

NEW FOREST NOTES JANUARY 2006

The Bolderwood Honeypot

The term "honeypot" is one of the less obscure pieces of tourist-management jargon which is in every-day use in the Forest. It means a recreation site which has become, because of its particular attractions, a magnet for visitors. They visit it like bees visiting a honeypot. The facilities at Bolderwood comprise such a site, if of second rank to such favourites as Balmer Lawn or Boltons Bench, but it is a site with a peculiar history and some questionable management.

Last summer the Verderers approved policies setting out how they would reach decisions on management matters. One important section related to signs on the Forest. It was stated that signs would only be approved where they are necessary for safety or essential information. The visual impact of signs should be no more than is necessary for the signs to be comprehended and the design, materials, colours and location should be sympathetic to the landscape of the Forest. It is a good and long overdue policy, but one which has been ignored by the Court (or so it must appear) in almost the first test since the policy was adopted. Two huge signs, fully six feet by three feet, have recently appeared at Bolderwood bearing a single letter "i" (information), on the quietest roads in the Forest. Their size would, I imagine, easily meet motorway standards for such signage. They direct the public to a newly-arrived timber-clad metal container with a chimney sticking out of the roof, from which Forestry Commission staff interacts with visitors to the honeypot.

How the Verderers could be so appallingly dismissive of their own policies is, at first sight, a mystery. In fact the answer is simple: they have not been dismissive at all. This is a case in which the Forestry Commission has chosen to exploit a loophole which enables it to bypass the jurisdiction of the Court in certain restricted geographical locations – one of which is Bolderwood. There would certainly have been no question of such signs being erected if they had been required to pass through the filter of the Verderers' Court.

Bolderwood Grounds has a frontage to the Bolderwood road out of Lyndhurst of about half a mile and belongs to a restricted category of land in the New Forest known as "Crown Freehold". Such lands are not subject to common rights, despite being the property of the minister who owns the Forest and they are not part of the statutory inclosures. They are thus outside the jurisdiction of the Verderers and upon them the Forestry Commission may do as it pleases, subject to planning constraints (if any). It is this status which has allowed the giant signs to appear. Moreover, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that, appearing as they did immediately following the adoption of the Verderers' policies, they are intended not merely to direct visitors, but to make a political point.

This particular piece of Crown Freehold was once an imposing royal estate with a palace, avenues, ornamental gardens, lakes, an ice house, ha-has and other landscape features. At the end of the 18th Century it was for a time held by Prince William Frederick, great grandson of George II, but the palace was demolished in the 1830s and the ornamental

grounds vanished under a timber plantation. Its northern edge now comprises the honeypot which the Forestry Commission seems intent on developing. I do not know if the planning authority approved the signs and the information container, or even if there was any necessity for them to do so. If they did, they are complicit in this further piece of damage to the Forest.

How Bolderwood came to be established as a tourist destination in the first place is rather curious. It could scarcely be a worse-chosen site for this purpose – attracting traffic through Lyndhurst to the very heart of the Forest along otherwise quiet lanes. With a little thought, exactly comparable facilities could have been provided on the Forest's eastern fringe, to the greater convenience of all concerned. It all started with potato-feeding of deer in the fields surrounding Bolderwood Lodge. Visitors found that they could watch tame animals without the bother of walking in search of "real wildlife", so a car park was built. The Commission added a "tourist trail". The opportunity for commercial exploitation was not to be missed and the ice cream van arrived. Then, of course, the lavatory block followed. A platform from which to view the deer was added, together with a scattering of seats, information signs etc. Finally the information container arrived, complete with its motorway signs. In the 1970s, the Commission had tried to boost the use of the area still further with proposals for a series of satellite car parks, but these fell outside the exempt zone of Bolderwood Grounds and the Verderers were able to block them.

