

# NEW FOREST NOTES JULY 2017

## National Park's recreation plans

Last month the national park authority announced a consultation on updating its recreation management strategy. Leaving aside the question of why the park should be concerning itself in management of the crown lands (a matter for the Forestry Commission and Verderers alone), the reported words of the park chairman appeared encouraging. They seemed to give some hope that that the present recreational free-for-all in the Forest might finally be curbed and that an attempt would be made to push back the intense pressure on the “tranquil areas”. This pressure has been steadily worsening since the park was established and its policies of promoting recreational opportunities in the Forest began to bite. Anyone who shared my optimism on reading the chairman's words is likely to have been thoroughly disillusioned on seeing the actual content of the consultation document. Instead of providing ideas on how the decline of the Forest might be reversed, the consultation is simply about reprioritizing fifteen extremely woolly policies extracted from the “Recreational Management Strategy 2010-2030”. Of these fifteen, two or three are more or less neutral in their effect. For example, a policy to “help golf clubs manage their land to ensure related facilities fit well into the landscape” is harmless enough, but scarcely begins to tackle the ills of a Forest groaning under the pressures of excess recreation. Since the Forestry Commission and the Verderers have already imposed very strict rules on the three golf courses located on Forest land, the park's intervention is hardly necessary. The remaining dozen policies have, in the actual words used, far more to do with promoting, improving, creating, encouraging and enabling recreational activities, than any attempt to roll back the forces already wrecking the Forest as an area of tranquillity and beauty.

The consultation document starts off with an innocuous, if rather pointless, tick-box page asking what recreational uses respondents make of the Forest and how frequent that use is. It seems pointless because it will reflect not what use is made of the Forest for recreation, but what use is made by those completing the questionnaire. Perhaps that is the intention. However, I appreciate that officials enjoy such statistics and their formal collection can do no harm.

Those completing the form are then instructed to select up to six of the fifteen topics they think should be given priority. Unfortunately the topics are almost all multi-faceted, making this a near impossible task. In respect of cycling the “policy” (if such it is) starts with “improve safety” and that is something which everyone from the most enthusiastic cyclist to the Forest interests fighting cycle trespass, could hardly quarrel with. It then goes on to say that there should be “improvements to connectivity and use of an agreed network of routes”

etc. That is park code for pressuring the Forest to accept more cycle routes off road and often in otherwise relatively quiet areas. In this, of course, the cycling interests and those of the Forest are at variance, yet we are invited to prioritize a policy containing two conflicting interests (safety and development) and that simply cannot be done. That is just one example of the ill-designed consultation process where support for one part of a policy is in conflict with opposition to another. Why not ask two simple questions – “Should priority be given to increasing safety for cyclists ?” and “Should there be priority for more off-road cycling tracks to connect up portions of the existing network ?”

Section three of the form is the only one which has much value in that it is a blank space in which respondents have the opportunity to give views on the impacts of recreation, what action should be taken in the light of those impacts or (presumably) what additional recreational development ought to be undertaken. However, it includes the standard nonsense of seeking comments on “how we can all enjoy outdoor activities and protect the New Forest”. The plain fact is that we cannot achieve those two objectives to the extent that meets the present overwhelming level of recreational demands. They are in irreconcilable conflict and the park should know perfectly well that in circumstances like this its statutory duty is to give priority to protection. That, of course, does not suit its long established (if never directly expressed) objectives of promotion and development. We have to decide either to restrain demand-fuelled pressures, in order to save some element of what the Forest once was, or to surrender to those pressures and accept what the Verderers in their Policies have called the “urban park” rather than the “precious wilderness”.

Finally there is a page of politically correct irrelevance, mercifully described as optional, in which we are invited to describe our ethnic group or background, our disabilities or lack of them, our age and our post code. Does it really matter to anyone how many disabled Irish travellers from Torquay or how many white English octogenarians from Tunbridge Wells have sat down and struggled to give impossible answers to an extremely ill-designed set of questions ? They will all probably end up disgusted and united in their desire to forget the entire process over a pint of Guinness. This section of the form will do nothing towards saving a single threatened ground-nesting bird or preventing one picnic party from throwing its rubbish into the nearest bush.

