

NEW FOREST NOTES JANUARY 2008

The Park's gamble over aircraft noise

The National Park is entirely right to resist the growth of aircraft noise over the New Forest. It is an audible blight second only to the racket from the A 31 road which, on a still frosty morning just before Christmas was intrusive even two miles to the north in Sloden Inclosure. On the other hand, the Park's line of attack looks to me as though it is a very shaky one. As I understand it, they are seeking a judicial review of the Christchurch planners' decision to allow a further development of Hurn airport. The basis of the Park's application is that the planners have failed to pay proper regard to national park purposes, as required by the Environment Act 1995, in reaching their decision to allow expansion. The planners for their part deny this and unless they have been extraordinarily stupid in the way in which they made their decision, it could be an uphill task for the Park to demonstrate such a failure. The Act does not tell adjoining local authorities to put the welfare of national parks above other considerations. It simply requires that regard must be had to park purposes when making decisions which will affect a park. A few ostentatious consultative meetings, some technical assessments and a wad of glossy reports would seem to fit the requirements and allow the developing authority to go ahead with exactly what it intended in the first place. "The authority has given the most careful and detailed consideration to the effects of its plans on Park X and, while it regrets the small injury which will inevitably result, has concluded that the economic well-being of town Y, together with the overriding national interest must, in this case, take precedence." There are distinct echoes of that well-known Lyndhurst bypass slogan: "People before ponies and trees".

I see this dilemma from the opposite end of the spectrum from Christchurch council. The Verderers' core business is protecting the Forest and not damaging it with development. Nevertheless, the Court is careful to have regard to national park purposes as required by the Act, because it does not want its decisions to protect the Forest challenged by those who seek park-related development. Still, I am not sure that "having regard" has ever actually altered the outcome of a debate. It is all a question of covering one's back and I would be surprised if Christchurch council has failed to do so.

Even if the Park should be successful in a judicial review, what will it achieve? The issue would presumably be referred back to Christchurch who would make a better job the next time round. If, by some miracle, the decision is forced onto the government, they are unlikely to allow a little matter like the New Forest Park to spoil those juicy electoral cherries of jobs for the people, economic growth and above all more and cheaper holiday flights.

The problem for South Efford House is that the New Forest National Park is and always was a mere conservation illusion. In Mr. Prescott's words, it was Labour's present to the nation on the occasion of his party's 100th birthday. It was designed to earn green points for the government at little cost and irrespective of its adverse consequences for the Forest. It was certainly not intended to act as a block on growth and profit in the surrounding areas –

Dibden Bay notwithstanding. The park authority is accordingly going to war in a dummy tank which was not designed or built for real combat. The ultimate outcome seems almost inevitable, although I should be delighted to be proved wrong. Unfortunately, when the tank is driven back across the border, with its commanders badly bruised, it may be turned with greater effect on all that is left to the Park – licking the locals into shape and promoting its own brands of development.

As to the tens of thousands of pounds involved in seeking a judicial review. That is a miniscule sum in the huge budget of the Park and I would certainly not begrudge its expenditure. Just occasionally gambles do pay off and at least the cause is worthy, even if the chances are poor.

Arrows from the past

Back in the 1950s faint traces of carved axes and a dagger were discovered at Stonehenge – traces that had eluded generations of earlier visitors. Now something very similar has occurred in the New Forest within the Ancient Ornamental Woods. I thought I knew these woods quite well, after half a century of walking and riding through them and photographing their beautiful trees, but I (and I imagine nearly everyone else) had missed a remarkable characteristic of the ancient beeches. Very large numbers of them, particularly of the straight-stemmed maiden beeches, carry government broad arrows, deeply inscribed in their bark. The discovery was made by Chris Read and is the subject of a paper by him which is about to be published by the Hampshire Field Club. For some years he has been studying tree carvings in the Forest. They are an odious form of vandalism which is, however, given some dignity by age. The arrows came to light during the course of this work. I must say that when they were first pointed out to me I was inclined to suspect random damage or hacking by children, but the pattern is so widespread and often so remote from tourist areas that there can be no doubt about its origin. These trees must have been marked by the Forest authorities and very probably represent their allocation for Navy timber. No doubt oaks were similarly marked, but due to the different nature of the bark, arrows on these trees would quickly disappear. The next question is how old are the marks? In general Chris Read thinks that they have survived on relatively slow-growing woodland trees which may often be much older than their physical size may suggest. It is highly improbable that they are any later than 1870 (when felling in the A&O ceased) and very likely that they are significantly older than 1851 when the administration of the Forest was overhauled. Indeed, Chris thinks that some marks may be of 18th Century date. There is certainly some documentary evidence, in a commission of enquiry of 1801, that this form of marking was in use at the period.

