

## **NEW FOREST NOTES JULY 2009**

### **The National Park and its critics**

I am not sure that the recently announced resignation of the National Park's chief executive will really prove the answer to all the New Forest's problems. Last week's threat by the Authority to sue those of its critics who had dared to publish a letter, apparently written by unhappy members of the authority's own staff, suggests that the problem goes much deeper than one individual. The letter criticised staff relations within the organization, complained of low morale and attacked the authority's intended application to develop a headquarters site where no other developer could reasonably hope to obtain planning permission. Thus within little more than three years of its establishment the Park has sunk through successive degrees of public disillusionment, starting with fairly general apathy, progressing through irritation at petty restrictions in new conservation areas, to protests and demonstrations over elements of the "park plan". Finally the decline has reached the level of an unseemly squabble which the Park threatened to escalate into legal proceedings unless its critics backed off - and back off they did, at least to the extent of withdrawing the offending letter from their website. It is difficult to imagine a more notable downhill progression, but perhaps the saddest element of the whole business is not the actions of the authority but its omissions. Again and again over the last three years it could have championed the cause of the Forest against specific threats of development and damage, but chose instead to sit on the fence or evade the issues. As usual, it has been left to the Forest societies and to the Verderers to bear the brunt of these conflicts while the Park looked on. The result is that many people who had no understanding of a park's constitution, but who had a vague idea that a national park in the New Forest must be "a good thing", have discovered the depth of their mistake. There are, of course, some people ideologically wedded to the park system who remain very happy with its proceedings, but those apart, one seldom now meets anyone who is very enthusiastic about what it has done to the Forest: many are actively antagonistic.

It does seem to me that the legal muzzling of its critics by the Park's solicitors is remarkably ill-advised, directed as it has been at a group of respectable citizens. The letter they published was hardly a state secret. It had been sent to our members of parliament and to the government. It was widely quoted in the local press. To me it looks entirely genuine, if in some respects unpleasant. I cannot see how anyone beyond an inner circle of park staff could possibly have written it and I am not aware that the Authority has actually claimed that it is anything other than genuine, although clearly they dispute its contents. Moreover, what is to be achieved by trying to suppress something which is already well beyond suppression? The Park has occasionally been criticised for its ignorance of equine management, but even those who do not know one end of a horse from the other should be aware of the timing rules on closing stable doors. There can be few people interested in the Forest who have not read at least a summary. Those with computers will certainly have downloaded the full (and remarkable) version, while those without computers will have received copies from their

friends. In short the Park may have won a hollow legal victory while taking one more step towards political suicide.

### **The railway threat**

Of all the unlikely threats to the New Forest, few could have been so completely unexpected as the proposal to build a railway across the heaths from Brockenhurst to Ringwood, yet that is what we are facing if the Association of Train Operating Companies has its way. The fact that there was once a railway on this route is irrelevant. There was once an aerodrome at Beaulieu and a bombing range at Ashley Walk, but nobody is suggesting reviving those, even though I am sure that tourism interests would welcome a new airport, while the military is always hungry for training areas. The old railway, which had a very short lifespan in terms of Forest history, was returned to the open heath in accordance with the provisions of the Act under which it was originally taken. The Act required that the common rights be revived and they were. In due course the recipients of the land, the Crown Commissioners, handed it over to the Forestry Commission and the land was physically restored, if to a low standard. The course of the former line is subject to the same international conservation designations as the remainder of the New Forest. Its crossing cottages and station were sold off into private hands as was (presumably) the remainder of the line west of the Crown Forest. Part of it has been developed as a camp site and part as a cycle route. A fast (and fenced) new road has been constructed along much of its length. Four or five key bridges have been destroyed and the four surviving bridges would probably not meet modern safety standards.

I think it is fairly clear that such a new railway could only be built using the compulsive force of a new Act of Parliament and any Bill would be bitterly contested by the Forest at every stage. What, moreover, would happen to the road from Wilverley Lodge to Holmsley? The Verderers would certainly not allow a new unfenced road to replace it across the Forest and even the smallest road closure proposal brings forth howls of rage from the motoring public. There would, in effect, be a new Lyndhurst Bypass situation.

