

NEW FOREST NOTES JANUARY 2007

A 31 road: CPRE hears no evil

Perhaps the best piece of work done by the New Forest Committee in its short life was to arrange for, on behalf of the Countryside Commission, a study of noise and disturbance within the Forest – the so-called Tranquil Areas report of 1996. It was an assessment which covered traffic noise, recreational disturbance, degradation of the landscape, aircraft intrusion etc and rolled the results up into a single judgement of quality. The map which the consultants produced was a fairly obvious record of what those who knew the Forest well were already aware of, but for the first time it was on paper with the authoritative stamp of scientific preparation. It was thus made available to those people who now largely control the Forest's destiny, some of whom seldom put on Wellington boots and who have no idea what lies beyond the view from the car windscreen. The consultants graded the Forest land into four colours and white areas. Blue showed the tranquil areas. They were very few in number and limited largely to parts of the Beaulieu Estate and to an area around Linwood. Increasing degrees of disturbance were then indicated by green, grey and yellow colouring. Highly disturbed zones were left white and by far the worst of these was a huge strip from Cadnam to Ringwood centred on the A 31.

I often find scientific reports difficult to understand, but this one was clear beyond doubt and accorded very well with the common-sense view of those who knew the Forest. It demonstrated the pressing need, successfully ignored by those in authority for the last decade, of doing something about the A 31.

Towards the end of last year, the CPRE published a set of maps showing the relative tranquillity of land across the entire country and that, of course, included the New Forest. The result was quite extraordinary. The noise and visually degraded swathe across the Forest which marks the line of the A 31 was omitted altogether and classified as tranquil – more peaceful in fact than remote parts of Ocknell Plain or the depths of Roe Inclosure. The CPRE is asking the government to use the same methodology in planning processes and if they are successful, areas such as the New Forest will be seriously threatened. Even allowing for all sorts of little variations in interpretation, plotting, criteria for disturbance and so on, the report is impossible to understand so far as the New Forest is concerned.

That assertion from someone with no training in noise measurement may seem presumptuous, but I make no apology because the claimed shortcomings of the CPRE's work were drawn to my attention by a local scientist, Peter Facey. After careful study of the report, he first of all challenged the CPRE direct and eventually got a blunt response that their "results stand and we stand by them". Mr.Facey now lives near Winchester, but was formerly a New Forest resident. He has an honours degree in physics from Brasenose College, Oxford. He worked for ten years at the Department of Electrical Engineering Science at the University of Essex and then as technical director of a software house in the City. He has made a special study of noise in the New Forest.

Peter Facey's report is available to everyone on his website: www.brisk.org.uk/cpre. Here you can see the CPRE maps and a careful analysis of why they are so defective. It is to be hoped that his campaign will be successful in getting withdrawn a map which is not only diametrically opposed to the Tranquil Areas report, but is potentially extremely damaging to the future planning and protection of the New Forest.

The Park and the Archaeologist

I am told that the National Park now has its own in-house archaeologist in the shape of Mr. Frank Green. This gentleman has a wide experience of planning, archaeological and historical work in the Romsey area. I don't think that the exact nature of his duties has yet been published, but presumably they will include advising on planning applications for work to listed buildings and buildings in conservation areas. There are supposed to be about six hundred listed buildings in the Forest area and I don't know what percentage of owners seek to alter them each year, but perhaps 3% might not be an excessive estimate. I imagine there will also be duties in connection with the preparation of planning policies and education. However, the New Forest is a tiny park with (by, say, Dartmoor standards) relatively few antiquities. There should therefore be plenty of time for research and exactly where this will be concentrated is an important question. The obvious target, the Forest itself, is probably not the area in most need of attention. It is the suburban fringe of paddocks, housing, playing fields and so on which has received very little work in the past and where records are sparse and sometimes inaccurate. By contrast, on the commonable lands of the Forest, quite a lot of fieldwork has been undertaken over the last half century and, while the job is far from finished, the records are reasonably complete and up-to-date. In the fringe, those farmers who participate in Environmental Stewardship Schemes can now secure points (worth extra money) for archaeological features on their lands and for their protection. Thus what might otherwise have been regarded as an annoying interference in private property, could now be welcomed, at least by the minority of landowners who subscribe to the schemes.

