

NEW FOREST NOTES - JANUARY 2000

Grim Secrets of Newlands Plantation

After a good many years of pursuing various New Forest problems, ranging from blocked ditches to controversial felling programmes, there are only a few corners of the woods and heaths which I have not visited. One of those rare neglected spots was Newlands Plantation (near Ringwood) which I explored for the first time last month. It is perhaps not strictly accurate to call Newlands part of the New Forest, although its integration into the Forest is the ultimate intention of both its new owner and its lessee, the Forestry Commission.

Newlands belonged to Lord Normanton's estate until last summer, and it is almost surrounded by common land. It is leased to the Forestry Commission who, about 1964, planted most of it with conifers after deep ploughing those parts which were not too steep or boggy. Shooting rights over the land were let (the tenancy continues), and the plantation is decorated with notices warning the public to keep out. As a law-abiding citizen, I have always done so, although to judge from the rubbish which litters the wood, the visiting public has no such scruples. Litter always shows up in winter, but this is certainly one of the dirtiest bits of Forest I have encountered.

When the National Trust purchased parts of Rockford and Ibsley Commons earlier this year, they also acquired the freehold of Newlands. An archaeological and landscape assessment of the area being undertaken for the Trust by the Hampshire Field Club accounted for my presence in the wood during December. At the moment the plantation is a forbidding place, littered with forestry debris, blown-down trees, deep dangerous drainage cuttings and even worse hazards. Plans for its future are more encouraging. The elevated northern portions against Ibsley Common are to be cleared of trees and restored to heathland. The boggy areas are to be subjected to "mire restoration" and the streamside corridor surrounding Dockens Water is to be weeded of conifers and opened up. The remaining woodland bordering the road to Linwood will be retained under broadleaves. I presume that at some stage it will be opened to the public and to grazing, but it is in no fit state for either at present, even if such plans could be reconciled with the shooting interests.

The plantation has a long and fascinating history which is only now being unravelled, but its more recent past contained some unpleasant surprises. Newlands is just to the east of the former Ibsley Aerodrome. Sid Deedman's extremely useful little book on the airfield's history ("RAF Ibsley 1941 - 1947. Part 1"), covers some of the military installations which were located in the wood. One of these comprised an army camp which was later taken over for use by black American airmen, because strict segregation from the whites was then considered necessary. If the black airmen were connoisseurs of landscape, they could hardly have asked for a more delightful setting, surrounded as the camp was by the Forest, but I doubt if aesthetic considerations were uppermost in their minds. They probably regarded living in Newlands as banishment to the wilderness.

In the course of unravelling the overgrown hut sites from the earlier archaeology of the plantation, I made a gruesome discovery. Near to Dockens Water I came across (or more precisely, almost fell into) what at first sight appeared to be a beautifully constructed open-jointed brick well. Its upper courses were corbled inwards to restrict its mouth to a width of no more than two or three feet. Closer inspection showed that it was in fact a cesspool, now dry, with filter drains discharging towards the stream. It had evidently served the American camp. In the gloomy depths, about eight feet down, there were bones projecting from the silt - the skeleton of a Forest pony, neatly curved around the wall of the chamber. Its end must have been quite appalling. Inevitably torn by the jagged brickwork of the narrow mouth as it fell, it must then have starved to death in the semi-darkness, invisible to the world above. By the time these notes appear, I trust that Forestry Commission machinery will have collapsed the chamber on top of these sad remains, removing future danger to man and beast.

The cesspool is not the only death-trap which Newlands contains. Elsewhere I found an open septic tank six feet deep and a series of flooded concrete gun pits. Altogether the Forestry Commission and the National Trust have a big task ahead of them if the place is to be cleaned up and made safe in preparation for grazing of restored heathland.

Wrecking of Forest Rides

I have been very encouraged by the statements of the Forestry Commission's Design Forum chairman, Mr. Rod Leslie, on the subject of tracks ruined by forestry activity. On two occasions now he has told the Forum that he receives more complaints on this subject than on any other and from right across his region. The Commission, he says, must make improvements. I have not sensed any dissent from these views among the local (New Forest) officers present, but there is no sign of the chairman's comforting words being translated into action here. Indeed, in some respects, things continue to get worse.

