

## **New Forest Notes – July 1995**

### **The New Forest Museum**

To the serious student of the Forest's history, archaeology or natural history, there can have been few greater disappointments than the so-called New Forest Museum. During the 1970s there was a collective dream of a centre which would co-ordinate research, provide library and lecture facilities, deal with the conservation of finds and employ enthusiastic and knowledgeable staff. Then, with the formation of the New Forest Ninth Centenary Trust and its plans for a Forest museum, these dreams seemed about to come true. A site was acquired in the centre of Lyndhurst and a fine building was erected on it. At this point with local hopes so nearly fulfilled, the project seemed to collapse in ruins.

Instead of the hoped for centre for research, the greater part of the building was turned over to a commercial operator to provide an elementary impression of the Forest for visitors, together with a tourist information office. As a provider of these services it is no doubt admirable, but to many in the Forest it seemed worse than useless. For years beforehand, the experts in planning and tourism had been saying that the very last place for a visitor centre was Lyndhurst because of its traffic problems, but that was precisely where it was built. Perhaps it scraped through the planning procedure under the guise of a "museum"., I doubt if anyone has calculated its contribution to traffic volumes in the village, but with extensive advertising and distant signing, it must be considerable.

While the bulk of the museum complex had thus been written off for most local purposes, the trustees did retain in their own control two upstairs rooms - a small lecture hall and an office. To the outside world, nothing very much seemed to go on there, apart from an occasional art exhibition and some "education" of school parties. A fine collection of Forest books donated by the late Miss F. Hardcastle sat in untidy piles on some shelving and the whole place had a disorganised air. However, this fragment of the original project remained outside the honeypot operations on the ground floor. Now, nearly ten years after the museum opened, there is at long last the chance that some part of the original hopes for the centre might be realised. In February the trustees appointed Jude James as a consultant to widen and improve the facilities offered by the small part of the accommodation they retain.

Jude James is well known for his local history research and adult education activities throughout the New Forest area. He is a past president of the Hampshire Field Club and chairman of the New Forest Research and Publication Trust, as well as the author of several important books on aspects of the areas history. Within a few weeks of taking up his new position, the accommodation has been tidied up and transformed. The library has been properly catalogued and stored and will usually open to the public from 10 a.m to 4 p.m. on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays (other times appointment). Photocopy facilities are available and determined attempts are being made to expand the collection. Jude is encouraging local societies to make use of the centre and to become involved in its work. Perhaps all this remains a long way from the original dream of a base for New Forest research but it is at least a worthwhile beginning.

**"Forest Reflections"**

In the middle of the last century there appeared a journal called "The New Forest Magazine". If it had chronicled the great battles to preserve the Forest from inclosure, it would have been of immense value to local historians of today. Unfortunately for them it was a church publication and contained, despite its title, virtually no references to the New Forest. It was a curious paper, evidently produced from some central church source as 90 per cent of it comprised bible stories, sermons and moral tales - usually 20 pages or more. Only the front and back pages, presumably printed locally contained notes relating to Forest parishes. I have seen copies from the 1880s and at the beginning of that period really only Lyndhurst, Dibden and sometimes Bramshaw notes appear. Later on, Emery Down and North Eling are also included.

The New Forest Magazine survived well into the second half of this century and by the time it expired (some time in the early 1970s I think) it served most of the parishes in the Forest and was an entirely local publication with formal sermons and bible stories virtually eliminated. On its demise no doubt the parishes all went their separate ways producing magazines of their own -- some church based and others secular.

It is not recorded what effect a century's influence of the New Forest Magazine had upon the morals of the people of Bramshaw. Perhaps it bred staying power and taught patience if they had to tackle 20 pages of sermons each month, but it certainly failed to weaken their entrepreneurial spirit. In 1973, the village magazine "Forest Views" was launched in its present form. More than twenty years later it has a circulation of almost 400 with copies finding their way many miles beyond the parish boundaries. It has a curious pricing system in which subscribers pay annually whatever they think the magazine is worth. Their opinion is evidently high because by 1991 the magazine's committee found themselves so overwhelmed with money that they decided upon a lavish volume reprinting the best and most interesting articles of the last 20 years. The result, *Forest Reflections* is published hardbacked this month at a price of £12 and can be obtained from local bookshops. With over 200 pages, numerous drawings, photographs and colour plates. It is a tribute to the vibrant community spirit which survives in Bramshaw while some other Forest villages have degenerated into unfriendly commuter dormitories.

The extracted articles cover a vast range of subjects, but are broadly divided into local history, wildlife and records of important happenings in the village and the surrounding Forest. Indeed the success of the magazine may be due in part to the fact that it has concentrated in large measure upon the Forest and not confined its coverage of events within tight parish boundaries. That it is not a church publication is immediately apparent from the many humorous and sometimes faintly improper stories reproduced - particularly tales of some wicked goings on in Fritham. The reminiscences of Charles Sillence, cowman to the late Col. Le Marchant figure prominently among them. Those acquainted with the Winter family of that village, will not be surprised to know that they also appear regularly within the pages of "Forest Reflections".

Apart from its humorous side, the book also contains much worthwhile local history collected almost exclusively from the memories of ancient inhabitants. However, like all information from such sources, it needs to be treated with caution.

Whether "Forest Reflections" will solve the financial problems of its publishers, I rather doubt. It could well produce for them an even larger and more troublesome surplus of funds.

### **How to run the New Forest**

Unless my attention has lapsed and I have missed some crucial paper on the subject, there must have been a period of several months in which no-one has published a report on how to change some aspect of the Forests management. That hiatus could not last and now a new season of report production seems to be opening. Within a few weeks we are promised the New Forest Committee's strategy for running the Forest and its suburban fringe. However, the first in the field is the Hampshire Wildlife Trust with its proposals "Towards a Strategy for the 21st Century." It has the merits of being short and printed with large type. It also contains some excellent material, especially on the management of the timber inclosures of the Forest. For example, it states clearly that some of the 18th and 19th Century oak plantations must cease to be regarded as commercial resources to be exploited for profit. Few outside the Forestry Commission would now argue with that proposition. On the management of the Open Forest, there are some high policies, cloaked in jargon, which are likely to arouse the suspicion of the commoners. A recent improvement in relations between them and English Nature has left the Hampshire Wildlife Trust as the champion of hard-line conservation in the Forest. It is easy to say, as the trust does, that commoners are a crucial element in the Forests survival, but it means little if you then go on to block their most desired works of grazing maintenance.

Unfortunately, it seems that the underlying purpose of the report is an attempt to breathe new life into the quasi-national park proposals for the Forest which, like every good monster, refuses to die quietly. The trust is extremely reticent about the roles it sees for existing management agencies. It does not even mention the Verderers, upon whose development control powers have depended the very survival of the Forest. It implies that the Forestry Commission should be quietly edged out of its present management position or at least that it should become a minor player. That of course, means that there must be something to take its place. The whole of the management proposals are in carefully coded wording, but stripped of their verbal padding they seem to demand a new statutory body based on the New Forest Committee (which in my view would very quickly be running the Forest), although there is still the usual smoke screen reference to "co-ordination", "overview of problems", "unifying body" and so on.

On the same theme, although certainly not emanating from the Wildlife Trust, there has developed over the last few days a new line in blackmail over the Forest management. This maintains that the Forest should knuckle down and accept a new super authority while it has the chance. If it fails to do so, the story goes, the inevitable result of the general election will be a new government whose burning priority will be the national parking of the New Forest!