

New Forest Notes February 1993

Verderers views on the National Park

LAST of all the Forest bodies to respond to the government's proposals for the future was the Verderers' Court. Its observations were submitted early January after a series of agonising meetings in which it quickly became clear that anything like unanimity was out of the question. The result is a somewhat woolly document of the type which usually results from a committee authorship and which is quite inevitable when different parts of that committee are pulling in opposite directions.

Perhaps the most important element of the response is that the Verderers do not believe that statutory designation ought to be applied to the New Forest. Any national park type designation should be confined to the suburban fringe and other private lands within the 'heritage area boundary'. Since it presumably follows that any statutory powers given to the New Forest Committee will apply to the statutorily designated area, the Verderers' amendment of the government's proposals would, to this extent, meet the wishes of the Commoners and many Forest residents.

However, where the confused reasoning of the Court does begin to show itself is in the response to the New Forest Plan. The idea for such a plan is clearly modelled, in the minds of the government draughtsmen, on a standard type of national park plan, although there has been much official shuffling away from this starting point as the highly controversial nature of the proposal became apparent. Such a plan would, in the absence of statutory powers, depend upon influencing other agencies into following its prescriptions, but the power of influence should be by no means discounted.

Having in effect said that the New Forest Committee's sphere of influence should exclude the New Forest (or to be precise, the, so called Crown lands of the Forest) the Court then goes on with dubious logic to accept the imposition of a plan covering the whole Forest, including the fringe and other private lands. The Verderers qualify this by saying that the plan should be a strategy and budget plan only, co-ordinating the management plans of individual management institutions. Such words as "strategy" and "co-ordination" have been bandied about endlessly in the discussions of the national park proposals with, I suspect, none of us really knowing what they are supposed to mean. Those using these gloriously vague terms can then interpret them exactly as they please in due course.

The real objection to this all embracing New Forest plan is the government's express determination that all management agencies should reflect its dictates in carrying out their duties. Unless the new Act provides otherwise, the plan will not override the existing powers of the constituent bodies, but it could certainly be used to put pressure upon the politically weaker components of the forest community such as the Commoner and Verderers themselves.

Where do we go from here? It seems to be generally understood that the government will give some sort of response to the responses later this spring and that if it decides, to press ahead with the quasi-national park legislation will follow, probably in 1994. I suppose the responsible officials in Whitehall will have to decide whether the political benefits of doing something supposedly "green" will be worth the bitter local opposition which any revival of the consultation proposals would produce.

The New Mandate

Another document rather lacking in clarity has also emerged in the last few weeks. It is the revision of the Minister's Mandate. The Mandate was the record of concessions wrung from the Forestry Commission in 1971 as a result of the campaign against the elimination of broad-leaved trees from the New Forest. It was, after the Act of Parliament, the most important regulator of the way in which the woodlands were managed and it was reissued unamended in 1981. This time there are some subtle changes in the woodland prescriptions and these will call for careful study by those Forest bodies dedicated to the protection of broadleaf's - notably the New Forest Association and the Hampshire Field Club.

This revision of the Mandate does not confine itself to woodland matters. There are also some bland and contradictory statements on the Open Forest and tourist management, all of which might just as well have been left out. For example, the section dealing with the Open Forest says in effect, that it will be managed for the benefit of the common grazing and for the protection of scarce wildlife. Since one of the few points on which commoners and conservationists seem to agree is that the two objectives are largely irreconcilable the Open Forest provision of the Mandate seem rather pointless.

Lawn Maintenance

In a New Forest context this has very little to do with lawn sand, weedkillers and mowers. The lawns beloved of the Commoners are those tiny pockets of better quality soils found scattered about the Forest, often in the flood plains of streams. These areas support the best and sweetest of grasses. The Commoners maintain that the feed value of the lawn is out of all proportion to their size and that they really comprise the foundation stones on which New Forest grazing is based.

Unfortunately, grazing alone has not proved sufficient to keep them clear of invasive scrub which to the naturalist may have interest in its own right or as a home to birds and animals which colonise it. As a consequence, there is perpetual friction between the two interests and this came to a head just before Christmas. At a site meeting to consider clearance work on Dockens Water Lawn near Linwood, the English Nature representative allegedly refused to entertain any maintenance work whatsoever beyond the removal of Scots pine, to the exasperation of those Commoners attending. With, patience exhausted, the Commoners Defence Association has now asked the Verderers to arrange for a ministerial visit to the Forest to produce a judgement of Solomon on the competing claims to the lawns. The Commoners were well satisfied with such a visit some years ago in which the Agriculture and Environment Departments were involved and which resulted in several clearance programmes including Brinkenwood Lawn near Brockenhurst.

E.S.A. for the New Forest?

The recent launching of the Avon Valley E.S.A. (Environmentally Sensitive Area) has once again raised questions as to why, the New Forest should not have similar status. In fact, it is very difficult to see how either the Forest proper or the Commoners with their enclosed holdings could benefit from such a scheme. The Crown and other common lands already have near maximum protection from a conservation point of view. E.S.A. grants could certainly be given in respect of enclosed pasture, assuming that the appropriate authorities considered that enough of it was worthy of protection as interesting grassland. My own assessment is that most Commoners have for a long

time been fairly regular users of nitrogen and herbicides so that the amount of unimproved grassland remaining must be fairly small.

However, leaving this question aside, the payment offered in the Avon Valley is £105 per ha (£42 per acre) per annum and the very restrictive conditions on which it depends make it highly improbable that there would be much uptake in the New Forest. A Commoner with a good dry 2 acre paddock, taking in two riding ponies, could expect an income of £730 a year making the government grant of £105 seem puny. Some other income could be obtained within the conditions, but probably not enough to make the scheme attractive. The conditions lay down stocking densities, they regulate times of cutting, control supplementary feeding of livestock, ban inorganic fertilisers and limit numerous other elements of normal land management. In short, this is one of those government carrots held out to the agricultural donkey which has more show than substance.

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