

NEW FOREST NOTES JULY 2003

New Forest Strategy Launch

I have not always been enthusiastic about the activities of the New Forest Committee, but I have to admit that there is one job which the Committee does rather well. That is the organizing of very pleasant buffet lunches in attractive parts of the Forest on special occasions. This may seem a little trivial, but if you can send visiting officials back to London or Winchester with full tummies and benevolent thoughts about the place where they have just spent the morning, that cannot be bad for the Forest. Next week they may be making vital decisions about our future.

The most recent of these entertainments was held in a tent at Bolderwood to mark the launch of the Committee's "Strategy for the New Forest". That comprises the Committee's ideas of what should be done to the New Forest (and by whom) over the next five years. At the time of the consultation draft of the plan last year, I suggested that it failed to tackle the politically sensitive issues of the ways in which the Forest is being damaged, and not much has changed in the final version. It does refer to some of them, concluding that they should be studied, monitored, reviewed and so on, but that is often as far as it goes. If this had been a Forestry Commission document (real power of action lying with the Commission), such evasion would have been a serious matter, but the Strategy is at best a wish list of a body which has no management role. In his address to the lunch party, the chairman (Ted Johnston) said that the plan must not be allowed to gather dust on the shelf, but in this hope I fear he may be disappointed. Its ignorability is a fatal weakness of the plan of which I am sure the Committee is acutely aware, but which it would never publicly admit. A few weeks ago, an attempt was made to imbue the Strategy with some element of moral coercion when constituent bodies were pressured to sign a document called "The New Forest Pledge". In this they would have undertaken to be bound by the prescriptions of the plan. Not surprisingly, those bodies with statutory responsibilities were unwilling to have their actions governed by someone else's policies and the New Forest Pledge idea ended in the waste bin. Now that the launch is safely out of the way, I have no doubt that the councils will simply go on exercising their powers in accordance with the dictates of their political masters. The actual managers – the Forestry Commission and the Verderers – will continue to manage for the good of the Forest, according to their separate interpretations of what that good comprises. I can see no reason why they should regard themselves as more constrained by this strategy than they were by the last one, which both of them ignored. This does not mean that either will necessarily act contrary to the ideas of the Strategy, simply that they will not be bound by it.

As to the Strategy document itself (now even better value at 156 pages compared with a mere 133 in the draft), I can thoroughly recommend it for the series of informative and colourful maps which it contains, covering such subjects as transport, geology and historic environment. It is also liberally decorated with Terry Heathcote's charming New Forest

photographs which are guaranteed to lighten even the most turgid text, but to be fair it must be said that parts of the report are far from dull.

The paperwork aside, the lunch was very successful, although the speeches which preceded it (in praise of the New Forest Committee by three eminent councillors and two civil servants) were perhaps not appreciated as they should have been. The attention of the audience was already focussing on food for the body rather than the mind. That food, as the chairman said, was obtained almost entirely from local sources and was devoured in quantity and with evident satisfaction. At my table discussion eventually reverted to the purpose of the event. The assessment of the Strategy by one retired senior local government officer seemed to me to be very appropriate. "This document", he said, " says simply that the New Forest Committee is in favour of virtue" !

Longslade cycle bridges

There exists a government supported body called Sustrans with huge sums of money at its disposal and whose business it is to secure the opening of cycle routes. Sustrans has long had designs on the new Forest and is pressing for a major route across it. This, according to its literature, could unlock greatly increased demand for cycling here. The fact that the Forest is already groaning under excess recreational pressure seems of no interest. The demand must be met because cycling is healthy, sporting and "sustainable" – never mind what it does to the Forest.

Sustrans has not yet succeeded in negotiating its desired route, but has decided to force the pace by applying for planning permission to construct two bridges at Longslade restoring those on the old Southampton & Dorchester Railway which were demolished some years ago. It is intended that this railway should become part of the route. The application has been made without consultation with the landowner (the Forestry Commission), although the bare statutory requirement of a formal notice served upon them was met. There was no notice to the Verderers whose consent for the work is required and there was, so far as I am aware, no consultation with the commoners who actually farm the land. Such an attitude is extremely discourteous to the Court, the commoners and the Forest as a whole.

