

New Forest Notes – February 1996

Houses for Commoners

The disagreements surrounding the activities of the Commoners' Housing Trust show little sign of abating and, as a consequence, a potentially worthwhile scheme seems likely to end on the rocks. Back in 1990 the New Forest Commoners' Defence Association worked out a scheme with the planning officers under which commoners with a proved track record in New Forest farming would receive favourable consideration in the grant of planning permission for small dwellings in the Forest. The object was to ensure that the traditional farming practices of the Forest would be able to continue. It was recognised that without the grazing animals the heaths and woodlands would quickly become choked by scrub and that by far the most cost effective way of keeping the animals was to foster the traditional farming system. Since commoners could not afford to compete with rich incomers, they would have to be helped.

The Association was keenly aware of the dangers of abuse which could arise- from an ill thought out or administered scheme. It therefore recommended that applicants should be able to demonstrate payment of marking fees for a reasonable number of animals over a period of years. The planning authority appeared to regard this as a wise precaution. They were no doubt fed up with the blatant abuse of the "agricultural" permissions- which had been wrung from them by a variety of devious speculators in almost every Forest village.

In such cases the standard procedure is to buy a few acres and make a pretence of farming for a while. You erect a few buildings and then perhaps move in a caravan for on-the-spot "essential supervision" of livestock. You then maintain that a dwelling on the site is vital for proper husbandry, security and so on. Even if you cannot fool the local planners, with enough persistence you will probably succeed in securing an agricultural permission on appeal. If that permission is worth only perhaps half the value of an unfettered building plot, you can still hope to pocket a clear twenty or thirty thousand pounds profit, leaving it to your successor to bully through permission for a large house, two garages, the essential loose-boxes and perhaps removal of the tie altogether. Clearly any scheme for commoners had to avoid such abuse and in this lies the root of our present problems. My comments should not be interpreted as casting any reflection on commoning applications so far.

In order to bind the use of the new building to the exercise of common rights, special legal devices are necessary, although there seems a good deal of secrecy as to their precise nature. These devices required the intervention of a private trust to hold the freehold of the property and to judge the suitability of applicants. The Commoners' Housing Trust has decided not to adopt the criteria agreed between the Commoners' Defence Association and the planning officers. Apparently they regard the safeguards as too restrictive and they want to accept applicants who do not necessarily, have any experience of exercising common rights in the Forest. Whether or not they were wise to do this has been a matter of violent dispute over recent months.

There are two real problems to be overcome in managing a commoners' housing scheme and the present system does not seem to solve either. Firstly you must ensure that your applicant is and will remain a genuine commoner. Under the CDA plans you have a good chance as a record of commoning is an essential precondition of the grant of planning permission. The existence of the

Trust should prevent the quick profit collection of the agricultural condition exploiter, but a supposed commoners' dwelling granted to an outsider is still an attractive target for cunning persons. For example, by appearing to run a few animals on the Forest, secretly employing an agent for this purpose, you should be able to secure a lifetime's use of a comfortable smallholding in the Forest at a fraction of open market cost.

The second problem is the understandable fear of adjoining owners that a "grubby smallholding" is about to blight the surroundings of their half million pound houses, in an area which they had believed to have the highest degree of planning protection. Whether socially justifiable or not, this is a real concern to those involved and, if ignored, will certainly breed increased hostility to the scheme. There must be some control over the location of new dwellings. Perhaps applications through the Trust should be judged by the planners as though the land was not in the Green Belt, but otherwise subject to the usual constraints.

Pony Passports

Europe is apparently about to dictate that British horses should carry identity cards, or at least that their owners should do so on their behalf. The details of the scheme are still under discussion and whether it is a wise health precaution or another example of crazy foreign bureaucracy, depends upon one's view of the E.U. Male cattle over three months old are already subject to such infringement of their civil liberties, so I suppose this is just a logical progression from one species to another. For the New Forest however, it presents very serious problems. At first it seemed that the passports would have to be prepared by a vet at a cost including visit fee of not less than £25. In the case of a horse worth perhaps two thousand pounds, this would be no more than an irritation. Indeed, many animals which compete or visit shows already have similar documents to record equine flu injections. However, with small colt foals selling at Beaulieu Road for as little as £10, the Forest's problem needs no explanation. The latest thinking is that a representative of the Pony Society might be permitted to prepare the necessary papers, but this would not overcome the difficulties. Even at a reduced cost of five pounds, when taken together with auctioneers commission and carriage costs, the introduction of passports strikes at the root of Forest pony breeding. As one depressed commoner commented, one might just as well save money and have the foal shot on the holding. Strenuous efforts are now being made to obtain exemption for foals up to the end of the year of birth or even to exempt the Forest altogether from the rules.

A31 Vandalism

I attended a meeting last month at which a Minstead resident attacked the vandalism of the Department of Transport in wiping out much of the vegetation within the fenced reservation of the A31 road across the Forest. This tidy-minded piece of park keeping has done much to expose the road to the Forest and to eliminate what little protection the flourishing vegetation was able to give against the roar of motors. It is not the first time they have acted in this thoughtless manner and it will take years to repair the damage. No doubt there will be all sorts of excuses such as fire risk, litter accumulation and so on. In fact fires within the fenced road margins over the years have been remarkably few.

The Department of Transport is also, I presume, responsible for the New Forest's number one eye-sore in the wreck of the Tally Ho Restaurant at Stoney Cross. Whether this sorry ruin was acquired by the Department in advance of proposed road works or was simply blighted to the point where the owner abandoned it, I do not know. For years now it has disfigured the skyline of the highest part of the Forest. Its grounds seem to have become a dump for road waste. Altogether, the Department shows scant respect for the Forest. Perhaps here are two further problems which the New Forest Committee could usefully sort out while coordinating the activities of public authorities within the Forest.

Hardwood Fellings

Throughout The New Forest there is probably more timber marked for imminent felling than at any time for a generation past. Huge areas of oak are to be "thinned." The subsequent extraction will destroy grass rides throughout whole Inclosures. It is rumoured that the volume of oak and beech marked already significantly exceeds the stated targets in the Forestry Commission's own working plan. In one wood, South Bentley, oaks regarded as of international importance because of their age. Size and lichen flora are marked ready to be cut down. However, in this case, I am told that protests from the scientific community have succeeded in having the felling order rescinded. These trees, dating in some cases from the beginning of the eighteenth Century, are also of outstanding amenity importance.

In conifer areas it is already clear that some marking promises violation of the New Forest Act of 1877 which prohibits clear felling. Indeed, in Sloden, for example, such illegal cutting has already taken place. Altogether, these new twists of the commercial screw are causing serious concern to both conservation and amenity interests. The overall picture is difficult to ascertain in the absence of detailed lists of compartments to be treated, but there are distinct echoes of the policies which threatened to destroy the Forest's woodlands in the 1960s and which we all thought had been killed off by the Minister's Mandate of 1971. Moreover, the few old plantations which are nearing their two hundred year rotation now seem particularly vulnerable. Both the Hampshire Wildlife Trust and the New Forest Association have voiced concern at the apparent hardening of the Forestry Commission's commercial attitude at the very time when the conservation and landscape qualities of the Inclosures have never been better understood or more highly valued.

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