

NEW FOREST NOTES JULY 2002

Strategy for the New Forest

The first of this year's big glossy New Forest reports has arrived in the shape of a "Strategy for the New Forest" produced by the New Forest Committee. It is an entirely well-meaning document, filled to overflowing with pious hopes and exhortations. It is even slightly less saturated with trendy jargon than is usual in papers from that source, although there is still a great deal too much about stakeholders, sustainability and headline indicators. It is also, at 133 pages, very far from concise.

The Strategy is supposed to inspire Forest managers and users to work together towards common objectives for the good of the Forest – objectives which are set out as "proposals" at the end of each chapter. There are two fundamental problems with this. First of all, managers sometimes don't take kindly to being told their business by other people and, if the experience of the previous strategy (1996) is to be a guide, they will completely ignore this volume. The Forestry Commission and Verderers are the two principal management agencies concerned with the real New Forest and in the six years since that first edition, I cannot recall one single occasion on which any one of its directives has been referred to by either body during the hundreds of hours of joint discussions and decision making. Perhaps other fringe groups are more enthusiastic or compliant. A council engineer improving street lighting in Lymington or an Environment Agency officer assessing a blocked stream near Fawley, may hang on every word of the relevant provisions of the strategy, but I doubt it. This strategy, like its predecessor, will be quietly shelved and the managers will get on with managing. In some ways that is a pity because there are some useful nuggets embedded in the spoil heaps of interminable text. For example, some of the non-Forest related sections dealing with social issues such as affordable housing are really quite informative.

The second problem with the strategy is that its writers are seldom prepared to tackle difficult political issues. They are clearly frightened to state publicly where things are wrong and need correction. Recreational uses which have damaged and continue to damage the Forest, disturbance of ground-nesting birds and the need for hard cash subsidies to Forest farming are controversial issues. There are oblique references to some of them, but too frequently the proposals side-step the difficult (sometimes unpopular) decisions which are necessary to tackle them. A good example of this arises out of the so-called "remote areas". These were identified by the New Forest Committee in what some regard as its only really valuable piece of work during a decade. They are areas highly vulnerable to human disturbance and where some traces of wilderness quality still survive. Some years ago, when very damaging recreational routes were established or formalised, fragmenting these areas near Linwood and Fritham, the Committee shuffled out of opposing these routes because they saw that to do so would be unpopular with the recreating public. Now, in the text of the strategy, the protection of the remote areas and even their enhancement, is advocated in relatively robust terms. In the proposals section the wording is so watered-down and weak as

to be useless. Anyone can be loud and forthright in condemning landfill sites or gravel working in the Forest, but to state publicly that some cherished form of recreation is causing damage and must be stopped requires real courage and leadership.

If the New Forest Committee had produced ten pages of hard-hitting, precise and politically courageous recommendations (instead of 133 pages of woolly report which might have come direct from a local council chamber), there is just a chance that Forest managers might have sat up and taken notice. The public must at least be thankful that one element of the strategy *has* been confined to ten pages. We are all invited to complete a mere ten sides of A4 response form (“and continue on separate sheets if necessary”!) for return to the Committee within three months. That will fill any idle days during our summer holidays and prevent the Forest from becoming bored.

Protecting the Forest's past

I cannot pretend to any great understanding of the Forest's rare natural history treasures, but I do know the basic rules of confidentiality. If you know the location of a woodlark's nest or come across a wild gladiolus, you keep quiet about them. If you don't, the eggs may be robbed and the plant dug up. I imagine a request to English Nature for disclosure of the location of such treasures would be met with a polite refusal. It is much the same with the relatively unspectacular remnants of the Forest's ancient history: disclose their location and they will be robbed. My impression is that robbery is rather less universal today than it was a few years ago, but metal detectors still operate (illegally), often early or late in the day. Antiquities stolen from the Forest are advertised on the internet or appear on the shelves of specialist dealers. It is profoundly depressing. For these reasons, a degree of caution over what is published is essential. On the other hand it is important that the Forestry Commission has up-to-date and accurate maps of all known archaeological sites on its land. For thirty years past, these have been provided and maintained by the Hampshire Field Club. Every eighteen months or so a revision is carried out and sent to the Queen's House for the Commission's cartographers to incorporate in the record maps. It is an efficient system which worked remarkably well over many years. As forestry works were planned, the maps were consulted and the nature and grading (importance and vulnerability) of the sites affected were noted. When necessary, Field Club representatives met the foresters on the ground so that any obscure details of the site could be explained. The men actually felling and extracting timber could then be instructed accordingly. There were rare mistakes, as when a contractor, contrary to specific instructions, ran riot over an Iron Age settlement near Fordingbridge, but they were exceptional.

