

NEW FOREST NOTES FEBRUARY 2012

How to encourage more Forest tourism

Thirty pages of almost impenetrable jargon recently landed on my desk with the rather uninformative title of "Local Sustainable Transport Fund – Application form – Department for Transport". Such papers usually turn out to be harmless results of some official needing to justify his existence by writing nonsense, but not this one. It has potentially very serious consequences for the New Forest and demonstrates that such troublesome papers can never safely be consigned to the waste basket unread.

On the surface this application by the county council and the national park is a bid for money to reduce carbon emissions by visitors to the New Forest. That is an entirely worthy objective. Visitors mostly come to the Forest by car and in doing so create emissions. The bid, a joint one with the South Downs, seeks £5,700,000 to limit the problem. It claims that this will be done in a number of ways, including "promoting sustainable access", "promoting opportunities for understanding and enjoyment" and by "supporting economic well-being for all". It does not actually mention motherhood and apple pie, but the implication is there. The problem is that as one goes deeper into the document it becomes clear that this is in fact more of a tourism-promotion campaign than anything else. It is designed to encourage more visitors from groups which might not otherwise come and to provide more attractions for them and others who already come. All this is to be achieved under the cloak of "sustainable tourism/transport". There is much talk of improving public transport and that is certainly a part of the proposals along with timetables, maps, information boards etc – but it is only one part. The paper is riddled with references to marketing, increasing accessibility, providing attractions, creating trails and walks and in fact nearly all the now familiar park-promoted back-door means of boosting the number of people who come to the New Forest. One has only to apply the adjectives "green" or "sustainable" to any tourist plan and the opposition is supposed to collapse in a glow of happy confidence that everything must surely be alright. The simple fact is that increasing sustainable tourism means increasing tourism, or in other words, more people putting more pressure on an already desperately overused Forest. Eventually, I suppose, we will cease to be hoodwinked in this way, but a lot more damage will be done in the meantime.

What exactly will these huge sums of money be used for? Analysis is difficult because the New Forest and the South Downs are linked together in the application. One million, two hundred thousand pounds has been set aside for "construction of new cycle and walking routes". Nobody seems to have considered that, in the New Forest at least, such routes are highly unlikely to be approved by the Verderers. Fifty thousand pounds will be spent on marketing the new routes. Ninety thousand pounds will go on the provision of "advice to tourist attractions to help develop sustainable visitor access plans". More than a quarter of a million pounds will be spent on something enigmatically described as "access to a bicycle"!

With all this exciting expenditure, a "cycling development officer" is a must, and he will cost the taxpayer a mere £182,000. One hundred and twenty thousand pounds will be given to cycle hire businesses for development – and so it goes on. Those who concern themselves with such matters will be delighted to know that the money will "improve the permeability of the national parks for pedestrians and cyclists".

The whole thing is a covert marketing exercise from start to finish. Does anyone really believe that an urban family wishing to visit the New Forest will be converted? Will they lug the picnic tables, kids' toys, lunch baskets etc to a local bus, transfer at the station and take the train to Brockenhurst, transfer again to a local tourist bus to their destination and then repeat the whole impossible process on the return journey? They will do what they have always done: load the family car and reach the Forest cheaply, quickly, conveniently and in relative comfort.

The Verderers considered this paper at their January Court and, after fighting through the jargon, decided that they would have none of it. Perhaps the really sad thing is that the national park, whose primary duty should be to protect the Forest is, as always, putting tourism and economic advantage ahead of the natural beauty and wilderness quality of the Forest. Moreover, at a time of welfare cuts and extreme economic stringency, is there really no better way of spending nearly six million pounds?

Dumped animals

One of the many ways in which the New Forest is abused is to treat it as a dumping ground for old, sick or unwanted animals. If you can't get your old horse to the Forest alive, you can always unload his body somewhere quietly under cover of darkness, taking care of course to hack off any brand marks and dig out any microchip. Fortunately such cases are still fairly rare, but they have been increasing in recent years. Emaciated horses are left from time to time and, if they can be nursed back to health, they are sold off for a great loss on the cost of keeping them.

