

NEW FOREST NOTES JULY 2008

Oil - the forgotten threat beneath the Forest

Twenty six years ago this month, an inspector recommended refusal of a planning application by Shell UK Ltd to drill for oil and gas at a site in Denny Inclosure, south of Lyndhurst. It brought to an end perhaps the biggest single planning battle to be fought in the New Forest, but just how durable that “end” will prove to be is a rather different question. With today’s record oil prices and efforts being made to exploit the last small reserves in the North Sea, can anyone doubt that the oil companies will be dusting down old files and preparing fresh assaults on former foes. With the Forest arguably weaker than it was in 1982 and with the evident importance which Shell attached to the “Denny prospect”, we could all of us be in for the very unwelcome reappearance of an old ghost.

The Denny application arose out of seismic surveys which were carried out across the New Forest and surrounding areas between 1977 and 1980, initially with dynamite detonated underground and later by a less damaging process called vibroseis. The inadequately-restored shot holes proved a great danger for riders and caused a lot of problems in the Forest for a while. Anyhow, the oil companies were much encouraged by the results of all this work, and not only Shell. At about the same time there was an application to drill at Pilley and rumours of another at Ipley. Neither eventually progressed, and it was Denny which was the focus of conflict.

This was not the first time that the New Forest had received the attention of the oil companies. In 1958 an exploratory well was sunk west of Hasley in the north of the Forest, apparently on not much greater evidence than a hunch. It proved to be dry, but did give useful information on the possible presence of reservoir rocks. I remember going out to see the drill site with its mass of pipework and machinery, but today little trace remains apart from some brick rubble beside a track. Then, in 1973, Wytch Farm was discovered, intensifying interest by the oil companies in the Hampshire Basin. At Marchwood in 1979, the Institute of Geological Sciences drilled for hot water, giving useful information to the oil companies. Wells at Farley in 1980 and at Lockerley in 1981 failed to find oil, but Shell still regarded its Denny prospect as particularly hopeful – even allowing that the percentage chance of finding oil at any particular site is always low.

What is it about Denny that makes it the most interesting of several promising areas in the Forest? Those of us who sat through the long drawn-out enquiry (initially in a freezing outbuilding at Foxlease with snow on the ground outside), learned quite a lot of elementary geology during those weeks and established friendly relations with some of the company’s scientists. No doubt technology has moved on since those days, especially in relation to the percentage of oil recoverable from a reservoir, but the basic facts remain the same. The discovery of oil depends upon there being a “source rock” – a rock in which oil is formed over long periods by physical and chemical action on plant and animal remains. There must be a “reservoir rock” of granular material (such as sandstone) where the oil accumulates. Finally

the oil must be held in place by an impermeable “cap rock”. Once all these conditions are fulfilled, an underground reservoir must be formed by folding or faulting of the rocks so that the oil is trapped – like air in an inverted soup plate placed in a sink full of water.

All these pre-conditions are thought to be met under Denny at depths between 3200 and 5400 feet, in a lozenge-shaped area extending from Parkhill Lawn in the West to just beyond Denny Wait in the east. Here the slope of the strata and faults to the north and east have created the potential for three separate reservoirs at different depths – two of Jurassic date and one, perhaps much larger, of the Triassic. That is why Denny is the first target in the Forest: it gives the drillers three chances rather than one.

The oil company received strong backing from the County and District Councils, both showing characteristic disregard for the special qualities of the New Forest in their greed for growth and employment. Just about everyone else was lined up in opposition. When the enquiry was resumed after a long adjournment, Hampshire County Council was forced into an embarrassing reversal of its stance, due to an alteration in the planning framework. It had started by backing the company and ended up compelled to oppose it – which it did without a great deal of conviction. The whole episode gave the Forest a very bad fright and not least because Shell indicated that there were several other prospects it would seek to exploit if it were successful at Denny.