All in all, Bolderwood is a very good example of how recreation facilities are provided where, when and to the extent demanded, rather than being carefully thought out in advance and located where they will not only meet the needs of visitors, but cause as little damage as possible.

What the visitors say

Some years ago I recorded in these notes the discomfiture of one of the agisters who, having received a complaint from a lady visitor that there were "bulls on the Forest", tried gently to explain to her that they were in fact harmless cows. The lady would have none of it. "Of course they're bulls: they've got horns!"

Last autumn a party of visitors was overheard discussing a group of piglets rooting beside the road. One of them, who evidently claimed a superior knowledge of Forest stock management, pointed to the rings in the piglets' snouts and informed his companions: "That's what they lead them about by".

Perhaps neither of these quotations quite matches an Isle of Wight example (of no New Forest relevance) which I overheard myself in the 1970s when visiting Osborne House. Two ladies from a Midlands coach party were examining the portraits of Indian dignitaries which lined a passage. After some moments silent study, one lady said to the other: "I suppose we're quite close to India here . . ."

Fuelwood complexities

In the days before health and safety and chain saw certificates, I used to buy much of my firewood from the local Forest keeper, but bureaucracy and high prices now compel me to rely on home-grown supplies. There is, however, a fortunate group of householders in the

Forest which is entitled to a free supply of firewood provided by the Forestry Commission under the common right of estovers attached to about one hundred houses. The firewood is provided in “cords” – stacks measuring 8’ x 4’ x 4’ – neatly laid out by the Commission beside the gravel roads for the recipients to collect. Most receive only a single cord, but a few are entitled to much more. It is one of those ancient traditions of the Forest which the Commission would prefer to forget, but it is highly prized by the right-holders.

As a matter of convenience to the Commission, the practice has arisen of providing this fuelwood from the lop and top of hardwood thinnings within the Inclosures, since that is effectively the only hardwood cutting now going on in the New Forest. This procedure, however, would appear to be illegal because the Register of Claims (the bible of all such matters) specifically requires that the fuel should come from the “open and unenclosed parts of the Forest by the view and allowance of the Foresters”. It is true that a later Act (1877) qualified this by saying that fuel requirements must be met without sacrifice of ornamental timber, but that hardly overrides the original restriction. The Ancient Ornamental woods are filled with naturally fallen timber comprising an immense store of potential firewood, the clearance of which would certainly not involve the banned sacrifice.

I don’t suppose this would matter to the recipients of the firewood one way or the other, but for the fact that the commoners complain bitterly (and justly) that the tracks in the A&O woods are in an appalling state – sometimes blocked from end to end by fallen trees. If the Commission was required to meet its fuelwood obligations from the Open Forest, there might be less reluctance to see the blockages cleared. Providing beetle food in the form of rotten wood is no doubt highly desirable, but it should not be at the expense of reasonable movement about the Forest for those who must manage stock.

Forest logos

Convention now requires that everyone must have a logo and the Forest is no exception. Perhaps here the Verderers led the field with (from 1877) the dignified crown and stirrup. That was updated in the 1970s with a decorative surround prepared by the late Jean Cobb and still in use today. The logo used by the Forestry Commission is probably the most instantly recognisable – a pair of trees, one conifer and the other broadleaf, but that is not specific to the Forest. The rather awful and terribly expensive disjointed pony heads beloved of the New Forest Committee is fortunately no longer with us, although surviving as an historical curiosity on some signposts and still adhering to the Consultative Panel notepaper. I suppose it did at least have the merit of being distinctive and that is the problem with the design chosen by its successor. How many pony-and-oaktree combinations there are in the New Forest, I don’t know, but probably a lot more than I have identified. Bartley Primary School has one (pony to the right) and the New Forest Museum Trading Company has the

same (pony right and deer left). Now we have the park with almost a copy (fat pony left and Grade 3 right). There is not a cow in sight. It is all very confusing and probably the whole lot will die of acorn poisoning in any case.

Anthony Pasmore