

New Forest Notes February 1992

One step nearer a National Park?

Over the last few days innumerable people have asked me what I think of the government's announced intention of making the New Forest into a national park. This demonstrates both the vagueness of the proposals and the understandable inability of most people to comprehend them, since formal national park designation is not, apparently the immediate intention. What is clear in that the government is considering granting statutory powers to the New Forest Committee in direct opposition to the recommendations of the New Forest Review and in complete reversal of its own expressed intentions only two years ago. This follows long and hard behind the scenes lobbying by the Committee which evidently wants to be given quasi national park powers along the lines of those possessed by the Broads Authority.

Of course we shall be deluged with assurances that the Verderers' influence will be unaffected and that the Forest will be better protected as a consequence of this new layer of bureaucracy. I believe neither claim, although exactly how much the Verderers' position will be weakened depends upon the detailed proposals which are still secret. The mere existence of a new tier of Forest management on which local authority and national recreation interests are for the first time in a position of great strength must weaken the protective influence of the Court and those other bodies dedicated to the good of the Forest.

Vagueness and confusion have dogged the whole discussion of national park designation or national park status. The two are in any case quite interchangeable in most people's minds. By repeating over and over again that their plans are "a good thing", the pro-parkers had attempted to convince us that once we have national park status, most of the Forest's problems will be solved. I doubt it. At least the proposals cannot be implemented without legislation and there is a hint that local consultation will be undertaken before a Bill is presented. If the present government should change at the general election there may be further obstacles on the road to national park.

Of course there are winners and losers in every scheme such as this. If, as I believe, the Forest and its traditional values would be the poorer and weaker under a semi-national park system, others will gain immeasurably. The hard pressed home tourist industry must benefit from a new higher profile for the Forest and from the flood of information and interpretation which is inseparable from national park style administration. From humble bed and breakfast accommodation to such vast leisure complexes as Beaulieu and Paultons, the industry will receive a welcome boost from "enhanced tourist volumes. No doubt there will also be quiet satisfaction among those who favour major public developments such as the Lyndhurst Bypass and who will see a shift of power towards local authority interests as bringing much nearer their desired objectives. Students of such matters will not fail to have noted highly equivocal comments of the Minister on major development in national parks in another part of the written answer which also covered the New Forest.

Righting old Wrongs

The poet, diarist and one time Lymington customs official William Allingham, records several visits made by Tennyson to the New Forest in the 1860s. Of particular interest is the diary entry for 22nd July, 1866, on which day the two men searched unsuccessfully for the ancient yews of Sloden, before being told that they had been felled several years earlier as part of the programme of inclosure and replanting which was then threatening the survival of the New Forest. They learned that this fine wood had been cut down and sold for £30, whereupon Tennyson is reported to have said that he would willingly have paid the timber value to keep the trees standing. Some years later, the Deputy Surveyor of the time was questioned about this outstanding piece of vandalism when being examined before a select committee enquiring into the management of the New Forest. However, the trees were gone and the yews of Sloden, apart from a remnant around the, southern edge of the present Inclosure, have been no more than a memory for over a hundred and twenty years. The oaks which replaced them were cut in the 1940s and then, as part of the now abandoned programme to convert the Forest to conifers, Douglas Fir was planted on most of the cleared land in 1953.

That might have been the end of the story for a century or so, but for the great storm of January 1990. That felled huge blocks of Douglas Fir in Sloden where thinning had recently taken place, thus creating an opportunity to make small amends for the huge losses of hardwood trees in the cuttings of post war years. The Forestry Commission has, in fact agreed to replant the whole of the clearings in Sloden with oak and work is about to start. Now, however, an important amendment to the replanting plan has been put forward by Chris Read, one of the Forests leading field archaeologist. He has suggested that, at least on the north face of Sloden Ridge, a mixture of oak and yew should be planted so that our successors in two hundred years may see again that gem of the New Forest which Tennyson missed by two years and the rest of us by more than a century. The plan has the backing of the Hampshire Field Club and the New Forest Associations hardwood sub-committee. The Forestry Commission has agreed to consider the proposal and there seems a good chance that it will be adopted.

Re-planting plans generally give some cautious grounds for optimism with conversion to broadleaves intended for Sloden, Pitts Wood, areas around Burley and a small portion of Holmsley. Elsewhere strips and fringes of broadleaves will be provided along with the conifer planting. However, only a small part of the devastated woods has been dealt with in the current proposals and the area so far reclaimed to traditional New Forest oak is but a small part of the thousand acres which were lost in the 1960s alone.

Deputy Surveyors

The announcement that the Forest is to have a new Deputy Surveyor in June this year is of great interest in Forest circles, but may be regarded outside as of little consequence. Why should the public be concerned with someone who, by his title is evidently an inferior officer? It is a peculiarity of the Forests management (some might say Irishness) that the Deputy Surveyor of the New Forest is neither a deputy nor, in the modern sense of the word, a surveyor. He is, in fact, the Forestry Commissions head man in the Forest, although it has long been a matter of discussion as to how far

the Forests management reflects the ideas of the holder of this office rather than policies dictated from further up the Commissions hierarchy.

The title Deputy Surveyor has its origins in the time, about two centuries ago, when there was a Surveyor General of Woods and Forests acting for the Crown and under whom were appointed deputies in each of the Royal Forests. The Surveyor Generals office was abolished about the beginning of the 19th Century, but Deputy Surveyors continued to be appointed until the Forests themselves were destroyed by inclosure. Apart from our own Deputy Surveyor, I believe that the office now only survives in the Forest of Dean.

Before the transfer of the Crown forests to the Forestry Commission in 1923, Deputy Surveyor tended to serve for very long periods and to acquire an intimate knowledge of the Forest and its politics. Some were extremely colourful characters such as L.H. Cumberbatch (1850-1880) and, most famous of all Gerald Lascelles who served from 1880 to 1914 and then published a fascinating account of his term in office. In recent years, however, perhaps as part of some deliberate policy the turnover of Deputy Surveyors has been very rapid. The present Deputy Surveyor, Mr. David Perry, is the fifth in not much more than twenty years.

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