Back in the winter of 1997/8, the Commission ruined nearly every ride in Islands Thorns Inclosure. The damage was indescribable, including destruction of the fragile soil structures with their gravel lenses which made the clay tracks useable by pedestrians and riders at all times of year. Eventually clay was thrown back into the huge ruts and roughly levelled over part of the track network. At the time it was pointed out to the Commission that this was perfectly useless and that the tracks (now pure clay) would not recover sufficient strength for even light use. The passage of time has fully endorsed this prediction. In addition, a large part of the network received not even superficial treatment and the ruts remain to this day - despite the promises. On top of all this, the so-called restoration is now again being churned up by tractors in pursuit of a few loads of firewood during the wettest part of the year.

In an adjoining inclosure, Pitts Wood, dreadful damage is being caused by extraction - again at the worst time of year and again partly over tracks "restored" within the last few years. It really is time for some action by the Forestry Commission: comforting words will no longer do.

Commoners and the National Park

The members of the New Forest Commoners Defence Association left no doubt about their opposition to making the Forest a national park, when the matter was considered by a special general meeting called by a group of commoners led by Mr. Ralph Hayward. One hundred and seventy five voted against the park and twenty eight in favour. The Association now has to demonstrate its ability as a campaigning organisation - something which it has not had to do for many years. It is one thing to manage an effective complaints service about broken bridges or defective drains, but quite another to run opposition to a major threat such as the national park. A meeting to decide on strategy has been fixed for later this month.

One of the many reassuring statements issued by the pro-parkers is that the handing over of management of the Forest to a park authority will not affect the operation of the New Forest Acts. I am inclined to think that the political strength of the park will in any case render the Acts virtually worthless, whatever their nominal force. However, others cling to the belief that they could still be used to curb park ambitions, so it is now necessary to look in detail at the letter of the law. There are significant doubts (I put it no stronger than that) that the pro-park reassurance does not stand up to examination. The technicalities are considerable, but there seems at least the possibility that a national park authority would be able to circumvent much of the hard-won protection given to the Forest by the New Forest Act of 1970. That Act ensures that the Verderers have a veto over recreational development within the Forest. I understand that Dr. Julian Lewis has put a number of questions to the government which, if they get a straight answer, should clarify the situation. I also, at the beginning of last month, asked much the same questions of the Countryside Agency through the New Forest Committee. However, the latter has declined to deal with the matter, despite showing every sign of being, effectively, the Agency's local agents. We must therefore await the response to Dr. Lewis. Admittedly the subject is a complicated one, but the Countryside Agency seems better at honeyed generalities than giving clear answers to specific questions. If they believe that the Forest will be able to withstand park developments, they should explain why and if their explanation is satisfactory at least one point of dispute will be reduced.

Life III

The Verderers are making a further application for European funding of the pony premium scheme. This falls under the curiously named "Life III" project - French acronym for "Financial Instrument of the Environment". The Life II Project is now nearing completion and has proved something of a mixed blessing. For a start, conditions of the grant require that any money given must be matched locally. This automatically rules out many worthy schemes (such as renovation of Beaulieu Road saleyard) where such local funds are not apparently forthcoming. Secondly, while a lot of very good work has been done, including rhododendron clearance, some land purchase by the National Trust and, of course, the

payment of pony premiums, there have also been problems. Very large amounts of public money washing about in the system can do harm as well as good. The Commoners have been a good deal less than happy with the so-called "mire restoration" (otherwise drainage obstruction) programme which no doubt has excellent conservation objectives, but which has threatened important grazing areas, damaged crossings and created some significant dangers to stock. There is also a nasty rash of signs appearing in the Forest which is required advertising of the Life Project under the guise of interpretation. Now, with seven million pounds reputed to be the target of Life III (including local funding) the opportunities for what some would see as hair-brained schemes are even greater. My own concern is that under Life II the Verderers were deemed to have approved details of programmes of other participants, or so it was claimed. They are now going into phase three without any clear report on the precise programmes of these others. Vague statements approving the principle while reserving judgement on the detail will probably not get the Court off the hook in three years time when someone is doing something disagreeable in the Forest. Still, the lure of premium money is irresistible.

For those interested in the Life Project, it is the latest Forest institution to acquire its own website - www.geocities.com/newforestlife.

Anthony Pasmore.

From A.H.Pasmore, Hatchet Gate Farm, Hale. (01725) 511298.