Special qualities of the New Forest

In the latest bundle of National Park papers, thoughtfully distributed by the Verderers' Clerk to members of the Court in time for Christmas, is a document entitled "Consultation on the Special Qualities of the New Forest". As Park paper consumption goes, this is a fairly modest wad of sixteen pages, although the Court was told that there is also a "book" available to enthusiasts. The Park is seeking public comments to assist in the preparation of "The National Park Vision and Management Plan", "The Local Development Framework", communication, educational and interpretation plans, ongoing work programmes in the Forest and future monitoring of the health and condition of the Park. There are clearly many good things still in store for report-starved Verderers and the public.

The bulk of the document consists of tables of identified "qualities", together with their significance and the degree to which they are threatened or, in the Park's view, need improving. It is a bewildering collection ranging from such concrete examples as ancient trees and corrugated iron churches to more abstract concepts such as the Forest having a "strong

but gentle spirit” - which I have yet to encounter. There is also the intriguing inclusion of New Forest ponies as a food source. Now there’s a marketing opportunity: “Park Brand Pony Burgers – for that authentic taste of sustainability” !

Altogether it is a brave if rather disjointed attempt to describe the New Forest in tabular form, but it contains a fundamental weakness which I fear the Park will neither acknowledge nor correct, because it is politically inexpedient to do so.

Huge emphasis is (rightly) placed upon the unspoilt character of the commonable lands of the Forest, its wilderness, peace, landscape and so on, but why it still possesses these qualities or rather characteristics, is ignored. It is largely due to a fierce control of piecemeal development by the Verderers Court during the post-war years. That control has sometimes been branded selfish, old fashioned, undemocratic and nimby – but it is the chief reason why the Forest is still relatively unspoilt. Again and again the Forestry Commission has applied for more trails, car parks, interpretation boards, picnic furniture, camping facilities, sculptures and recreation events – only to be rebuffed by the Court. Without that control the Forest would be a jumble of inappropriate development and disturbance, made up not of great projects, but of hundreds of ugly or intrusive pin-pricks. It is a jumble which the Park’s corporate plan now seems intent upon promoting, just as the Commission has done in the past, in opposition to the Court and despite the evidently good intentions of the Special Qualities list.

Graffiti

I seldom go to London, but when I do I am horrified by the disfigurement of every bridge, utility kiosk and building visible from the railway, by the hideous daubings of mindless hooligans. Now this cancer is spreading even into the New Forest. How many of our railway bridges are already affected, I do not know, but a horrible mess has been made of the underpass north of Beaulieu Road Station for example. Similarly, the targets on the Long Bottom range were defiled a few years ago. This is something which the Forestry Commission must stamp on hard at an early stage and, if funds for cleaning are not available (as I am sure we shall be told), no doubt the National Park will be able and willing to provide them. If the damage is allowed to remain, we will certainly see it spread through the camp sites and perhaps even to the beech tree trunks whose canvas-smooth bark must make them a tempting target.

Acorn deaths and the pannage extension

At the Verderers’ Court in November an extension of the autumn pannage season was announced, allowing pigs to remain on the Forest until December 31st . By now all pigs should have disappeared except for those breeding sows permitted to remain by special permission of the Deputy Surveyor. They are said to be exercising the “breeding sows’ privilege”. Up to the end of November, the number of ponies and cattle killed by acorn poisoning was estimated by the agisters at 43, but such figures are necessarily approximate. Owners may remove poisoned animals before they die and there is then no obligation to report subsequent deaths on the holding. Further stock will have died after the end of

November and, in some parts of the Forest at least, deaths will continue for weeks yet. In my own area in the north of the Forest, nearly all the acorns seem to have been consumed and my cattle show no interest in missing their breakfast (as they often did last year) for the sake of dubious rewards in raiding the nearby woods for acorns. All in all, the Forest has probably got off fairly lightly considering the weight of the acorn crop in 2006. I can remember some years when the death toll has topped one hundred. The total number of pigs turned out was about 600.

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