have to judge the Forestry Commission's proposals as they stand and not look to Europe to bale them out.

What of Roundhill ? Here, in addition to 100 new pitches, the Commission wants five new washroom blocks to be built in Stockley and Perrywood Inclosures. It also wants hookups for "a significant proportion" of the pitches. For years the Commission has been worrying away at the Verderers (without any success) on the subject of Roundhill's present mobile toilet blocks. Now it seems the big push is beginning, to make this the Forest's new super camp with all the trimmings. The timing is somewhat curious. If the Verderers refuse, there is not much the Commission can do about it at the moment. If the application is delayed for a few years and if a national park is by then imposed on the Forest, the Commission (working in collaboration with the park) will be able to force its plans through. Perhaps that is the fall-back position if the present assault fails.

Finally there is New Park. The "youth camping" which has often been a great trouble to the Forest (to say nothing of an immense source of litter) is to continue. The Show gets its lease and a curious entity called "The New Forest Trust" is to be given a "base". This trust is a considerable mystery. We are not permitted to know its purpose, its trustees or its sources of finance. The only clue given in the paper is that "one of its main purposes will be the betterment and welfare of commoning stock and deer and the land they graze upon". That, of course, is admirable, but what are its other "main purposes" – perhaps the fostering of recreational development and "public enjoyment" ? It is not long ago that the Commission floated the idea of such a body to counter the influence of the Forest societies. All details have been withheld from the Verderers, but there are plenty of rumours going around. The Forest might be forgiven for amending the biblical question to ask "Can any good thing come out of the Forestry Commission ?".

Ralph Hayward

This winter is proving a bad one for the deaths of stalwart friends of the New Forest. The latest victim is Mr. Ralph Hayward who died last month after a short illness and only weeks after competing (in his 80s) in the Boxing Day point-to-point race. He was, perhaps, the best known commoner of his generation in the Waterside area. Forest people in general are very good at grumbling about things and Ralph could grumble with the best of them. But unlike many in his community, he was prepared to do a good deal more than talk, writing letters, making presentments, attending public inquiries, and serving in local government and on the committees of Forest societies. If, for example, he failed to get a satisfactory answer from the Verderers to a presentment, he would come back Court after Court until he did get it. Unlike that of some who appear before the Court, his campaigning was always good humoured and the more effective for that. In his latter years his tolerance of stupidity in officialdom tended to wear a little thin. More than one dignitary from London, intent on telling the Forest how to run its affairs, suffered the disconcerting spectacle of Ralph sweeping out of a meeting muttering that he had better things to do with his time than listen to such nonsense !

Two years ago, following a casual vacancy on the Court, the Verderers acknowledged Ralph Hayward's immense contribution to Forest life by appointing him to fill the vacancy as a sort of honorary member – for one Court only. He became probably the shortest serving Verderer in history, taking up his post on Monday morning and relinquishing it at the election on the following Friday. The Forest can ill afford to lose such colourful and industrious characters.

Exposing the A 31

In November I wrote about the horrid conditions on and around the A 31 at Picket Post. Quite by coincidence, a particularly thoughtless and damaging scheme affecting other parts of this road through the Forest came to light in the middle of January. Since the fencing went up in the 1960s, nature has begun, in places, to soften at least the visual intrusion of the road. A screen of young trees and scrub has begun to form within the fenced reservation. In places this has become really effective, as on the south side of the road at Stoney Cross.

It appears that English Nature and the agents for the highway authority came up with a scheme to cut down some of the trees and clear the gorse in places to improve the habitat for reptiles. I am told that they (the reptiles) find this litter-strewn, oil-soaked and fume-saturated environment particularly attractive (because there are no people), but to complete their roadside comfort, they desire the removal of trees to foster heather. The fact that they have 70,000 acres of the New Forest in which to live is irrelevant: they have an urgent need of this half acre of screen at Stoney Cross.

This seems to me to be environmental stupidity in the extreme. The Verderers have remonstrated with the authorities and attempted to secure this vitally important length of vegetation. If there is money to be spent on the road, why do they not repair the fences properly and clear what is in effect a linear rubbish dump (conditions in the Handy Cross lay-by are like those of a back ally on an inner city housing estate), rather than threatening the poor fragments of screen which have been able to struggle up ?

A remarkable aspect of the matter is that there seems not to have been a word of complaint from Minstead or any of the Forest societies. Even the householders of the big houses in the Grove who are most directly affected have been silent. Perhaps they simply do not know what is about to happen.

Of course effective gorse management (and gorse is an essential element of the screen) requires periodic regeneration, not least to limit fire risk, but it should be done on a careful rotation designed to retain and enhance the screen, not to weaken it.

Anthony Pasmore