No doubt the Forest will eventually be forced into submission and compelled to take one more turn of the ratchet of pressure. A few thousand more cyclists a year will not of itself be a death blow, but there must surely come a time when there will be nothing left to destroy because all of it will have been eaten away by "only one little isolated development".

Last chance on the right to roam

Last year the Verderers drew attention to the need for all commoners and other landowners to check the Countryside Agency's draft maps of "open country" – land to be opened up to public rambling as of right. Serious errors were apparent in the draft maps with pony paddocks, farmers' fields and even private gardens being shown as rambling land. Since then things have moved on. The "draft" maps have been replaced by the "provisional" maps, but so far as I can see the new version remains littered with such anomalies. Moreover, the time for informal objection is now past. There exists a short period (until 23rd

August) during which formal appeals, on the correct form, must be submitted. Failure to do so could result in the loss of thousands of pounds worth of capital value.

It may be, of course, that the affected landowners are already locked in conflict with the Countryside Agency and that the latter has simply overruled objections to the draft maps. I rather doubt this. It is more likely that the Agency's proposals have simply been overlooked.

I suppose no one person's knowledge of landownership and character is sufficient to cover the entire Forest, so on a brief examination of the plans I have noted the following cases which *seem* to be entirely unwarranted assaults on private enclosed land. A word of caution must, however, be added. The maps I have looked at are on the Agency's website and it is possible that the colouring there does not correspond exactly with that on the original documents. Having said that, I think that the owners of the following land (perhaps amongst many others) are at immediate risk: fields at Wicksmoor and Lampards Farm at Bramshaw; a strip of land through Foulford Farm at Ringwood; portions of garden at Bisterne Close Burley and North Weirs Brockenhurst; a field at Blackthorne Farm Canterton; and a paddock at Setley. There is still time to act, but not very much of it.

As to the remainder of the plans (that part covering the Crown lands and commons), it remains as chaotic and ridiculous as ever. Large areas of heath are omitted in all parts, while elsewhere tiny parcels in the middle of a dense wood have been singled out for inclusion – for example, Gutter Heath. A few glaring examples will show just how badly prepared the plans are.

If you go for a walk over the green at Boltons Bench in Lyndhurst, you will have the right to roam, but if you cross the unfenced road onto exactly similar green grazed by the same ponies outside Appletree Court, you will have no such right. If you walk up the Bolderwood Road to Shorts Parlour, you may ramble by right on the piece of heath on the south side at White Moor, but not on exactly similar heath on the opposite side of the same road. If you decide to go for a golf course walk, you may ramble at will across Bramshaw Golf Course, but on Lyndhurst Golf Course you will have to be content with such privileges as the Forestry Commission chooses to grant you. It is difficult to see how the Agency can expect its maps to be taken seriously.

One other thing is remarkable about the provisional maps. It seems that the rambling organizations failed to take advantage of their right to object to the draft in that large areas of privately owned heath were omitted from them and remain omitted from the provisional version. I assume, of course, that they did not object rather than that they objected and were overruled. This is rather surprising since the Open Spaces Society in particular was urging its members to ensure that every available inch of heathland was included in the maps. As I understand it, the opportunity to include more rambling land is now closed and that only those with property rights have a further last chance to object.

June Irvine

June Irvine died on 21st of last month. There can be few people in the Forest who did not know her, because her interests spread so widely across everything to do with the

community. She was a keen ornithologist, horsewoman, archaeologist and dog walker, quite apart from her work for many charitable groups in and around Lyndhurst. She never held high positions in the Forest – she was never president of this or that important society – but she was always to be found where hard work was required at the grass roots level. Almost continuously since 1966 she had served as secretary to the New Forest Section of the Hampshire Field Club and in her latter years she was also secretary to the New Forest Publications Trust. She took a prominent role in the battle to preserve the old broadleaved woods of the Forest in the late 1960s and was then appointed to the Consultative Panel of which she remained a member for more than thirty years. Perhaps she will be best remembered for her vigorous stand against an outer Lyndhurst bypass, because of its damaging effects on the Forest. That took great courage at a time when many of her fellow villagers and bypass promoters were concerned primarily with their own convenience and property values.

I fear that history may not give full acknowledgement to the part she played in protecting the Forest over a very difficult period because she tended to be very economical with words in both writing and conversation. She has left few records of her work, but those of us who worked with her know just how great that contribution was.

Anthony Pasmore