

## **NEW FOREST NOTES JULY 2004**

### **Continuing Life III battles**

The disputes over the Environment Agency's plans to "restore" various river courses in the New Forest show no signs of going away, after nearly a year of wrangling. The project, called "Life III", is financed in part by the European Union and there is a widespread suspicion in the Forest that it was devised simply to absorb money which had become available. For those who do not already know, the Agency is engaged in filling river channels to control erosion and at the same time restoring the former (often early 19<sup>th</sup> Century) alignments of the watercourses. The Forestry Commission's share of the work is largely in recreating bog-like conditions where drainage has been carried out in the past. It is on a much smaller scale than the Agency's. For those not keen on change, the proposals sound horrific, not least because they involve large scale clearance of trees (mostly conifers) on the flood plains of the rivers to be treated. They have also ruffled the feathers of several notable New Forest characters, particularly Mr. Bob Cooper of Minstead who has chosen to concentrate his fire more on the legality of the proposals than their actual detail. Earlier this year he secured a notable victory over the Environment Agency in the matter of an "environmental impact assessment". That is Euro-jargon for a statement by a developer justifying his proposed work in an area of conservation importance such as the New Forest. The Agency had said very firmly that such an assessment was not necessary, but Mr. Cooper stuck to his guns and eventually forced the officials to back down. Great effort and no doubt cost was then expended on preparing the assessment. The resulting document is huge and I cannot claim to have read every bit of it, but it plainly did not satisfy Mr. Cooper who, with supporters, attended the June Court and attempted to address the Verderers on the subject at much greater length than the Court's rules permit. Had he been able to speak more shortly, he would have told the Verderers that he contested the legality of the proposed work and the validity of the assessment.

I have to admit that the legality or otherwise of what has been done or is proposed to be done is a rather obscure subject. I don't much like EU law interfering in how the Forest is run, but if it is the law it has to be obeyed, whether damaging or beneficial. The Verderers also have tended to look at the proposals from a practical rather than theoretical point of view and this has determined their comments on the Assessment. They have made it clear that loss of good grazing is not acceptable, that all existing crossings must be maintained and, where necessary, their number increased.. They have stipulated that all stock injured as a result of the works must be paid-for, that certain works damaging to the landscape will not be acceptable and that any unanticipated damage – such as might result from lorry routes in to the working areas – must be made good. Finally the Court has expressed displeasure at some statements in the Assessment, including one which suggests falsely that New Forest ponies are bred for meat ! Beyond these general points, the Verderers have, without prejudice to the question of legality, given a cautious approval of the Environment Agency's intentions, on the basis that they are experimental.

Over the last few months I must have looked at every inch of the rivers to be treated by the Agency and a good deal of them more than once. There is, I have to say, potential for immense damage if things go wrong, but also the opportunity for some landscape improvement if the experiment is carried out with care and proves successful. As to the scientific conservation benefits I make no judgement. The conservation lobby is vehement in its support and that speaks for itself, but conservationists are not noted for sympathy towards the more readily appreciated characteristics of the Forest such as its beauty, grazing and wilderness qualities. It is a big gamble to take with an area so precious as the New Forest, but the scientists seem utterly confident that they will not fail. In one case (Highland Water at Ocknell Sling), there can be no doubt whatever that work to halt erosion is urgent and should receive the unequivocal support of all parties. Elsewhere the arguments are much more finely balanced.

Apart from the fairly limited threat to streamside grazing (there is very little of it in the areas to be treated), a key worry arises out of the actual process of filling the rivers. Hoggin gravel and some clay – thousands of tons of these materials – must be transported to the depths of the Forest and poured into the rivers. There they will be compacted to raise the bed levels. Carelessly done, this could result in a lethal soup, disastrous for livestock and of appalling appearance. However, at a site meeting at Blackensford north of Burley, Verderers and members of the Commoners' Defence Association were told that water would be diverted away from the working areas by pumping as the river is filled. The hoggin can then be compacted to a suitable consistency while relatively dry. Little streamside lawns in the area will become wetter but, say the scientists, they will also become more productive and more resistant to bracken infestation. No wholesale killing of streamside oaks and beeches is anticipated as a result of waterlogging the roots and those that do die will be removed to protect the landscape rather than being allowed to become protected beetle food. Great care will be taken to protect historical features and the existing tracks and bridges will be maintained and even improved. In short, there will be absolutely no grounds for complaint once the work is completed.

