

New Forest Notes February 1991

The New Forest Association

Last month saw the sad death of Derry Seaton who was for many years chairman of the New Forest Association. So much has been written and said about his work for the Forest that there seems little left to add. However, one aspect of his achievements does seem to have escaped notice and this relates to the finances of the NFA. Despite a surprisingly small membership and a very modest annual subscription, the Association has been able to mount some very expensive and often successful campaigns in recent years. This has been due largely to the promotion and sale of a wide variety of high quality goods and publications to do with the Forest and it was Derry's unseen hand which lay behind much of this unglamorous but vital work. An army may march on its stomach, but a conservation society often succeeds or fails according to its funds.

The New Forest Association now, as so often in the past, faces a difficult future. It was founded in the middle of the last century when the Forest faced general inclosure (effectively destruction) and at that time it was composed of a small committee of great landowners whose activities were financed by a voluntary rate on their property. After its initial successes which culminated in the New Forest Act of 1877, the Association went through alternating periods of activity and hibernation and this pattern has been repeated up to the present day. With one or two notable and not very creditable exceptions, the N.F.A. has shown itself very effective in combating major external threats to the Forest. For example, in recent years it has fought Shell's application to drill for oil; the County Council's Lyndhurst Bypass Bill and the Department of Transport and

County Council's proposals for Stoney Cross. Provided its funds hold out and it retains a core of hardworking and knowledgeable members, it is well equipped for this sort of fight, but an effective and lively association needs more to keep it going than the occasional major battle. _ The N.F.A.'s weakness is that it is not able to maintain momentum between the major conflicts of Forest life. Its committee and membership is made up of an extraordinary mixture of mutually irritating interests: pro and anti hunting; those who regard the Commoners as the essence of the New Forest and those who see them as (on occasions) a threat to conservation; those who want to see the promotion of tourism and tourist sites and others who regard even more visitors as ruinous to the Forest. The consequence of this is that on day to day issues the Association's voice is often muted and ineffective. Everyone knows where the Commoners' Defence Association stands on Forest drainage, or the Hampshire Naturalists' Trust on applying lime to the Open Forest, but too often the NFA remains silent simply because it has no policy on a particular issue.

An outstanding example of this inability to form a policy arose over the vital question of whether the Forest should become a national park. For many months while the Ramblers and others were promoting clear and well reasoned arguments on the subject, the N.F.A, said nothing. Only very late in the day when it was already clear that the Review Group had rejected national park status and its

recommendations had been accepted by the government did the Association add its voice to the opposition.

Perhaps these difficulties are the unavoidable consequence of a broadly based membership, but it does mean that the Forest is often without anyone to speak for its welfare in an arena of local politics dominated by sectional interests.

More Concrete Crushing

Two months ago I welcomed the destruction of much of the remaining concrete at Stoney Cross Aerodrome. This month, while working in my fields at Hale Purlieu, I was startled by crashing sounds coming from far away in the Forest to the south. Investigation showed that the noise came from the six acre concrete "wall target" in the Ashley Hills which is the latest victim of the crushing machine. Not only was the target an incongruous eyesore for forty years, but it tended to attract all sorts of distressing proposals for new uses. In some eyes it was the ideal site for microlite flying or car racing. After all, it was miles away from houses with only vast expanses of open heath around it, so the noise would not upset anyone, would it? No one who values the traditional character of the Forest will mourn its passing, although I suspect it has given us a place name which will outlive the physical evidence. Just as old Fritham people know of the Petrol Road or No. 4 Hanger, so locals in the north talk of The Concrete and will no doubt continue to do so when bracken and heather have reclaimed the site.

Charcoal Burning

No doubt many of us feel an instinctive twinge of alarm when the familiar blue "planning application" notice appears on a neighbour's gate post. We anticipate a fourth garage, a second swimming pool or that essential extension of any good modern home which comprises "study, games room and conservatory". Something of these feelings swept over me when I encountered such a blue notice deep in the Forest at the entrance to South Bentley Inclosure - to say the least, a peculiar place for a planning application. However, this proposal is for charcoal burning, reputedly one of the most ancient of Forest crafts, and one which we know from David Stagg's research into Forest law has been practised in the New Forest since at least the 15th Century. Those who have a keen eye for the unusual may be able to detect the low circular banks of charcoal pits in the old woods. They usually have an overall diameter of about 40 feet and they are particularly common in area around Mark Ash.

Until the beginning of this century, charcoal burning in the New Forest was carried out in traditional "earth" pits or kilns which were constructed wherever sufficient supplies of hardwood timber were available. The old charcoal pits consumed about one thousand cubic feet of split cord wood per firing and each firing lasted a week from the beginning of construction to the bagging up of the charcoal. The process was a complex one with the method of firing the pit a closely-kept trade secret.

By 1900 the industry had almost died out in this Forest, although there was a brief revival during the first War for which the Cull family from Copythorne was responsible. The last charcoal pit is reputed to have been worked by Frederick Cull in Furzey Lawn Inclosure in 1920. Thereafter charcoal burning

was carried out by visiting operators who use cylindrical iron kilns which have a firing cycle of about twenty four hours. I last remember, them in the Forest in 1970, just as the major restraints on hardwood felling took effect. They were then operating in Park Grounds Inclosure at Lyndhurst, but I also have photographs of kilns in South Bentley on the site which is now to be reused. Perhaps the huge quantities of timber wrecked in the storms of recent years have made a visit worthwhile. No doubt the South Bentley operations will become a major attraction for visitors as most of us seem to find this ancient and aromatic craft quite irresistible. The charcoal burners may have to appoint a full time public relations officer if they are to get any work done at all.

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