

## **New Forest Notes February 1998**

### **PREPARING FOR THE PARK BATTLE**

OVER the last few weeks, everyone concerned with the Forest has been busy dissecting the New Forest Committee's "national park" proposals and preparing for battle, for or against them. It is far too early to predict the outcome, but the next steps are easier to anticipate. Probably the Committee will consider the responses made to it, select those it considers most appropriate and then make representations to the government as to the powers it would like to have over the New Forest. The Countryside Commission, recreational pressure groups and others favouring a national park will add their voices to the Committees demands. Thereafter, I imagine, we could be faced with a Parliamentary Bill, more or less hostile. It looks like being a long hard fight.

Back in 1992, the Forest was solidly opposed to the national park proposals. The New Forest Pony Breeding and Cattle Society rejected them outright. The Commons Defence objected by an over whelming majority at a special general meeting. Even the New Forest Association was forced by its members to oppose statutory powers for the Committee when the plans came before the Association's AGM. The Verderers, then split up the middle as they remain today, wanted any statutory powers to be confined to land which did not comprise the New Forest.

So far this time, not everything has gone the Committees way. The New Forest Association's council, divided as usual on the issue, has decided that the park committee should have no powers over the commonable lands of the Forest. In other words, its activities should be confined to the private enclosed lands inside and immediately outside the Forest boundary or perambulation. Cutting through the jargon, this means that "the New Forest", as it is understood by the public at large, should be outside the control of the quasi national park authority. This somewhat peculiar solution (the best that that could be secured from a divided committee) has also been adopted by the Verderers. In the Court, opposition to any statutory powers at all was defeated by one vote. A national park committee which does not run its own park would fit comfortably into Alice's Wonderland. It is perhaps appropriate that the principle window of the New Forest Committee's office looks out over Alice's grave, fifty yards away in Lyndhurst churchyard.

The Pony Breeding Society, as staunch an opponent of the national park as ever, has come out firmly against the proposals and the Commons Defence has yet to decide. Interestingly enough, some of the minor local authorities who last time simply assumed that a national park must be a good thing, have this time begun to express reservations.

If the New Forest Association's line is followed, it will present the New Forest Committee with a considerable dilemma. It will either have to ignore the demands that it should have no power within the Forest, relying on the inevitable support of the big councils and outside pressure from recreation groups, or accept that it is to have no role in the management of the Forest. I cannot see it doing the latter. Being confined to tinkering with obscure planning matters in the suburban fringe between the Forest boundary and the so

called Heritage Area Boundary (a concept which very few people understand or ever will understand) is an unappealing prospect for any ambitious group of land managers. Dealing with recreational and planning opportunities and overseeing the running of the Forest itself is the real prize and no doubt what the Committee is after.

How such ambitions are to be thwarted further down the legislative line is an interesting question. In 1949, the Forest societies combined with the Verderers in a series of petitions against the New Forest Bill and perhaps that is again the way forward. However, we have some way to go before that stage is reached, and I am beginning to wonder how much stomach the government has for another bruising battle with a rural community. Farming, hunting, and land-owning interests have all had their toes rather badly crushed over the last few months. The national parking of an angry New Forest could just be one countryside contest more than the government wants at present.

### **Ogdens Purlieu**

Four years ago, Jude James published his valuable history of East Boldre which I referred to in these notes. The village, almost entirely made up of land encroached from the Forest, probably had had its origins as a dormitory area for labour in the shipbuilding industry on the Beaulieu River. If that was its purpose, the settlement probably dates from the early eighteenth century.

Throughout the remainder of the Forest there are similar but smaller encroachment settlements, portions of which fell into decline and reverted to the heathland from which they had once been reclaimed. Such sites were usually undocumented and are extremely difficult to date. For this reason, an excavation undertaken by the New Forest section of the Hampshire Field Club last summer was particularly important. The report issued this month, gives the first archaeological dating evidence for one of these "Forest edge" abandoned encroachments.

In the north west of the Forest is a remote area of heathland surrounding Linwood and once known as Ogdens Purlieu. The name is still applied to a portion of heath on the edge of Ibsley Common. Until 1802, the soil of Ogdens Purlieu was claimed by the lord of the manor of Linwood, but an arbitration in that year awarded it to the Crown. Evidence produced to the tribunal by the claimant showed that the owner of Linwood was granting leases of portions of waste (to be enclosed) during the first half of the eighteenth century, but it was evidently insufficient to convince the arbitrators and the case went against him. Most of the land taken in seems to have remained enclosed, but on the east side of the Purlieu, near Hasley Inclosure, is a small abandoned paddock or pound. This was the subject of the excavation. True to the form of most archaeological work in the New Forest, it was hardly spectacular or likely to appeal to the devotees of television's "Time Team". It did, however, produce a few scraps of pottery dated to the first of the eighteenth century, thus exactly tying in with the recorded expansion of Linwood. Why the site was later abandoned remains a mystery. Its remote and exposed location, together with its poor soil may at least be part of the reason.

A full record of the work at Ogdens Purlieu appears in the New Forest sections report for 1997 which is about to be published.

### **More Cycle Pressure**

The almost invariable justification for heaping yet more recreational pressure onto the New Forest is something along the lines of "we only want a little bit of land and the Forest is large". Individually unexceptional, these "little bits" accumulate over time into a damaging and overwhelming whole. Managers and authorities who ought to know better are taken in by this plea over and over again. Last month the Verderers Court saw a classic example of this. Someone (it is not entirely clear who) has devised a road cycle route to run through the New Forest, without consulting the Verderers, or, it seems, even the Forestry Commission. What is clear is that the route is sponsored by a large national bakery and backed by Hampshire County Council who certainly ought to have been aware of the intolerable pressures on the Forest. Not a bit of it! Former council leader Mike Hancock, the publicity leaflets states, "looked forward to the National Byway bringing the same benefits (and I assumed the same pressures) as the Tour de France's visit in July 1994". Of course the route will "only" affect a corner of the Forest, only the residents of Godshill and Woodgreen are likely to be inconvenienced, only one area of the Forest will be subjected to more intense picnicking, deviation onto Forest tracks and the use of the bushes of lavatories. That evidently did not matter to Councillor Hancock who confidently predicted "the National Byway will help attract visitors from all around the country as well as from abroad". It will of course, be Councillor Hancock's late authority (Hampshire county Council) which will control the New Forest if a national park is successfully established.

The Verderers, in a rather spineless response, threw up the opportunity of demanding a change in the route to avoid the Forest and agreed to the erection of signs through Godshill and Woodgreen. In mitigation, it has to be said that the signs were accepted under threat that the County Council would probably paint them on the road to evade the Verderers jurisdiction if the Court did not consent. So much for talk of conserving the New Forest. Where sport and recreation conflicts with the peace of the countryside, conservation and the convenience of residents, the Forest does not stand a chance.