

NEW FOREST NOTES FEBRUARY 2017

New Forest Association anniversary

The New Forest Association is celebrating one hundred and fifty years of its existence in 2017 and doing it in a variety of ways, some of which seem to be rather peculiar. It is an organisation which was set up primarily to prevent the conversion of the New Forest into almost continuous plantations by the inclosure of the heath and ancient woodlands. Oak was to be planted on the better soils, but the bulk of the Forest would have become conifer woods. If that had happened, the Forest of today would look very much like the Forest of Dean, without the wide open spaces, ponies and ancient trees. That was a battle the Association won in a spectacular manner when the New Forest Act of 1877 was passed a decade later. Over the next century, smaller victories tended to be interspersed with long periods of inactivity and decline. The NFA nearly disappeared altogether after WW2 and in the late 1960s it hit another low point when it betrayed the Forest in a most blatant manner as the Forestry Commission set about cropping the Ancient Ornamental Woods and trying to eliminate nearly all broadleaved trees from the Inclosures. Only by the efforts of the redoubtable Mrs. Jean Cobb and her team of activists was the NFA eventually dragged kicking and screaming into the camp opposed to the Commission. After the Commission's plans were consigned to the dustbin there followed a period of renewal when the Association's funds did much to secure the defeat of Shell's application to drill for oil in Denny Inclosure. Even better, the Association took a leading role in opposing the Lyndhurst Bypass Bill, in partnership with the Verderers. That Bill, which sought to authorise the construction of a major road through the woods and heaths around the Forest's capital, comprised the most serious threat to the Forest in modern times.

The one hundred and fiftieth anniversary sees the NFA moving away somewhat from its core function of fighting damaging attacks on the Forest and into a more trendy role as educator and communicator. These are perhaps worthy functions, but they are the business of public authorities and not of a red-bloodied fighting group which conserves its funds for those emergencies which inevitably arise from time to time. To start with, there is now a new cuddly image for the NFA as "Friends of the New Forest", supposedly designed to attract the support of visitors. Perhaps it might just do that, but when I (as a visitor) joined the Dartmoor Preservation Association many years ago, I did it just because it was a "preservation" group. Presumably the NFA has concluded that its title is somehow unattractive, old-fashioned or unfriendly. A few years back a similar attempt was made to popularise the New Forest Commoners' Defence Association by dropping the allegedly "aggressive" word "Defence". That move was roundly defeated by the membership and the CDA has remained the most active and effective of all the Forest's societies. We are told that Friends of the New Forest is really just a sort of subtitle, but to traditionalists like me it is not a welcome change. Moreover, in place of the attractive, and to my mind dignified, NFA logo, we now have a rather disagreeable artificial tree sprouting out of the middle of the new subtitle.

These cosmetic changes are perhaps no more than a passing fad to be dropped in due course, but the expenditure of £24,000 of the Association's valuable reserves on sponsoring

apprentice “rangers”, seems to me a highly questionable use of funds donated to protect the Forest against tangible threats. The so-called rangers are simply park managers or wardens working for tourist-oriented bodies such as the Forestry Commission and the National Park Authority itself. I personally doubt the value of their role – certainly when measured against the traditional officers of the Forest, the keepers. If rangers must be employed rather than strengthening the keeper force, then, as public servants they should be trained and financed at the public expense and not from the coffers of a small local charity. I hardly imagine that such use of the reserves will induce elderly members of our community, when preparing their wills, to see the NFA as a worthy recipient of legacies.

One aspect of the 150 years celebrations which I do welcome is the issue of Peter Roberts's new book “Saving the New Forest”. It is a valuable account of the Association's history and campaigns. The author had to work under great disadvantages as much of the early records has been lost by, or stolen from, the Association in recent years. He has done an excellent job attempting to make good the losses from other contemporary sources. At £12, presumably going to NFA funds, the book is good value.

