

NEW FOREST NOTES FEBRUARY 2006

The Mystery of Duckhole Bog

Several years ago, the lower parts of Duckhole Bog near Rhinefield were subject to a stream-blocking operation under the Life projects. In other words, the drainage channel which had been dug in early post-war years was filled with heather bales and, on the heath alongside the bog, a long line of quarry pits was dug to secure peat turf to complete the filling. During the course of this work, one of the earliest precisely dated human occupation sites in the New Forest was uncovered and then destroyed. Most of the quarry pits are only about six inches deep, but a number of them are deeper and cut right into the underlying clay. It was within the limits of one of these deeper pits that the Duckhole boiling site had lain undisturbed for more than three thousand years. If the quarrying had been limited to the turf only, this important archaeological feature would have survived – if in a slightly damaged condition. Instead, almost the whole of the archaeological layers disappeared, through to the bare clay beneath.

I have to say at once that the Forestry Commission (which undertook the stream blocking) absolutely denies that it was responsible for the destruction. It admits to forming the quarry pits, but maintains that it did not even have on the site machines capable of digging away the archaeology which lay within their limits. Since the relevant layers survive intact beyond the edges of the pits, but not within them, the Commission's denials necessarily suppose the secret intervention of an unknown party to account for the damage. Such a miscreant must have turned up, post turf-stripping and unseen, with a digger, tractor and trailer. Several loads of perfectly worthless burnt flint must have been carefully extracted from the base of the Commission's diggings and then transported out of the Forest to no-one's advantage. This is an unlikely sequence of events.

The damage caused (either by the Forestry Commission or by a phantom site-wrecker and gravel-thief) was discovered in August 2005 and a rescue excavation was immediately put in hand. This showed that most of the feature had been completely obliterated, but in one small area enough had survived for the recovery of some undisturbed charcoal samples suitable for carbon 14 dating. Such dating is an expensive process undertaken only by specialist laboratories, but requests for it to be funded by the Forestry Commission or the Life Project managers fell on deaf ears. Since both denied responsibility for the destruction, neither was prepared to pay. As the costs were beyond the means of the excavators, the Hampshire Field Club, it looked as though nothing could be salvaged from this disaster. It was at this stage that the New Forest Trust agreed to help.

The New Forest Trust, a registered charity, was launched in the spring of 2005 and at the time I expressed the hope that its good works would not be confined to multi-thousand pound projects, but would also extend to smaller but important donations to help the Forest. It did not take long for these hopes to be met. It was agreed that the full cost of the dating and identification of the samples would be paid from the Trust's funds. Moreover, there was a

remarkable freedom from the usual red-tape which surrounds such funding and a ready appreciation of the urgency of the work. The samples needed to be dealt with quickly to avoid contamination. Accordingly, during November charcoal was dispatched to Waikato University in New Zealand for dating and to Durham University for identification. The results were received just after Christmas.

All three samples were of alder wood, suggesting that there has been little change in the woodland vegetation of the bog over millennia. The dating showed that the site was in use in the 15th Century BC (in the Bronze Age) and this makes it the second oldest archaeological feature of its type in the New Forest to be precisely dated by modern methods. It was a “boiling site” – a place where large quantities of water were heated in a flooded trough, by means of hot stones being thrown in. Such features are numerous in the New Forest: over three hundred are now known. We probably possess a greater known density of such sites than any other part of the British Isles. Unfortunately they are difficult to date without great expense and their purpose – industrial or domestic – remains uncertain. The only other dated site, at Millersford near Fordingbridge, is older (Seventeenth Century BC). When the process was first introduced to the New Forest is unknown. It had probably died out by the beginning of the Iron Age.

