

## **NEW FOREST NOTES - JUNE 2000**

### **Forest Design Plan Forum**

After two years, the initial work of the Forest Design Plan Forum is drawing to a close following the issue at last month's meeting of the final set of proposal maps. To a Forest punch drunk with committees and reports, this probably means very little. Most people, if they have ever heard of the Forum, have probably forgotten what it is about and I would certainly not blame them. However, this is one committee which, if it has not itself altered the future of the Forest, has at least rubber stamped government decisions which will have the most profound effect on the Forest's woodlands of any policy change since the 1850s. This, for once, is no jargon-filled and paper-wasting plan, but a fundamental alteration in the Forestry Commission's attitude to one aspect of management. It is an alteration almost entirely for the better although, as always, final judgement must be made on delivery and not on promises. For those who have no idea what the Forum is, it comprises a committee of local interest representatives which receives bulky folders of expensive coloured plans showing what the Commission thinks should be the future of the plantations in the New Forest. The forum discusses them, consumes a good lunch, makes helpful suggestions and supports the Commission in its public consultation exercises. What the Forum is not doing (whatever it may think) is making overall policy: that has evidently been decided at a much higher level.

In September last year, I outlined the first phase plans in which the Design Forum approved the clearance and return of most of the Verderers' Inclosures to the Open Forest. The Verderers' Inclosures are plantations which were made on ploughed-up heathland in the 1960s and planted with conifers. Compensation was paid to the Commoners via the Verderers' Court (hence the name). In September I said that the crucial test was still to come in that treatment of the old broadleaved plantations - mostly of Napoleonic and earlier oak - was still to be decided. Now that the remaining plans have been issued and all but the latest phase subjected to public consultation, there is reason to be very hopeful about the future of the old woods also. Most of the finest will be allowed to revert to semi-natural woodland, known in the New Forest at "Ancient Ornamental" (A&O), instead of being felled on reaching 200 years. This is the outcome for which so many people in the Forest fought throughout the 1960s and 1970s, in the days of illegal clear felling and wholesale elimination of oak and beech. The Forestry Commission, then, resisted with equal vigour.

It seemed inevitable that within the next fifteen years a major conflict would arise. That is because in 1970, the Minister of Agriculture granted a concession which allowed the old woods to survive until the age of 200 years. That ministerially determined lifespan was about to run out for most of the outstanding woods except those such as Islands Thorns, planted after the 1851 Deer Removal Act. If the future is now that which has been submitted to the Design Forum, the war will have been almost won without a shot being fired.

Exactly how this change of policy has come about is very far from clear. It is certainly not because of the influence of the Forum itself. Its members have merely fine tuned plans

fed to them by the Forestry Commission - admittedly securing some additional valuable concessions here and there. The real decisions were clearly made at government level, possibly that yet another New Forest battle was not wanted and that the commercial future of the old woods should be written off. Perhaps in thirty years someone will unearth the details in the Public Record Office. The Forum, despite making some useful contributions on matters of detail, has merely been the medium through which the new policy has been released to the public.

Like everything to do with trees, except their felling, the implementation of the new policy will be a slow one stretching over many decades. Today's children will find the Forest of their old age almost unrecognisable as a result of that policy, while even those of us with more limited life expectancy will see the beginnings of change. In general, the secure plantations which have dominated the Forest's landscape for two centuries will start to fragment. Corridors for wildlife and stock will be opened up through them. Many portions capable of being restored to heath will be cleared of trees. The fences will disappear from the most beautiful old oak and beech woods and, over centuries, they will revert slowly back to the form of ancient woodland which occupied their sites before the Inclosures were made. River and stream margins will often be cleared of trees to restore their conservation value. Commercial conifer plantations will be confined to fewer and more isolated blocks within the Inclosures, although they will still occupy substantial tracts. That, at least, is the intention, but in this increasingly fluid situation, it is difficult to see the continuation of commercial forestry in the New Forest over the long term. Total capitulation to the demands of conservation and amenity at this stage would be politically difficult. In many ways it is a pity that commercial timber production in the New Forest has established for itself such a dismal reputation. With a more sympathetic approach over the last fifty years, its collapse would not have been so inevitable. Moreover, the widespread hatred of conifer monoculture which it has engendered, has blinded many to the scenic merits of hardwood conifer mixtures, of open-grown Scots pine and of the exceptional contribution to the landscape of large old firs. A New Forest without the Douglas fir and Scots pine is to my mind unthinkable, but it is not so very far over the horizon.