How wonderful it would be if, just for once, the National Park, the Forestry Commission and Natural England could all come together in support of the Forest and say firmly that so damaging a proposal as the new railway is utterly out of the question. I don't expect that to happen. Instead there will be fence-sitting and evasion so that, as usual the Verderers and the Forest societies will be left to stand alone against the threat.

### **Mallard Mead**

South of the road from Lyndhurst to Ashurst and beyond a thick screen of woodland is a delightful grassy lawn known as Mallard Mead. An old bank surrounds it and shows that until recent years it was fenced-in. In the 18th Century it was known as a "keeper's mead" presumably attached to the nearby Ironhill Lodge. Richard Reeves of the Christopher Tower Library tells me that it is likely to have been made at about the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century. A further enclosure immediately to the north and now indistinguishable from the surrounding ancient woodland was known as "Wild Ground".

Mallard Mead falls within the scope of a further massive drain-filling and stream diversion project now being planned by the Forestry Commission. Public expenditure may be coming under the axe in just about every other sphere, but for such works as this in the New Forest the flow of money seems limitless. Anyhow, the Commission wants to cut a new channel through the middle of Mallard Mead, at the same time partially filling the existing tree-lined course of the Beaulieu River. The new course will follow the relic line of an old watercourse which is visible in the surface of the green.

I cannot help feeling that such schemes are becoming increasingly bizarre. When these works first started, they were directed at repairing damage caused by excessive draining in the 1970s. There was, in some instances, an arguable case for such repair, but having got a foot in the door, the Commission then turned its attention to the drains of the 1930s. Next it was the turn of the 150 year old watercourses of the so-called "Railway Fund" and the drains made from the timber Inclosures two hundred years ago. These are all integral parts of the history and landscape of the Forest. Next it tried to obtain consent to "restore" late 18<sup>th</sup> Century watercourses and now we are faced with an application to fill an Elizabethan stream ! Where will it all end ? Shall we next have a proposal to fill the ditch of a supposedly Saxon enclosure on Sloden hillside, or will the Bronze Age boiling mounds be considered objectionable as masking Neolithic stream courses ? There must certainly be a million or two pounds available for destroying so recent an abomination as the Mediaeval Bishop's Dyke.

The New Forest Commoners Defence Association has been able to negotiate some compensatory scrub clearance in return for the potential damage to Mallard Mead, so that the work is very likely to go ahead. Whether it results in a charming babbling brook across the green or a smelly quagmire where there is now good grazing is not really the point. There must surely be a limit to the Commission's ambitions to disrupt the historical features of the Forest's watercourses.

Mallard Mead lies at the head of the new project with further works running down the Beaulieu River as far as Ashurst Lodge and south east to another abandoned field – the old Lyndhurst Sewage works. It sounds disagreeable, but is actually now a very pleasant spot with all trace of the old works vanishing under the Forest vegetation. Only the smashed sewer pipe disgorges (clean) water over the Forest making an unpleasant bog. In my early days in Lyndhurst, this field was a very nasty place. The works were worn out and filtered but untreated sewage was discharged indirectly to the river. The Verderers fought a great battle to have the place closed down and eventually it was replaced by the new works in Dunces Arch Inclosure. Cleaned effluent is discharged northwards from there to, I think, Bartley Water, so that the upper Beaulieu River is reasonably clean, although something unpleasant still seems to be escaping from Lyndhurst.

When I first joined the Verderers' Court, I somehow acquired the unenviable job of observing, recording and negotiating over the problems of the old Lyndhurst sewage works. The then keeper or warden of the sewage field was a very pleasant chap who was often to be seen through the fence surrounded by tomato plants. That seemed to me a strange crop to

be cultivating deep in the Forest and I asked him about it one day. He apparently ran a thriving trade supplying plants to gardeners for miles around and the explanation was simple if unappealing. Tomato pips escape the ravages of the human digestive system and arrive at the sewage works in vast quantities. That, together with the fecund environment within a sewage farm makes ideal conditions for tomato plant production. His trade must have died with the old works and I hardly suppose the operators at Dunces Arch, under the scrutiny of health and safety regulations, have succeeded him.

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