The arrows tend to be at a height of about three or four feet from the ground and are often distorted as the girth of the tree has expanded. Their points are invariably upwards and it is not uncommon to find several such marks on the same tree, presumably indicating different periods of marking. Arrows have been recorded in all parts of the Forest, but are most numerous in the great central block of woodland with a concentration in the Millyford to Bolderford area and another in the Ashurst, Lyndhurst and Cadnam triangle.

Lottery problems

The plans for a Forest-wide application for lottery funding seem to be going through a rough patch. Not only is there a widespread view that worthwhile schemes such as those proposed for the Forest have little chance against the insatiable appetite for lottery cash demonstrated by the Olympic Games, but there are local difficulties as well. At the recent Commoners' Defence Association meeting at Bramshaw, a good deal of dissatisfaction was expressed over the apparent lack of support for the Association's plans. Various cherished projects apparently did not qualify for funding. Moreover, the subject of matched funding (whereby the applicant has to supply 50% of the intended expenditure) had been rather glossed-over in the early stages and money to meet this commitment now seems very scarce indeed.

Early in January there is to be a meeting of the managing committee of the lottery bid in an effort to solve the Commoners' Defence problems and to keep the commoners from turning their backs on the process altogether. That, unfortunately, is not the full extent of the difficulties. Other bodies which are supposed to be contributing elements of the bid are also experiencing problems with both the matched funding and with the dreadfully complex paperwork and estimating process. Several meetings of the committee have already had to be cancelled as a consequence and it looks likely that some excellent schemes will disappear from the bid because no-one is able to devote the time and finance necessary to push them forward. Only the giant stream-filling and bog restoration objectives of the Forestry Commission seem exempt. It is likely that by the end of this month we will have a better idea of where the bid is going, but it would not greatly surprise me if the whole scheme collapses.

Christmas damage

It is a longstanding tradition that holly is cut on the Open Forest in the weeks running up to Christmas. It is sold "on the bush" to contractors who cut and remove it for sale to the public. Unfortunately the supervision of these contracts is poor. This year the contractors seem to have been driving about all over the Open Forest in wet conditions and making a considerable mess. Barrier gates all across the north of the Forest at least have been left open, presumably because the pick-up drivers find it inconvenient to open and relock the padlocks and there is no-one prepared to chase them up. This is not the first year that holly sales have produced such problems. Damage and litter (binder twine) left about have been the source of repeated complaints. It really is about time that the Forestry Commission provided adequate policing of its contracts or else suspended holly sales altogether.

The Minister's Mandate

This year (2008), the Minister's Mandate is due for renewal. It is the document which regulates how the Forestry Commission undertakes much of its work in the New Forest and in particular the management of the beautiful mature oak and beech woodland. The Mandate was first issued at the time of the great felling controversy of 1969-71 and has since been regarded as a sort of charter ensuring that never again will the Forestry Commission be able to launch an assault on the broadleaved trees of the Inclosures and Open Forest. Now, I am

told, the Commission has suggested that the need for such a charter no longer exists. Bearing in mind the propensity for history to repeat itself in the New Forest, I trust that this is a suggestion which will not commend itself to the various conservation and amenity bodies who fought so hard to secure the original Mandate less than forty years ago.

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