

## New Forest Notes – July 1997

### **Remote areas mirage**

In recent years it has become rather too common in New Forest management (not just that of the Forestry Commission) that dithering is substituted for positive action, however clear the need for that action may be. By common consent of those who really know what is going on in the Forest, the problem of mountain biking has this summer got quite out of control. Every pony path reveals tyre marks after rain and every Forest gravel road carries an intermittent stream of cyclists on fine days. No corner of the Forest is now free from constant and often noisy invasion. I am reliably informed that many of the Forestry Commission's field staff have simply lost heart and are reluctant to do anything of leadership and instruction from above. Even the notice boards at the entrances to the Forest which once confined cycling to the gravel roads have been removed. A chaotic free for all has been created and no-one seems prepared to do anything about it beyond talking endlessly in committees.

I was recently sent an article from a national magazine published in April) in which the author incited wholesale flouting of the Forestry Commission's byelaws by recommending illegal cycle routes through the woods around Lyndhurst and Minstead. Cyclists were told to "head south for some muddy good fun". They were recommended to violate Withybed Bottom and at Highland Water to "plunge down into the river from one side, get stuck in the mud on the other, then hop back over the bridge and try it from another trickier angle". When I telephoned the Commission's recreation manager, he said he was aware of the article, but apparently nothing had been done about it — two months after publication.

Even the Commission's cycle advisory group has effectively folded up for the moment. A compromise set of cycle routes agreed by the group at Christmas has been taken no further and the bikers have spent the intervening period trying to chip away at it to open up more and more of the Forest to legalised bedlam. The reason for the delay is an inquiry into so-called remote areas being undertaken by the New Forest Committee. Its results are supposed to be reflected in any recommendations of the cycle group. The basis upon which this study is being undertaken is set out in a paper circulated to the members, the language of which is so obscure as to be almost unintelligible. At first there had seemed some hope that the quiet areas of the Forest might be protected. However, so far as I can discover from the odd unguarded comment, there is a hidden agenda which seeks to squeeze into the remote areas as much recreation as possible, provided only that it does not do measurable physical damage or actual harm to some element of wildlife. As usual, the scientists and technocrats who determine policies (many of the latter knowing nothing of the Forest except what they are shown on Forestry Commission conducted tours) have missed the point entirely. Because what one authority called "wilderness quality" cannot be measured, photographed or plotted on a map, it is effectively disregarded. The pleasure to be gained by a lone walker in silent woodland is to be sacrificed to the demands of sport and recreation. Twenty jolly mountain bikers, in pursuit of "muddy good fun", laughing and shouting, can be in the farthest depths of the Forest within ten minutes of leaving any car park or road. Virtually no part of the Forest is more than a mile from a

tarmac highway. There is, apparently, to be no place in the New Forest for more than the tiniest fragments of land free from noisy and disruptive recreational pressure. The potentially quiet zones identified last year as being worth protecting intact seem likely to be fragmented by cycle routes for no better reason than that there is a demand for such routes. So long as physical damage is avoided, anything goes.

All this is profoundly depressing for those of us who see the New Forest as more than a giant recreation ground. I am sure that includes the silent majority of residents, walkers, and naturalists who value the Forest (perhaps without knowing it) for just that wilderness quality which is now so politically incorrect. Sport and recreation have become gods and the quiet places seem destined to be sacrificed to them through a confused and deceiving "remote areas" policy.

### **Another Aerial**

The Verderers have been investigating the sudden appearance of a new aerial mast deep in the Forest on the edge of Woodfidley Inclosure. The offending structure is, in fact, within the fenced margins of the railway line and is apparently for railway use. That does not alter the fact that it is an ugly intrusion, erected without a planning application being made, and with total disregard for the damage it does to the Forest. Of course safety is pleaded as a justification, but the railway has been operating since the 1840s without the need for this mast, so it is difficult to see why it is now so important.

The Court has been told that planning permission for such structures is not needed if they are less than 15m high. This mast looks higher than that to the sceptical eye. but my memories of trigonometry are too vague to attempt a precise calculation. Anyhow, legal or not, the railway is apparently threatening the sprouting of further similar masts, although it is not clear if these will be within the Forest.

### **The Forest at the Show**

Each year the representation of the New Forest at the New Forest Show increases. This year for the first time the Verderers will have their own stand, albeit within the precincts of the Forestry Commission's display. For some time past, the agisters have attended (also within the Commission's display) to explain to the public their practical work with the animals, but this time the work of the Court as a whole is to be represented. The distinction between these two branches of the Verderers' functions is important. Those who seek to belittle the Verderers in official reports and elsewhere, usually refer to them as "the people who look after the ponies", deliberately ignoring the major element of the Court's work controlling development and exploitation within the Forest. This is a function of the Verderers that local authorities, public utilities and others have very much resented in the past — hence their attempts to represent the Court as rural bumpkins obsessed with the trivial detail of their agricultural management.

It is hoped that at least one Verderer and the Clerk or her assistant will be on duty throughout the show to explain the non-agricultural duties of the Court. Like any public body, the Court can and occasionally has made a mess of its obligation to protect the Forest, but more usually it has been very effective. Damaging car parks, camp sites, roads, powerlines, airports and recreational facilities have

all been blocked over the years. We see the failures because they are still with us. The successes are represented by the physically unchanged face of the Forest.

The Forest societies — New Forest Association, Hampshire Field Club, Pony Breeders and Commoners' Defence Association — will have their usual stands in the New Forest tent. The Commoners' Defence in particular provides an important service by having available the Atlas of Forest Rights for free inspection by anyone with land, houses or gardens in or around the Forest. The Atlas is the official record of the rights attached to that property. This year there is a Verderers' election and the right to vote depends upon the rights attached to land. Anyone who occupies (owner or tenant) at least one acre with common rights is entitled to a vote and can be placed on the electoral register by completing a simple form at the show. Those on the existing register do not need to do this as they will automatically receive a form from the Clerk to the Verderers which need only be returned signed to the office. However, new voters must complete a form — at the show or at the Verderers' office if they are uncertain as to the rights they possess. Anyone interested in the Forest, whether farming or not, is entitled to vote if they have the necessary land qualification. However, the really sad thing is that there are still some practising commoners who are not on the register. This is their opportunity to secure voting rights. Commoners' Defence members will be on hand to assist with the Atlas searches and form-filling so that even the paperwork should not prove too painful.

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