

NEW FOREST NOTES - JULY 2000

The Park and the New Forest Show

The three day New Forest Show at the end of this month will be a busy time for the Commoners' Defence Association and its allies opposed to the plan to make the Forest into a national park. The theme of the Association's display this year is to be "New Forest - national treasure or national park?" and a team of members will be on hand to explain to the public why a park would be so damaging to the Forest and its way of life. The Commoners are fortunate in being able to call upon a wide range of skills within their membership, including the services of a professional graphics company, while much of the photographic work and printing work is being undertaken through the Commoners' Animals Protection Society. The display itself will be under the banner of the two groups and the New Forest Pony Breeding and Cattle Society. They may not be able to match the half million pounds allocated by the Countryside Agency for forcing its plans on the Forest, but enthusiasm and commitment counts for a good deal.

For some months the Commoners' Defence has been operating a special sub-committee preparing opposition to the park and observing the work of several groups set up by the Countryside Agency to advance its scheme. At the outset there were still hopes that the Agency might be able to deliver something worthwhile on its promises of good things for the Forest, but as the months of evasion and fruitless talking have advanced, even the most optimistic are becoming disillusioned. In my own case, it took the Agency five months to reply to a handful of questions about how they envisaged a park would operate in the Forest. A supplementary question, put when I eventually got answers, has now been sat-on by the Agency for nearly a further two months ! Worst of all, it is now abundantly clear that all the assurances, ministerial or otherwise, that the powers of the Verderers would be unaffected by the imposition of a park administration are worthless. The park will be able to carry out whatever recreational development it pleases, completely ignoring the Court and subject only to its own planning and other constraints. The Verderers will be pushed into the sidelines as little more than an agricultural management committee.

As part of the campaign against the park plans, the goings-on in other national parks are being studied with interest and much of the results is far from encouraging. A delightful scheme is reportedly under discussion by the Lake District Park Authority whereby commercial concerns might be sold the right to promote their products with images of well known features of the park landscape. The money thus raised would be devoted to park projects. If government money flows so readily into national parks, it is difficult to understand the necessity or attractions of so appalling a project. However, where the Lakes go today, the New Forest National Park would no doubt follow tomorrow. We can look forward to the Kit-e-Kat Knightwood Oak and the Persil Balmer Lawn on our television screens if the advocates of a park get their way.

I don't for a moment suppose that those defending the Forest will have things all their own way at the Show. The usual combination of Countryside Agency, Labour Party and Ramblers will, I am sure, be promoting Mr.Prescott's "birthday gift to the nation". As for the New Forest Association, it will (or should be), sitting uncomfortably on its accustomed fence, because it has no policy on the park beyond "wait and see". That was determined for it by a special general meeting last year. Then, opposition to the park was defeated by eighteen votes, but it was made equally clear that this should not be taken as a policy of supporting the proposals.

Charging Forest Exhibitors at the Show

Several organisations (charities or non-profit making associations) have been not a little disgusted by an announcement from the promoters of the New Forest Show that they will in future be charged for their display space in the New Forest Corner. This is particularly distressing because the New Forest Corner is one of the few genuinely "Forest" aspects of the Show, along with the Forestry Commission display and the Verderers' stand. There are all sorts of exciting stands and tents at the show from tractor sales to goat breeders but, while these are well worth seeing, they have little to do with the Forest.

When the New Forest Corner was established some years ago, many of the smaller Forest groups were more or less begged to participate and on the whole they have made a very good job of it. The amount of money now being demanded of them is not great, but it is certainly enough to force out those charities which are not selling goods and for whom attendance at the Show is seen as a public service rather than a money making opportunity. An increase of a pound or two on the stands of the big commercial operators would surely be a more equitable means of increasing revenue. It would ensure the retention of many interesting and worthy exhibitors.

Verderers' Election - Register at the Show

The Verderers' "millennium election" will take place in November, although I don't think anyone has yet got round to using this title. As always, those whose names are on the existing electoral register will receive forms (reply addressed and postage paid) which they must return to the Clerk to the Verderers if they are to retain their right to vote. The problem is not with these electors, but with the hundreds of others who have never registered or whose registration has lapsed. The Show gives them an opportunity to correct matters, with someone else on hand to search the Atlas of Rights and complete the tedious paperwork - and all free of charge.

Anyone living in the area bounded roughly by Southampton, Salisbury, Cranborne and Bournemouth may be entitled to a vote at the Verderers' election. The simple requirement is the occupation of at least one acre of land carrying rights of common over the New Forest. There is a common misapprehension that such rights exist only within the Forest boundary. In fact they attach to land miles outside the Forest. There is no need to own land - someone renting an orchard to keep a pony in (if it has rights) has just as much entitlement to a vote at Lord Montagu owning a vast estate. From an analysis of former

registers, we already know that many practising commoners have failed to claim their voting rights and that is particularly disappointing. In fact anyone who lives in or around the Forest and who occupies land, if only a large garden, should check their right to vote. It is no good complaining about how the Forest is run while wasting a vote.

A copy of the Atlas of Rights (on microfilm) will be available in the New Forest Corner (CDA stand) on all three days of the Show, together with blank electoral register forms and friendly assistance. For those who cannot get to the Show, a visit to the Verderers' Office in Lyndhurst, preferably by prior telephone appointment (02380 282052), will produce similar assistance.

New Forest Committee Report 1999-2000

With so much talk of national parks, some people have probably supposed that the New Forest Committee has quietly disappeared. It once saw itself as the tailor-made park authority in waiting, but that ambition was finally extinguished when the government announced its intention of dealing with the New Forest by means of a council-controlled park authority. The Forest, it seemed, was no longer considered as worth its own special legislation. The Committee, however, still exists - as testified by a beautifully illustrated annual report which dropped through my letter box this week. Eighty or so excellent colour photographs show all aspects of the Forest from child cyclists enjoying an illegal ride over the Commoners' grazing to an atmospheric view of the Scots pine plantation at Turf Hill. The text is somewhat less illuminating, for it can hardly be claimed that the Committee (as a committee) actually does very much at all. Its members, such as the Forestry Commission, do a great deal, but that is an entirely different matter. The Committee is not there to do things, but to "co-ordinate", although many people are understandably confused as to what that entails. Amongst other things, it involves the holding of meetings and seminars - quite a lot of them if one includes sub-committees. It produces comprehensive and extremely wordy reports and discussion documents. It organises the New Forest Consultative Panel, a group which in turn does a lot of discussing and paper consuming. It formulates initiatives and strategies and it specialises in dialogue, communication and monitoring. It also employs consultants from time to time, who do all these things at even greater length and tedium, but with immense benefits to the timber pulp trade. Its activities cost the public purse £173,000 in 1999.

The future of the New Forest Committee is, to say the least, uncertain. Some might say it is irrelevant. We are heading for a ludicrous situation in which we have a Consultative Panel advising a New Forest Committee, advising a national park authority, instructing four councils, the Verderers and the Forestry Commission on how they should run the New Forest ! Nothing will be done at all without preliminary reports in triplicate, all written in the latest approved eco-jargon. It is an unattractive prospect.

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