In a recent case such an animal was found by the agisters and accommodated in a stable overnight. By the morning it was dead – help had come too late. From an animal welfare angle that is the end of the story, but there is still the nasty business of disposing of the body to be taken into account. In the old days it was just a matter of burial, but the law does not now permit that except in the case of a pet and on one's own land. The carcass had to go to the hunt kennels and that incurred a substantial cost. It has been customary for the Verderers to bear such expenses in the case of the death of a Forest animal which cannot be identified, but the dumping of a dying horse by outsiders is an entirely different matter. The Forestry Commission represents the landowner of the Forest and has to take the financial responsibility, even if the Court (as in this case) deals with the initial welfare issue.

The secret life of a Forest cow

Over the years, academics have fallen over each other to study the behaviour of Forest ponies, their breeding, diets, territories and so on. The humble cow, by contrast is of no interest to them. Cows are there to be eaten in due course and in the meantime they are a nuisance to be tolerated, or so the thinking seems to be. My wife and I have kept cattle for nearly forty years and now that my farming career nears its end, I wish I had been able to devote more time to watching as opposed to just managing them. They are not stupid (the adjective "bovine" is an unkind one) and when running on the Forest, their behaviour is quite as interesting as that of ponies.

About twenty years ago I tired of seeing my cattle in a wet field during the winter, doing nothing but wait about for the next meal. Accordingly I decided to put them on the Forest through the worst months of the year and, from the cows' point of view, I never made a better decision. The Forest offers unlimited opportunities for natural behaviour to show itself and the gorse brakes and cosy bracken-covered corners allow a cow to make itself really comfortable even in the worst weathers.

To prepare the herd for its first experience of the Forest, I built a feeding yard in one of my fields adjoining the heath and fed in it promptly at 8.00 am for a couple of weeks. Eventually I simply opened the gate after breakfast and, with somewhat surprised expressions, they wandered off and disappeared. Next morning there was an orderly queue outside the gate at the correct time and so things have continued, with each generation teaching the rules to its successor. There is a little ritual to going out. On the first occasion of the winter, each cow chooses its own birch tree and indulges in a really thorough scratch. Scratching opportunities for field cows are limited. Then, regularly in the morning, a really filthy puddle is sought out for a post breakfast drink. There is a trough of clean fresh Sembcorp water in the feeding yard, but it is used only sporadically. The water company clearly has much to learn about flavouring.

Of course the main interest in a cow's life is mating. It would be no good putting out heifers, who would probably be ten miles away next morning looking for a bull. In-calf cows eschew such nonsense and observe the timetable. Strangely enough, a heavy fall of snow, when one would suppose a good feed was most necessary, can keep the cows away for several days on end. Sometimes high winds and rain will do the same.

During the day I encounter my cows on occasions as I go about the Forest or in the village, but mostly they are invisible. However, I usually know where they have been. Pine needles on the back tell me that they have spent the night a mile away to the south (there are no pine trees near home). At the moment they frequently return with blackened faces like a team of commandos. Then I know they have been playing in the bonfires where the Forestry Commission is burning brash in Millersford Plantation. Sometimes they appear with faces apparently covered in bright yellow war paint which can only be acquired in a particular sandy clay track cutting in nearby woodland. Perhaps few conventional farmers understand how important to a cow is a good dust bath and the opportunity to wallow in soft earth. Bulls are renowned for digging pits, but cows also seek facilities of this sort.

The herd has very definite methods of both verbal and silent communications. Hierarchy is important to them and not always determined by size and age. On going out in the morning, someone gives a signal to turn either north or south, assuming any movement at all is considered necessary. South means a day of serious eating and sleeping on Hale Purlieu. North, on the other hand, indicates that the morning will be spent lounging on the village green watching the idiotic activities of humans and leaving unwelcome traces of their presence around the cricket square. As spring advances a north turn becomes increasingly common following the opening of green shoots deep in the hedges. At that stage I start getting grumbles from my more suburban minded neighbours who feel no obligation to maintain their fences. A row of tails projecting into the road from a deep hedgerow shows that the herd is hard at work. Eventually, in the interests of village harmony and in preparation for calving, everyone is loaded up and transported to the summer fields. Another winter on the Forest has been successfully completed. I should perhaps add that in Forest terms I am a very small farmer with never more than a dozen or so cattle out, probably reflecting the practice in my village since the dawn of time. Things are very different for the big cattle ranchers.

I shall miss my cattle, but there comes a time for everyone when the joys of carrying hay bales through half frozen slurry by the light of a winter sunrise begin to seem increasingly less attractive than a leisurely breakfast in a warm kitchen.

Anthony Pasmore