The big question for the Forest of 2008 is whether it could repel a renewed attack; for much has changed since 1982. Whether or not the County and District Councils would again back the developer against the Forest is uncertain, but perhaps this question is less relevant now because both have lost their planning control of the Forest. That control now rests with the National Park, although of course the park is itself under the majority control of local councillors. They may well retain the same desire for growth and development as before, but I doubt if they would be able to override the inevitable strong advice of officers that oil-drilling and extraction would conflict with statutory national park purposes. On balance, therefore, I would expect the park to oppose drilling, if not with great enthusiasm. Actually that does not matter too much because the application would almost certainly be called-in by the government and the attitude of the government would be crucial. Offers of petrol for motorists are likely to secure far more votes for the politicians than protecting ponies and trees. I would not expect that a little matter like the New Forest would be allowed to stand in the way of secure fuel for the family car – however unjustifiable such a promise might be. The Forest, to a man, would remain against drilling.

On the company’s estimate, Denny had the potential to contain between thirty five and forty nine million barrels of oil, of which, with 1982 technology, between 20% and 40% would be recoverable – perhaps a lot more today. That is a very unpleasant time bomb for the Forest to be sitting upon and the clock has been ticking for a long time.

Will Parke

June saw the retirement of an unassuming but key person in the Forest’s administration, in the shape of the Forestry Commission’s land agent – Will Parke. He has

served the Forest quietly for nearly a quarter of a century, yet apart from those on the inside and regular attendants at the Verderers' Court (where the land agent traditionally sits next to the Deputy Surveyor), I doubt whether many people even know his name.

When I was first acquainted with the workings of the Forestry Commission, nearly fifty years ago, land agents were changed every few years, presumably under the impression that they could thereby be saved from the temptations of corruption, rather in the same way that tax officers are or were moved about. It was an unfortunate policy because of all departments in the Commission, the land agent's particularly benefits from continuity. The ability to recall that twenty years ago some lessee gave trouble, or that a drain was laid in a particular place, or that a licence was refused for important reasons, is absolutely invaluable. In such matters, Will Parke has excelled and of course nothing of a formal land-holding nature is ever approved in the Forest without passing across the agent's desk.

At the June Court a presentation to Will was made by the Verderers. In reply to the Official Verderer's congratulations, Will remarked that it was only the second time in twenty five years that he had spoken at the Court and that, I think, sums up the man very well. He will certainly be missed in Queen's House and the Verderers' Office, while his successor, Mark Street, will have a difficult example to follow.

Lord Manners

A great deal has been written following the recent death of Lord Manners, former Official Verderer of the New Forest, and there is little that needs to be added. He was certainly a remarkable character, if not always the easiest person to work with on the Court. It has rightly been said that the great achievement of the Court during his time as chairman was the defeat of the Lyndhurst Bypass bill in 1988. If that bill had succeeded, it would have had devastating consequences for the Forest, allowing the building of a major road deep in the woods and on the heaths. It would also have so weakened the position of the Verderers that it is doubtful if they could have survived the imposition of the national park some eighteen years later.

While the bill was in progress through the select committees, those of us who were witnesses or advising our legal representatives, practically lived in the Palace of Westminster, but it was an evening visit to our Parliamentary Agents which remains dominant in my memory. Lord Manners loaded his car full of witnesses and drove us to London. He brought to his driving the same bravado and enthusiasm which had distinguished him as a fighter pilot. I had considerable doubts as to whether any of us would make it there and back alive. Perhaps Hampshire County Council came closer to success that day than they ever imagined possible.

Keeping the Lyndhurst deer in

The great original purpose of royal forests was, of course, to provide for the king's hunting. There could also be within the forests special deer parks, perhaps as a ready source of meat or to provide a reliable quarry for the chase. Such a park existed on the south east of Lyndhurst and is said by Heywood Sumner to date from 1291. It clearly altered in form from

time to time and was enclosed by massive banks and ditches, the former probably surmounted by a high palisade. No section has ever been excavated across the Lyndhurst Park so, until last month, we knew nothing of the depth of the ditch. The laying of a new water pipe to Parkhill allowed me, together with the national park's archaeologist, to spend a pleasant Saturday morning at the bottom of the pipe trench recording the profile of the ditch. At that point it is nearly three metres wide and one and a half metres deep. Add to that the bank which in well preserved portions still stands nearly two metres high and, even ignoring wastage over the centuries, the earthwork may have been perhaps 3.5 m high (nearly 12 feet). A fence on top of that must have presented the deer with a truly formidable obstacle.

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