All this sounds very encouraging and I don't think there was a single point raised on the site visit which was not fully answered by the Agency's representatives – at least to their own satisfaction. There is no doubt that if they succeed (Mr. Cooper's legal challenges not stopping the work at the outset), it will be a triumph for the conservation lobby. If they fail and dreadful damage results, it will be a long time before the Forest forgets and allows further manipulation of its priceless assets.

### **Recording the history of the Forest's commons**

If I have some reservations about the millions of EU and government money to be poured into the Forest's rivers, I have none over a very much more modest grant of a few thousand pounds which was made last month. It is towards recording the history and landscape of a dozen or so mostly privately owned commons within the New Forest. The work will be undertaken in part by volunteers during the coming winter and is financed by a

strangely-named source of EU money, “Leader Plus”, administered by the New Forest District Council. It is what is called “matched funding”, or in other words, 50% of the cost has to be raised locally – in this case by contributions in kind supplied through volunteers and reduced-cost labour.

In 1997 and 2000, two similar studies were prepared covering all the National Trust's commons in the Forest, while historic sites on the Crown land have been the subject of a continuing programme of research for the past forty years. Now the remaining common land will be dealt with, giving for the first time a really detailed picture of everything from Bronze Age burial mounds to World War II defence works. The New Forest archaeological database which so far covers only the Crown lands will be expanded at the same time to include all the commons, whether privately owned, National Trust or local authority property.

The work will be undertaken by the New Forest Section of the Hampshire Field Club and on completion the various landowners will receive extracts from the report relevant to their own areas of commons. The updated database will be housed (as is the present one) in the Christopher Tower library of the New Forest Museum in Lyndhurst. The target date for completion is the end of July 2005.

### **Donn Small**

Last month's death of Donn Small will have stirred memories for quite a few people still in the Forest who worked for, with or against him during his term of office as Deputy Surveyor from 1971 to 1983. Of the Forest's recent holders of the office, he was certainly one of the most important. He was appointed just after the Forestry Commission's attitude to the New Forest began to change at the end of the 1960s and had to take charge of and administer strange new policies. There had been a bitter battle over several years to preserve the old hardwood plantations and to stop commercial cropping of the “Ancient Ornamental Woods” – the semi-natural woodland of the Open Forest. That was a battle in which the Commission was decisively defeated, resulting in a new framework for management set out in the Minister's Mandate – a directive from the minister to the Commission. The Mandate prevented further replacement of hardwoods with conifers and banned the exploitation of the open woods. It was the new Deputy Surveyor's task to implement it, but he did much more than that. He was the first Commission officer openly to repudiate the official myth that the A & O woods were “dying on their feet”. In a seminal study of these woods (with G.M.Haggett), he swept away years of Forestry Commission propaganda and stated firmly that the woods were thriving overall and had expanded by 21% in the previous century.

Donn Small's other great Forest achievement was in the field of recreation management. In little more than two years he fully implemented the control of camping recommended by the report “Conservation of the New Forest”. Controlling car parking and closing the remainder of the Forest to vehicular access took longer, but was achieved well in advance of his retirement. He had to tread on a lot of toes in doing it, campers and commoners included, but it was a significant achievement. Where he tried to go too far, as in

the matter of deep penetration car parks, the Forest resisted successfully. Today it may seem that the loss of land to parks and camps was a high price to pay, but anyone who has not seen cars and caravans scattered through the depths of the Forest cannot imagine just how horrid it was and how pressing was the need for a solution.

In discussing Donn Small's achievement with a present-day official not so long ago, I suggested that the Forestry Commission was no longer so effective as it once was. "Not at all" was the reply. "Don Small was given huge sums of money to do what he did and he was not tied hand and feet by consultations and rules as we are." That is no doubt true in part, but does not reflect the true extent of the late Deputy Surveyor's achievements for the Forest.

Anthony Pasmore