

NEW FOREST NOTES JULY 2018

The latest stream filling projects in the Forest

The seemingly endless flow of stream filling projects within the Forest has received a boost this summer with the Verderers' approval of an additional three schemes, all within the north of the Forest. Another scheme at Pitts Wood has been sent back for further information. Of the three approved, the filling of the brook at Cunniger Bottom near Godshill is a major operation requiring large volumes of imported material to fill a stream which has not been artificially dug out and which has remained unaltered except for a few cubic meters of natural erosion for as long as anyone can remember. Works at Shobley Bottom and Deadman Bottom are more minor. The Deadman Bottom project is nevertheless interesting in that it strays far from the original concept of filling the artificial drains of post-war years and will seek the destruction of entirely natural features of the Forest in an area where no drainage has ever been undertaken and where drainage elsewhere has had no displaced effect whatever on the site. For those who don't know the area, Deadman Bottom (despite its gruesome name) is a delightful dry valley for most of the year with a grassy floor over much of its length. There are occasional springs both in the base of the valley and on the slopes above, but in the few places where there is any water channel at all it is what would be called in Dorset a "winterborne". In periods of heavy rain, water flows over the surface, filling the stream where it exists and carving out little pools in the subsoil. It has been unchanged throughout my lifetime and probably throughout all recorded history. In the Bronze Age the little springs and other ephemeral water sources here were used by the local people for communal water heating sites. A more undisturbed and natural place is difficult to find in the New Forest. Now it appears that Natural England has taken against these landscape features and has decided that some of them must be filled-in because they make the valley "unfavourable" for its obscure purposes. Certainly there are some old posts within a few of the water holes, but these are no more than the result of earlier ill-conceived filling projects that failed. Certainly the posts need removal, but no more than that is required. Even the little winding stream adjoining the east end of Turf Hill Inclosure, beloved of visitors, is to be partially filled (it is a terrifying and unnatural 12 inch deep chasm in places) as part of this box-ticking exercise. Not only is this an appalling waste of public money – the HLS scheme which is financing it seems to be an integral part of the notorious magic money tree phenomenon – but it will damage interesting and (in the Forest) rare geomorphological features. That will not concern the visitors. For them it is just a nice place to bring the children to play and that in itself is good enough reason to leave it alone.

I get the impression that the promoters of such projects are casting about desperately to find holes into which to throw money in the dying days of the HLS scheme and so as to keep the momentum of expenditure going in the hope of securing funds for a fresh round of similar operations throughout the Forest.

Filming in the Forest

At the June Court the Verderers discussed the ever increasing demands from the makers of documentary films about the Forest. Of course permission to film on the Forest is strictly a matter for the Forestry Commission and unless the work has implications for livestock or the special qualities of the Forest, the Verderers have no say in the matter. Feature films such as "Robin Hood Prince of Thieves" which was made partly in the Forest can have a devastating effect and are in an entirely different category. Unfortunately the big attraction for documentary film makers is not the production of timber or the running of a camp site, which are Forestry Commission matters. They want action and pseudo-history. The work and aura of the Verderers supplies both in plenty. High on the list of magnets are the pony round ups (drifts) organized by the Court. Galloping ponies in clouds of dust make spectacular films, but the filming can cause extra danger and can disrupt the already quite difficult work of the agisters. Away from the Wild West activities of the drift season there is the enduring fascination of the "ancient mediaeval Court of Verderers" whose powers are said to be a survival of the Norman Forest Law. The fact that the Verderers' powers mostly date from post-war Acts of Parliament and that the present court is only a decade older than the county councils does not seem to matter to the film makers. Why spoil a good story? They want to hear of appalling mutilations for Forest offences and of dogs' claws being struck off with chisels to stop them hunting. To them it does not matter that the Court's actual business is dominated by such matters as the approval of a gas pipe or the interpretation of a forestry lease. Altogether the demands of filming place an immense burden not only on the Court's employees in the field, but also on the office staff. Moreover, the Verderers themselves are, by and large, not a charismatic bunch and they are reluctant to be interviewed. When they are trapped into it they are perhaps not the most effective advocates for the Forest.

In an attempt to meet some of these challenges the Court is to seek advice from bodies like the local authorities who have their own public relations departments and especially the national park authority which is a master in the art of selling itself. I hope the Court will not go too far along that route, which seems to me to deliver a good deal more spin than substance.

Pylons

Eleven years ago the Verderers issued a policy document called “The New Forest – precious wilderness or suburban park ?” It sets out how the Court will seek to ensure the protection of the Forest in exercising its management functions. To my mind it was (and remains) the most important and unequivocal statement of what is needed to protect the Forest from further damage and to start correcting some of the dreadful mistakes of the past. At eleven A5 pages it is certainly the most succinct Forest plan ever produced.

One section of the policies deals with public development such as roads and power lines, with the Court pledged to support the latter being put underground. Some progress in this direction has already been made with schemes at Hincheslea and another in prospect at Burley. The real prize, however, was always the removal of the 400kv pylon line across the north of the Forest. This abomination dominates the landscape for five miles to the south. The policy document actually illustrates the line as one of the worst modern intrusions on the Forest landscape. At the time the policies were formulated, the burial of this line seemed an impossible dream, yet the government has now provided money to “underground” the very worst examples of pylons blighting the landscape of our most cherished areas of natural beauty. In West Dorset, for example, the landscape is about to be transformed by the removal of an appalling line of pylons near Winterborne Abbas. At the June Court, the Official Verderer reiterated support in principle for such undergrounding, while making it clear that much detail needed to be considered and that no decision has yet been taken.

Initially it seemed that all was going smoothly with this scheme, but a recent revision of the route for the undergrounding, to accommodate concerns of Natural England, has understandably upset adjoining residents who would now be disturbed by engineering operations near to their houses, over a four month period during the two year project. They believe that the inevitable disruption of the surroundings (albeit temporary), including common land immediately adjacent, will eliminate wildlife and terrify ponies into abandoning their haunts and driving them onto the roads to be killed. Those not so affected will be at the mercy of lunatic drivers delivering materials to the site along an internal construction road. There have been claims that heat from the buried cables will be so great as to destroy any vegetation (National Grid says 0.5 degrees increase which will have no effect). They believe that restoration of the heathland is otherwise either impossible or will take twenty five years and that in any case the cables will have to be dug up every few decades for replacement. In short, just about every evil imaginable is laid at the door of the government funded scheme and National Grid. They conclude that compared to all of this the landscape gains are of no consequence. They might be right, but I doubt it.

Between 1939 and 1946 the military authorities appropriated nearly nine thousand acres of the New Forest. They bombed it from the air, laid concrete over huge areas, built camps equivalent to small towns, burnt oil on it and tested explosives. Eventually almost all the buildings and concrete were removed and the land came back to the Forest. Virtually no restoration work was carried out, yet the natural vegetation re-established itself (except where huge amounts of lime had been imported) and today those encroachments are pretty well indistinguishable from what had existed before the war. By comparison with all of this the work to underground the pylon line will be in the region of 50 acres undertaken in four sections to minimise disturbance. In addition there will be immediate restoration using all the best expertise (and it is considerable) available today.

Leaving aside all the arguments and counter arguments, it is clearly disagreeable to have engineering work close to your house for several months. I am sure nobody would deny this. Without making any judgement on the scheme or the merits of the objections, the Verderers have asked National Grid to look at a possible alternative southern alignment which would take the line far from most of the houses of the principal objectors and impinge only marginally on Hale Purlieu. It may be that there are engineering difficulties which would prevent such a route from being worked, but it is at least worth investigating.

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