Imposing the national park plan

In the national park’s latest circular, there is a worrying indication that it will seek to exert its authority in a way which is quite beyond its powers. The park is preparing a plan which will set out how the authority seeks to run the Forest. That is perfectly proper and is indeed a legal requirement. Park authority plans in other areas tend to be vague and weak documents except in respect of planning. This is probably because they are trying to face in several directions at once. “We will protect park X from over-use by controlling recreation, but recreation is a large producer of income and important to urban populations so we will encourage it.” This is a crude over-simplification and the authors of such plans are adept in choosing their words so as to fudge the conflicts. The problem with the proposed New Forest plan is that, not content with directing its own activities, the park evidently has ideas about coercing others (which it calls its “partners”) in the same way. These partners are not defined, but probably comprise the other statutory authorities operating within the New Forest. According to the circular, “The plan will set out the medium to long term policies for delivery of national park purposes by the authority *and all its partners* with the authority setting the strategic direction” (my italics). That it has no right whatever to do. All public authorities whose activities affect a national park must have regard to national park purposes in making their decisions and I have no doubt that in the New Forest the law is being scrupulously observed. Certainly it is within the Verderers’ Court and, indeed, the Verderers have gone much further than the law demands and have committed themselves to establishing a close working relationship with the park. Now, however, the park is beginning to push its luck. Having regard to the statutory purposes of national parks and the priority of those purposes is very different from having to submit to what a park authority, with its conflicting objectives and

councillor-dominated membership, may decide to include in its plan. It may, for example, decide to promote or support damaging development like road construction or an intensification of recreational pressure – all of this under the cloak of “economic well-being” or “promoting understanding and enjoyment”. We have seen sufficient aberrant decisions of other park authorities for it to be quite clear that their interpretation of the law is not beyond question. Under such circumstances it would be required of those whose unequivocal duty it is to protect the Forest, to resist the prescriptions of the plan rather than meekly to assist in their delivery. DEFRA’s guidance on the subject is muddled and apparently without legal basis in that it describes management plans as a “useful mechanism for managing these areas to secure the active involvement of relevant authorities”. The requirements of an Act of Parliament are not necessarily the same as a set of prescriptions which enshrine the ideas of a party-politically controlled and possibly suburban-minded faction. The park must understand that it does not run the Forestry Commission, or the Verderers’ Court. On the other hand, of course, insofar as the provisions of the plan are consistent with the protection of the Forest, I have not the slightest doubt that the Verderers at least would give them their unstinting support.

Buggy rider prosecuted

I have occasionally criticised the Forestry Commission for being lax in the enforcement of its byelaws – especially where the offences involve sport and recreation. It was therefore a pleasant surprise when the Deputy Surveyor informed the January Verderers’ Court of a successful prosecution in just such a case.

The New Forest seems to be an immediate target for whatever new craze is dreamed-up. Scramble bikes, powered cycles, model aircraft, mountain biking, are just some of the pressures which have been heaped on us over the years. The philosophy of the participants seems to be that you can get away with absolutely anything in the New Forest, so that is the place to go. “They’ll never dare stop you, so get stuck in !” One of the latest problems (and by no means the least disruptive) is kite buggy riding. In this the “sportsman” is towed across the Forest at speed on a sort of skate board attached to a kite by a long string. Because large areas of reasonably level grass are required, the reseeded areas (dedicated improved grazing grounds) have been particularly targeted. Those near Brockenhurst and Beaulieu possess the required physical characteristics and have been under the greatest attack. The activity disrupts the lawful use of the Forest by walkers and grazing stock, disturbs wildlife and is extremely dangerous for horse-riders whose mounts may be terrified by such apparatus. Because it involves a wheeled vehicle it offends against the Commission’s byelaws. Presentments have been made to the Verderers on the subject, but I don’t think that any of us was very hopeful of firm action by the Commission.

By June of last year it seems that even the elastic patience of Queen’s House had snapped and an offender at Wilverley reseeded as taken to court. The case was heard in November, but seems to have received no publicity and to have passed unnoticed in the Forest. That is a pity, because the Commission deserves credit when it makes the effort to

tackle a problem of this sort. A few well-targeted and publicised convictions might bring an end to a great many of the problems the Forest faces today – especially mountain-bike trespass. In the present case I understand that the buggy rider was given a conditional discharge, but ordered to pay £300 costs. That should persuade his colleagues that the New Forest is not the soft touch they had supposed and that it can be an expensive place for half a day's joy-riding.

Gig Alford

Last month saw the death of one of the most respected figures in the Forest's commoner community. He was a large owner of ponies and a well known cattle dealer, operating from his farm at Ower. The Forest mattered to him, but not it seems, the outside world. He claimed never to have been in a supermarket in his life and his only visit to London was for the coronation in 1953. He will be much missed by his friends and business colleagues.

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