Denny Lawn and decaying passages

There are few more depressing sights in the New Forest today than the once well drained and maintained lawns now deteriorating into swamp. The “lawns” are the sweet grass areas, usually adjoining streams, which are crucial for Forest livestock. In the mid-19th century, many of them were carefully drained to encourage the grass, but there followed seventy years of neglect until a major programme of restoration in the 1930s. In 1949 the Forestry Commission was given a statutory responsibility to see that the Forest was properly drained and this they did, if not always very willingly, until about 1980. Since then the neglect has mounted year after year. Recently there has been some scrub clearance, but the drainage remains dreadful. Where (as recently at Burley Lawn) something is actually done, it is often no more than a shallow scraping away of weed – work which will last no more than a year or so.

The latest of these sites I have been photographing is Denny Lawn near Beaulieu Road Station. Here the main drain that carries large amounts of water from Denny Lodge Inclosure to the Bishop's Dyke is choked with vegetation and silt and is overflowing. Water spilling from the now almost non-existent channel is spreading out over the lawn and eroding the approach to the bridge leading up into Denny Wood. As riders and stock try to force their way through this mess, they churn up the bridge approaches into a sea of mud. Next come the visitors who collect up branches and throw them into the soup in attempt to form a bridge which will allow them to cross. The result is perfectly horrible. The Forestry Commission has promised to look into the problem and we will have to see what happens.

Another and even worse bridge and ford approach (they are called passages) is at North Hollow in Linwood. This is the only route between the Forest and Ibsley Common apart from a

footpath a mile away to the south. There is no alternative for all stock and riders and it is heavily used by walkers. On the north side of the bridge the track has disappeared into a quagmire created by a series of deep eroding ruts. The mess is not confined to the immediate surroundings of the bridge itself, but a further and even larger area of erosion is to be found just on the Forest side of the Ibsley Common boundary. Trespassing mountain bikes cut deep grooves into the exposed sand and these immediately become eroding runnels when it rains, adding to the problems. In national parks other than the New Forest the authorities make much of their path repair projects, even using helicopters to move materials to inaccessible places. Here, however, very little remedial work is now undertaken by the Forestry Commission and both locals and visitors must suffer the consequences. Nobody wants to see heavily engineered and ugly causeways, but the local maintenance staff is (or was) skilled at the construction of attractive and durable approaches made of local materials.

Railway land

When the railway was built across the Forest immediately after 1845, pieces of land were repeatedly added to it for sidings, buildings, yards and so on. The Act of Parliament under which such land was taken from the Forest provided that if the acquisitions ever ceased to be used for railway purposes for a period of two years, they should revert to the Forest and again become subject to common rights. Today, with much of this railway land no longer having any track-related purpose, we are faced with a situation where everything from tiny bits of worthless copse to big commercial hotels are occupied in defiance of the Act and should be returned to the Forest or otherwise freed from the requirement for such return. Not surprisingly, the present illegal occupiers don't much like this idea. It is easier for the Verderers to prize away the useless copse than the more developed sites. Such a case has arisen at Ashurst (Lyndhurst Road) Station where a rubble-strewn and waterlogged quarter of an acre has deteriorating railway fencing which is allowing ponies to escape onto the dangerous A 35 road. Here, in the hope of finding a solution to the escape problem, the Court is seeking the return of this scrap of land. This will be neither cheap nor easy to achieve. Land which reverts from the railway goes initially to the Crown Commissioners (representing the former owner) rather than to the Forestry Commission. The Forestry Commission has then to be persuaded to take over the plot and has indicated that it will only do so if the railway debris which covers it is first of all cleared up. Finally, someone must erect a new fence along one boundary to prevent animal escapes and must also take over responsibility for its future maintenance. Altogether I see endless trouble and expense ahead, but the Verderers believe that the task has to be attempted, even at the expense of making a large hole in the reserve funds – money which was set aside to secure good new grazing to add to the Forest.

The reserve fund (commonly called the Railway Fund) was acquired many years ago when, also at Lyndhurst Road Station, a small block of workers' cottages reverted to the Crown

Commissioners and was sold by auction. The Commissioners and the Verderers each took half the proceeds, with the Court's share being earmarked for future land acquisitions which would not only benefit the grazing, but would be open to the public for recreation. Opportunities for such acquisitions within the perambulation of the Forest are rare and the fund still remains largely intact.

Anthony Pasmore