Over the last two years things seem not to have worked so well. Actual and potential damage done by forestry has increased again. For example, timber was felled and hauled over a group of Romano-British pottery kiln sites, while another group was only saved by a chance visit to the area just as work started. In the last few months, the site of a mediaeval building with the highest grading (probably connected with a royal hunting lodge) had trees felled all over it and some timber extracted across it. All these sites were clearly marked on

the Forestry Commission's maps and were taken into account by the Commission at the planning stage. Thereafter the system seemed to break down. The Hampshire Field Club has been endeavouring to secure a solution to these problems, but so far progress has been slow. A meeting with the Commission's archaeologist is now to take place next month.

Any damage to the Forest's ancient history is particularly worrying. We may not boast spectacular Roman villas, stone circles or great castles, but its archaeology is as integral a part of the Forest's character as the wildlife. Perhaps the difference is that there is no English Nature equivalent to threaten prosecution following damage, but now at least there seems a good chance that the difficulties will be resolved.

One of the projects on which the Field Club has been working and which is indirectly related to its present negotiations with Forestry Commission, is the preparation of a comprehensive database of all archaeological sites on commonable lands within the Forest. The Commission's record maps show site extent and grading, but they do not need information beyond this. For research, on the other hand, far more detailed records are required and, with probably over two thousand sites to be dealt with, this is a formidable task. It is also likely to be expensive and so far no funding is available and only a pilot scheme has been worked out and instituted. There always seems to be plenty of money for wildlife projects, but field archaeology does not have the public appeal of cuddly birds and animals.

377 Park representations

Last week the Planning Inspectorate published the list of those making representations on the plan to impose a national park on the New Forest. In total, 377 people and organizations are listed. The Inspectorate evidently hopes that like-minded people will be able to work together in presenting a common case, because otherwise the enquiry, fixed to start on 8th October, is likely still to be sitting at Christmas. Unfortunately the Inspectorate has made no attempt to break down the list into different categories of representation. This means that unless one is prepared to spend hours sitting in an uncomfortable council office reading through every letter, it is impossible to distinguish friend from foe. I am told by the programme officer that they are considering putting the representations on the special enquiry website (www.planning-inspectorate.gov.uk/newforest), but that because this would involve a great deal of scanning, no decision has yet been made. Anyhow, there are some listed groups with well-known points of view. For example, the Commoners' Defence and Pony Breeders are there, leading the opposition for the Forest community, while the Labour Party and the Ramblers are established champions of the park enthusiasts. It is the large number of individuals that present the difficulties of identification. I suspect that in fact many of these will be content with having written down their objection or support and will not actually choose to attend the enquiry. My limited experience of such events is that on the first day the venue is packed out and that by the end of the first week (when it is evident that anyone remotely like Perry Mason is unlikely to appear) a lonely inspector is sitting at the end of a near empty hall in company with a couple of lawyers and a handful of witnesses. But even if only half those who wrote in wish to speak, it looks like being a long and complicated business, not

helped by the fact the Countryside Agency will no doubt occupy a lot of time in presenting its case at the outset.

One group of “objectors” is fairly evident from the list. There are a number of farmers and landowners listed, most of them presumably intent on getting the boundary altered in one way or another. No doubt those with tourism and “diversification” interests see enhanced business opportunities (real or imaginary) in getting their land included in what will become a primary recreation zone, while those without such sources of income are equally anxious to avoid greater enforced access and recreation impositions (real or imaginary) and are fighting to be left out. They are perfectly entitled to fight for their properties, but it is the future of the Forest itself which, for most people, is the primary consideration.

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