

New Forest Notes – January 1998

Return of the National Park

ON the 15th December the New Forest Committee announced a further attempt to make the Forest into a tailor-made national park with itself as park authority. The fact that the announcement did not say this in so many words does not make it any the less true. The proposals, give or take a few embellishments, are a carbon copy of those put forward in 1992 and then roundly rejected by the Forest. Making the Forest a national park is a sensitive issue, so I suppose it is not really surprising that in a seventeen page consultative document the Committee never once spells out its true objective. There are references to "tailor-made proposals", "tailor-made arrangements" and so on - never a mention of tailor-made national park. I am not sure how many people this coyness is supposed to fool. If it was a tailor-made national park in 1992, then it is the same thing today.

Before considering the details of the proposals, it is worth explaining once again exactly why plans for any sort of national park in the New Forest are so threatening to the Forests protection - protection which is the envy of amenity societies in every national park in the country. Since the last war, most major development threats to the Forest have been promoted, supported or approved by the County and/or District councils. It is the county and district councils that control national parks. The list of these threats is a long one, but includes initial plans for a major traffic interchange at Stoney Cross, a lunatic scheme for a fast traffic route past Fritham, a refuse tip at Blackhamsley, the outer route of the Lyndhurst bypass and a road along the railway past Burley. Time and again these proposals were blocked by the Verderers and this continual thwarting of the councils ambitions enraged both Appletree Court and the Castle. Here, in the New Forest was the one part of the country where legitimate public development was being frustrated to protect a lot of scruffy heathland, trees and a few ponies. It was an administrative disgrace. No such problems were being encountered in national parks, so why short the New Forest escape?

To remedy this situation, in 1973 the County Council promoted a Bill which would effectively have taken control of the Verderers and eliminated their power to protect the Forest. It was fought and defeated even before getting into Parliament. In 1988 the council tried again, this time with a Bill to break the Verderers powers (and incidentally their finances) by forcing through the outer Lyndhurst Bypass. That Bill made better progress, but was eventually defeated in Parliament. Undeterred, the Council tried again four years later through the less direct method of supporting the governments "tailor-made national park" proposals. This was a far more subtle approach because the proposals were covered in a conservation veneer, but if they had succeeded the councils would have held the whip hand in influencing the future of the Forest. Once again the Forest fought off aback door take-over, but however many heads were cut off, the persistent monster refuses to die. The Forest has been too successful in preserving its integrity and the wounds go deep in local authority circles. Now, for the fourth time an attempt is being made to break the Forest.

The proposals are for the New Forest Committee to become in effect a tailor-made national park authority. The promoters of such schemes insist on the "tailor-made" suffix because they claim to abhor the idea of a real national park. The park authority will require statutory powers to compel other management agencies to act in accordance with policies which it will determine from time to time. At

the moment the New Forest Committee is not able to force its members and the consultative document implies that the "discretionary approach" is no longer acceptable. How compulsion is to be achieved (beyond the fact that it will be provided for in legislation) is left deliberately vague. Indeed, there is something of a conflict in that it is said there will not be a direct attack on the powers of the Verderers, the Forestry Commission and others. That is rather beside the point. The immense influence of a tailor-made national park authority will be quite sufficient to force through unpalatable measures. If, for example, the Lyndhurst Bypass had been promoted by a (council controlled) New Forest National Park Authority - the official guardian of the New Forest - can anyone doubt that the road would exist today? This is as much a bid for overwhelming influence as it is for powers.

The Committee has shied away from telling us exactly how the park authority will be constituted and for a good reason. This was one of the rocks on which the 1992 scheme foundered.

There are one or two technical planning matters relating to the Forests suburban fringe which it may be desirable to resolve by a government statement, or perhaps some minor amendment to planning legislation of statutory instruments. That is not in dispute, but it is being used as cover for obtaining powers over the Forest itself. Vague and unspecified promises of "funding and resources" made in 1992, are repeated this time. They are used by pro-parkers in, I hope, a vain attempt to win over the gullible or greedy. It is a ploy that failed last time.

