

New Forest Notes – January 1997

Year of the report

"It is important to accept that sometimes there is a mistaken belief that a study or a policy or a plan is an end in itself - a glossy, well illustrated report, beautifully produced has never in itself achieved anything". These recent words of Michael Hawkins, chairman, of the Exmoor Society (a distinguished, retired, planner) teach a lesson which most of the New Forest's authorities seem determined not to learn,. The spate of report production here seemed to have got quite out of control in 1996. I am sure I missed some lesser New Forest reports during the year, but the total accumulation on my bookshelves by mid-December amounted to well over three hundred pages.

To be brutally frank, the greater part of this heap was as much dead wood from the moment of its issue as the pulp consumed in the paper on which it was printed. True, there are occasional gems embedded in this dross (the "Tranquil Areas" report was a good example), but most of it will probably never even be read - let alone result in anything which might benefit the Forest.

I am told, for example, that my 1996 collection is not yet complete. We, may expect a final exciting contribution in the form of a report commissioned by the New Forest Committee. It will deal with the archaeological influences on present - day land use and agricultural practices. There is no doubt a handful of peculiar people of which I am one, who will read this report with the greatest interest. It may even be successful in blinding with science the odd planning inspector or two - which I understand may be its purpose. However, whether or not it is a wise use of council tax payers' money, or is likely to make the slightest contribution to the good management of the Forest, is an entirely different matter.

Perhaps we should now institute an annual New Forest Pulp-user of the Year award, to be given to the public body consuming the most paper in a single New Forest report or survey. This year's runaways winner would certainly be the New Forest Committee with a staggering two hundred and twenty pages on sport and recreation. The Forestry Commission comes a poor second with 'Maintaining the Ancient and Ornamental Woodlands' - a paltry ninety pages. However, the Commission has cheated disgracefully by printing on one side of the Paper only. Against these giants, the local authorities stand little chance. Hampshire County Council, for example, has managed a mere twenty four pages on New Forest transport.

Transport Day-dreams

Early in the autumn, the County Council issued a consultation document 'A Transportation Strategy for the New Forest.' Somewhat surprisingly the Verderers who will have to grant or withhold consent for any work affecting the fabric of the Forest, have not yet been able to obtain more than one copy, although I am assured that no slight upon members of the Court is actually intended. As a consequence, no corporate view of the proposals has yet been formed by the Verderers. The report is, unfortunately, a catalogue of day-dreams - a strategy of mutually conflicting objectives and of pious hopes, most of which have little chance of coming to fruition. It seeks to control traffic, but at the same time will riot interfere with economic prosperity, It will "improve travel choice and accessibility for all,' but will close roads, cut animal accidents by 30%, reduce visitor car use and so on. It places immense importance on enhanced public transport as a substitute for private car use. At the same time it

ignores the hard, fact that cars are cheap and very convenient while public transport is so expensive and inconvenient that effective alterations in the balance would need politically suicidal action. Any county councillor supporting it would be thrown out at the next election!

In its suggestions for road closures the report is at its most fanciful. I accept that its proposals are good sound sense and in the interests of the Forest, but the authors must know perfectly well that the public is so wedded to its cars that it will fight to the last ditch any proposed closure. This was demonstrated at the time of the last New Forest Highway Strategy and again earlier this year when the County proposed to close the redundant (but beloved for pleasure drivers) road through Mark Ash.

Squirrels

There seems to be an interesting argument in progress as to whether not the autumn of 1996 was a "good", year for acorns, and its effect upon squirrel, populations and their damage to young trees. My own observations suggest that there were very few acorns indeed, but vast numbers of squirrels. How much damage they are doing to the Forestry Commissions trees is a matter best assessed by the Commission, but it is now very rare to find a young beech in the Ancient Ornamental Woods which is lot severely mutilated. In the medium term and 'on a Forest-wide basis, the Commission is patently losing the battle against grey squirrels.

These beautiful but unpleasant and damaging pests have recently launched an assault on my garden, (which is outside the Forest) killing trees, ravaging the bird tables and eating their way into the chicken house. In my troubles I was reminded of the story of a Burley lady who was bothered by grey squirrels in her roof. She set about trapping them live and releasing them afterwards in the Forest. However, when the trapping programme produced no diminution in the problem, she eventually decided that some squirrels were returning repeatedly to the scene of crime. The lady was a horsekeeper and within her medicine chest was the ubiquitous "purple spray" used for the treatment of minor equine wounds. As each squirrel was trapped, its tail was sprayed bright purple so that it could be distinguished from others. It was then released and the purple-tailed squirrels of Bisterne Close became a subject of intense local interest. Who won the contest is not recorded. I expect the squirrels did.

In my own war I have electrified the birds' nut feeding rack using a six volt electric fence unit. This, of course, does not affect the birds who alight directly on the rack and are not earthed. The rack is suspended from an earth wire and separated from that wire by an insulator. As the squirrel descends the wire he bridges between the rack and the earth and receives enough of a shock to convince him that peanuts are not worth the discomfort. I have also caught, sprayed and banished four squirrels in less than a week, but I have not yet acquired either the means or the inclination for killing in cold blood.

Forest of Radio Masts

Reports of a recent meeting of the New Forest Committee may have given the impression that the Verderers are pressing for more mobile 'phone aerials' around the Forest to improve reception for the agisters' phones. Both my colleagues who serve on that committee assure me that, this is 'not the case. It is certainly not the view of the Court.

There can be few more depressing consequences of modern technology than ruining of so many fine landscapes in Dorset by the construction of more and more aerials. Indeed, I believe was one of the factors recently influenced a company against using that county as the location for filming a Hardy novel. It would be a disaster if the New Forest were to go the same way for the sake of commercial gain and the enhancement of yuppie toys. I believe the Forestry Commission has had a good many enquiries from mobile phone providers with covetous eyes fixed upon our unspoilt elevated heaths. They were no doubt turned away with the usual answer "You will never get it past the 'Verderers' Court"!

Whether the phone companies, the Forestry Commission for indeed the Verderers) like it or not, it would appear to be quite outside the Court's power to grant consent for such masts. About two years ago the Deputy Surveyor came to the Verderers with an informal request that they consider permitting a transmitting mast on Lyndhurst Hill for the commission's own communications. The case was pressing they said, lives were at risk, a Forest crime wave threatened and an urgent approval was required. Some members of the Court were far too old hands to take all this at face value or be bonced into an immediate decision. The Deputy Surveyor was asked to look into the legal basis of his request and to advise the Verderers as to how they might properly agree to it - if minded to do so. Nothing was ever heard of the Emery Down transmitter and I am not aware that law and order in the forest collapsed as a consequence.

The background to this little dispute lies in the New Forest Act of 1949 which says precisely what development on the Forest the Verderers can permit. Anything not specified, of course, lies outside their powers and is not allowed. The Verderers may agree to lines for telephone and telegraphic communication", but radio masts are neither of these. In those days telephones depended on wires and despite the name "mobile phones", they in fact rely upon radio waves. Nothing in the Act allows the construction of radio masts. The Phone companies have evidently recognised the problem and are now busy trying to evade the statutory protection of the Forest by pushing up masts on any suitable site just off the Crown lands. Water company property seems particularly favoured. The planners, meanwhile, seem powerless to prevent the spread of the disease, in the face of government directives to submit.