

New Forest Notes – July 1996

The Forest's Ancient History

THERE is never a time when, some corner of the Forest does not conceal a scientist pursuing some obscure beetle, concocting theories on geomorphology or counting the number of lousewort plants per square kilometre. The results of much of this work end up in university libraries and are practically inaccessible to the locals public. One survey of a rather different character is in progress at present and, that is being carried out by the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments based in Swindon. It was originally billed as a comprehensive study of the Forest's rich archaeology, but the Commission has been subject to severe, financial cut-backs and the project has suffered accordingly. It is now confined to studies of a few areas or particular classes of site. The resulting maps, of which I have seen several draft copies, are superb records which will be an invaluable base for future research

However, it has been difficult to organise very close co-operation between the Commission's Surveyors and those amateur Archaeologists who have amassed a vast store of local knowledge over the last forty years. Certainly the Commissions staff has examined and copied material from locally held records, but thereafter they have gone their own way and sometimes arrived at incomplete or dubious conclusions. I hope that these difficulties may now have been sorted out in time for what may be the final season of surveying during the coming winter.

Archaeological fieldwork in the New Forest is a strictly seasonal business. Most ancient sites are, at least in part, bracken covered and it is surprising how little bracken can mask the very faint traces of abandoned agriculture and occupation which are the archaeologists raw materials. Heavy rain or snowfall during the early part of the winter crushes the dead bracken and, the more it is crushed, the better are conditions for discovery and survey. This year, from December to May, conditions were as near perfect in the Forest as I can remember. The very late spring also allowed survey work to continuing into early June. Unfortunately, the Commission seems to have done little on the open forest during this period and is concentrating its remaining effort and resources on the coming winter.

One of the great problems with research of this kind in the New Forest is that publication of results presents special difficulties. Because in the Forest almost unrestricted public access is permitted, many of the more vulnerable (and publicly known) archaeological sites have been robbed by metal detector operators and others. The use of metal detectors in the Forest is, of course illegal, but much damage was done before the byelaw was introduced and occasional raids are still taking place. At one time a local dealer was openly selling antiquities robbed from the Forest. The publication of research undertaken on private farmland presents little problem. Anyone found on such land is trespassing and I assume that taking material under such conditions is theft, but in the Forest precautions have to be very strict and all sensitive information has to be withheld. Just as a naturalist would not publish a list of wild gladiolus sites in the Forest, so details of the Iron Age and Roman remains which are so important to the Forests history must be withheld. This does not mean that a general picture of the Forest's archaeology has to be kept secret. Small scale non-specific distribution maps are perfectly acceptable and, I hope, will be the basis of any eventual publication by the Royal

Commission. This is certainly the understanding on which the Hampshire Field Club has made available its records to the survey team.

Eighteen Million Visits

The news that the New Forest COMmittee's consultants on using the New Forest for sport have discovered eighteen million day visits per year (whether by locals or locals and tourists is not clear) has caused consternation in some quarters, The "traditional" figure has been eight to ten million day visits. However, the present panic merely goes to demonstrate how little many of those who influence the Forest,s destiny really understand. The number of day visits is quite irrelevant. It does not matter if there are forty million such visits provided no damage is being done, while only one million visits are, unacceptable if the Forest's character is degraded by them.

The hard fact is that for years past the fabric, peace and solitude of the Forest has been eroded by gross over use. Pious statements from those in authority have always been along the lines that "there is a danger of the Forest being over used." It is always future damage to which they refer - never current or continuing degradation. There seem to be two reasons for this. Firstly, if over use is admitted, it is accepted that someone should be taking action and no-one wants to do so because of the political difficulties. It is easy to propose or commission surveys and studies, but actually to take measures to control damage is unpopular and is shied away from - as witness the recent retreat in the face of mountain bike pressures.

The second reason for failure to act is much more fundamental but one which, I suspect, is seldom recognised. It is that many of those who influence the Forest's management have virtually no knowledge of what is happening on the ground: they simply do not know the Forest. They drive about its roads of course, and perhaps take an occasional stroll from a favourite car park, but as to what is going on in the depths, they have not a clue, If it looks pretty from the road, it must be fine. Why try to regulate its use? This criticism of management is certainly not universally applicable. I know that many of the Forestry Commission's staff (at least those who stay here long enough) , have an intimate knowledge of the Forest. There is even one senior Commission officer who lives some distance away, whose daily work is in the Forest and whose weekend recreation is walking in it!- Among my colleagues on the Verderers' Court there are several people whose knowledge of the Forest's geography is encyclopedic. Comment on a broken gate catch in some obscure Inclosure fifteen miles away and they are sure to have seen it last, week. The problem come with increasing numbers of officials and others, often from Winchester or beyond, who hold forth on what is good for the Forest when one suspects that they know little of it beyond the fences of the A31 or the view from a committee room in Lyndhurst.

Perhaps an examination equivalent to that endured by London taxi drivers might be appropriate for those seeking to manage the Forest. As a final test they could be taken blindfolded to a remote spot where the blindfold would be removed and they would then be required to make a precise map identification of their position after no more than a ten minutes walk.

Plantation negotiations,

Now that the row over the extent and rate of the Forestry Commission's proposed Inclosure fellings has died down a little, the New Forest Association and the Commission have started to talk

about ways in which such problems might be avoided in future. It has to be said, however, that there has still been no satisfactory solution to the dispute over the tree cutting which is about to be carried out. Some vague assurances have been given as to the toning, down of the more blatantly commercial aspects of the work and felling in the three most controversial Inclosures - Islands Thorns, Bramshaw Wood and South Bentley - has been postponed pending further discussions and reports. The Commission apparently feels it is too late for anything more concrete to be done in the remaining cases.

As to the negotiations on future work, the Association has prepared a set of proposals which would ensure that the plantations are managed in strict accordance with the letter and spirit of the Acts and directives which are supposed to ensure the protection of the Forest. However, it has been agreed that until the discussions are concluded, this shopping list will, not be made public to avoid either side being pushed into a corner from which it cannot retreat. It may seem a trifle odd that anyone should have to negotiate for what ministers have promised or the law requires, but clearly the Commission's interpretation of both may differ from that of the amenity societies, wildlife interests - and the public.

During the course of preliminary discussions, it has become clear that the Commission undertakes an extensive programme of consultation prior to submitting its felling plans to the Forest Authority. Again, it seems peculiar that one element of the Forestry Commission should sit in judgement on the proposals of the other, but no doubt the two parts are kept entirely separate. From the wildlife point of view, the consultation - process is straightforward and comprises, discussions with English Nature. Similarly, there are established procedures for dealing with archaeology. However, the Association's representatives were much surprised to learn of the new (1994) arrangements for landscape consulting. Apparently the Commission now consults the New Forest District Council on this subject. I have always been a strong supporter of local government carrying out functions in its own specialist fields. Who better is there to deal with schools, libraries, parks and sports facilities? However, when it comes to the sensitive and highly specialised matters relating to the management of the New Forest, the council offices are just about the last place I would look for expertise. Of course the council has well trained officers expert in tree safety and care, but that is an entirely different matter.

Anyhow the proof of the inadequacy of such a system is already demonstrated. A competent judge of the Commission's 1996 proposals would have launched a public outcry against the planned excesses. If there was the smallest squeak of complaint from the council, it, certainly received no publicity. There was an outcry, but it was left to the voluntary societies, scientists and English Nature to engineer.