For those of us used to the legal certainties of the past century and a half, the new plans are going to be difficult to get to terms with. Until now, Forest people knew that there were 17,600 acres of Statutory Inclosures, that 16,000 acres of these might be fenced at any one time, that hardwood trees must be allowed a 200 year lifespan, that the Verderers' Inclosures were held under an agreement for 150 years and so on. Now, although the legal framework will theoretically still exist, the actual management of the woods will be determined by extremely complex and detailed planning. How that plan is recorded (it will in effect be a new Forest Charter) and how the promises it enshrines are to be rendered sufficiently concrete to inspire long-term public confidence, are the big unanswered questions. Forest managers may see flexibility as a virtue, but it is certainly not always so - especially in a controversial area such as the New Forest. We need our tablets of stone equivalent to the Acts of

Parliament and the Minister's Mandate. If the Design Forum's work is to be of lasting value, the Deputy Surveyor will need to study for a new role as Moses.

### **Verderers' decision of Draghtunting**

A great many people in the Forest will be very disappointed at the Court's (small majority) decision to support draghtunting trials. The logic of this decision is very difficult to see. Back in October last year the Court was very firm in its view of trials. It decided that draghtunting would be an unacceptable additional pressure on the Forest, damaging to vegetation, disturbing to wildlife and commoners' stock and interfering with other Forest users. The Verderers said that whatever the outcome of trials, they could not grant consent for draghtunting because of their "determination to actively reduce overuse and damage to the fragile and sensitive heathland". That seemed a good clear policy with widespread support in the Forest community. Of course, in the interval the Forestry Commission and its guiding Minister piled on the pressure and the "determination" wavered. By May, draghtunting trials had become "useful to prove the Verderers' point in the longer term". That seems to me like announcing that smoking damages health, while instituting a universal smoking trial to see how many people get ill ! That also would prove a point.

I am not at all sure that draghtunting trials will do anything to prove a point - Verderers' point or anyone else's. The licensees will handle the trials with kid gloves to ensure that as few grass blades as possible are broken. They will inevitably proclaim the trials an outstanding success (so may the Forestry Commission and their directing Minister) and in the long term the Forest will be the loser.

### **A curious Spring**

This Spring has been a remarkable one in the Forest, with the most curious patterns of vegetation growth and flowering. For a start, the bracken is unusually late. Back in the 1960s, the first fronds started to appear about the beginning of May. It is a stage in the arrival of Spring which is crucial to the field archaeologist, because it signals that it is time to put away the ranging poles and tapes for another year as bracken masks all ground detail. Throughout the next three decades, bracken seemed to appear earlier and earlier, presumably in response to climate change. In recent years, fieldwork has often been impossible by early to mid April. Sometimes the new fronds were repeatedly burnt by frost. This year, however, even now (end of May) large areas of the Forest are still devoid of more than a few scattered bracken leaves - even in those areas which were not sprayed with Asulox last Summer. The consequence of this is that bluebells have been apparent over large parts of the bracken heath where they would normally be covered by a dense fern canopy. It has, in any case, been an exceptional year for bluebells. In one remarkable instance, a gorse regeneration enclosure on Hampton Ridge was filled with the flowers, while outside the protecting fence there was one solitary blossom. Finally, the gorse flowers in March and April seemed to outshine even their usual brilliance, while holly blossom is so heavy as to turn many trees an uncharacteristic cream colour.

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