There is, of course, another fundamental objection to the plan and that is the public perception of national parks as vast playgrounds dedicated solely to recreation at the expense of everything else. That is not the statutorily defined purpose of national parks, but it is exactly how they are viewed by many people. It is no good the New Forest Committee saying that they will not call the Forest a national park. The government if it legislates, and under pressure from recreational interests, will not be able to resist earning some "green" points by adding to the so-called National Parks Family. The already intense public pressures will become unbearable.

The whole consultation process is being rushed through in little more than a month (including the long Christmas break), because it appears the Countryside Commission will be recommending to the government early in the spring that the New Forest and the South Downs should be made national parks. The chairman of one Forest society on hearing this said that the Countryside Commission could be damned and that his society would not be rushed any more than it was the last time!

As a forum for discussion between management agencies in the Forest, the New Forest Committee may still have a useful if marginal role to play. As a statutory organisation issuing directions, subverting the protection which the Forest at present enjoys and adding a further clogging layer of bureaucracy, it has none.

Collapse of the Pony Market

Anyone who attended last autumn's Beaulieu Road pony sales will need no reminder of the desperate state of the pony market in the New Forest. At the December sale it was heartbreaking to see colt foals sold, one after the other, for five guineas or less. Beaulieu Road obstinately refuses to abandon guineas and why the heavy hand of European Union bureaucracy has not descended upon it is beyond understanding. Since the auctioneers take a minimum of about £3 per lot sold and the

Pony Breeding Society charges a small percentage, a net price of two pound for a foal is not now unusual. There is a story, widely told in the Forest, of the commoner who went colt hunting towards the end of last year. In catching a colt foal, his riding horse lost a shoe. He sold the foal at Beaulieu Road and received a cheque for £2. He was then compelled to go colt hunting for a further four similar foals to recover the cost of replacing the single lost shoe!

Some of the EU "Life Bid" money is earmarked for research into the economics of keeping animals on the Forest and the promotion of a marketing strategy. While the former objective may well be of value, no amount of clever marketing is going to make saleable an excess supply of a product which no-one wants. Good fillies or really large strong colts may be another matter, but the market is saturated with large numbers of poor little colts which will never make good riding ponies and which even the meat trade seems now to shun. I have not been able to discover exactly why the meat market has dried up. It is probably a combination of increased costs, over-supply and more intensive veterinary inspections.

The Forest is faced with some stark choices. It can either tackle the over-supply problem by drastic and unpopular measures, or it can sit back and do nothing. Such drastic measures include a subsidised mare slaughter scheme to remove old, poor, weak or unsuitable mares; subsidised foal slaughter; control of breeding or a combination of all three. I can see little prospect of money being raised for such unpopular measures as killing "dear little foals" or even older stock. Breeding control is entirely feasible, relatively cheap and within the existing powers of management agencies. However, it would cut across long established prejudices and sentiment. By far the most likely outcome is that nothing will be done because no-one will be able to agree on what should be done. Learned consultants will report in June and their report will join dozens of similar papers gathering dust on the shelf. The pony market will continue to bump along the bottom for years until some economic wind eventually breathes life into it again. We shall all of us have to place some really unpleasant times before that stage is reached.

End of an era

The November Verderers election is now very old history, but I cannot let it pass without recording the sadness of many members of the Court at the fact and manner of Dionis Macnair's departure after 24 years of service. She was elected (with me and Maldwin Drummond) back in 1973 at a time when the Verderers had their backs to the wall fighting for their independence. Since that time she has participated in numerous battles and consistently championed the breeding of registered New Forest ponies. In November she was disqualified from standing for re-election on a technicality which was a sad (and for her irritating) conclusion to a long association with the Verderers. The Court does not seem the same without her.