### **Ancient history**

In recent years it has been increasingly difficult for archaeologists to pursue the programme of excavations which over the last fifty years has added so much to our knowledge of the Forest’s ancient history. Red tape in quantities which would have satisfied even Sir Humphrey Appleby has made the process of getting permits from the relevant

authorities almost impossible. During June, Paul Everill of Winchester University continued his 2016 excavation at Denny on the site of a 14<sup>th</sup> century hunting lodge and earlier features underlying it, but permission for his work arrived only one day before excavation was due to start. Bearing in mind that many months are usually needed to organize a volunteer labour force, dependent on fixing holiday periods, such late issue of permits is quite ridiculous. Fortunately in the case of Denny the work was able to go ahead because the bulk of the labour force was made up of students.

Equally frustrating has been the delays attending the issue of permits for work by Professor Tony King on behalf of the New Forest History and Archaeology Group. Two years of inaction within the authorities finally ended with the issue of a permit during June for work which is to take place in the last week of August. This project (at Brockenhurst) looks like being particularly fascinating in that it is to investigate a settlement, which is probably Roman, at least in part, just outside the village. Here the labour force will be made up chiefly of local volunteers and I understand that the director would welcome new recruits – especially those with some experience of archaeological excavation. Anyone interested should contact the labour coordinator, Wendy Wiseman, at [wendy@arthur5.plus.com](mailto:wendy@arthur5.plus.com)

### **Water in the Forest**

At the June Verderers' court, Mrs. Mary Gray of Bramshaw made an appeal to residents not to put out water for Forest livestock in places where the animals are at risk of being hit by motor vehicles – as they are on road edges outside houses. Her presentment came at the peak of the recent heatwave when some well-meaning people assumed that the animals were in desperate need of water and so placed buckets or troughs outside their gates - almost invariably on the highway edge. In fact, even in the most extreme hot weather such as we experienced in the third week of June, there is no need for the provision of water. All Forest animals have defined territories, quite often several hundred acres in extent, and they know exactly where to go for water. Of course in hot dry weather many of the streams and small ponds dry out so that the Forest appears parched and waterless, but this is a misleading picture. Many of the bogs and hillside springs continue to provide a more than adequate supply of water and the animals know exactly where it is. In some places, where there are particularly large herds of animals, mains water is supplied through troughs, but more for the convenience of stock than out of necessity. Through this provision a long hot walk to water in the middle of the day can be avoided. Examples are to be found on Janesmoor Plain at Fritham, at Beaulieu Road (Lyndhurst) and near Ashurst Lodge.

Many Forest people remember the drought of 1976 when, after months without rain, there were real concerns about the adequacy of natural water supplies. Even then such

fears proved quite groundless. A detailed assessment of water sources in the central and northern parts of the Forest was undertaken, the former being done by the late Mrs. June Irvine, while I dealt with the north. Nearly all the streams were dry, at least in part, but some of the hillside springs which are fed from sources beneath the gravel capping of the ridges, seemed almost unaffected. One in particular at the head of Black Gutter Bottom provided (despite the name) abundant clear water for ponies and cattle coming from over a wide area to the north. By the end of July 1976, many trees throughout the Forest were dying and few streams continued to run. In Foulford Bottom near Picket Post the normally free-flowing brook appeared only in segments, with the remainder going underground. In the dry places between these segments the sound of running water underground could still be heard at the surface.

Perhaps the most remarkable record made at the time related to Latchmore Brook. The stream was completely dry where it emerged from Alderhill Inclosure and upstream from that point almost to Fritham Bridge. There the brook is joined by a small tributary from west of Crock Hill whose flow seemed almost undiminished after months of drought, in marked contrast to the big stream which it fed. The origin of this seemingly endless supply of clear water is the line of springs arising within the ancient landslips and seepage terraces which line Hampton Ridge from Amberwood Cottage to Stainer's Hat. Today the stream is still there, but its channel has been sadly neglected by the Forestry Commission, so that the water now spills out resulting in the creation of a swampy area which is steadily killing the beautiful Napoleonic oaks with which it is planted.

A full record of the 1976 observations may be found in report number 14 of the New Forest Section (Hampshire Field Club), January 1977.

Anthony Pasmore.