

NEW FOREST NOTES JUNE 2005

Managing Lyndhurst Golf Course – sensible maintenance or reckless vandalism ?

Speaking for the New Forest Commoners' Defence Association at last month's Verderers' Court, Mr. Mike Cooper described recent works at Lyndhurst Golf Course (which is built on Forest land) as "reckless vandalism of the Forest lawn". He produced remarkable photographs in support of the Association's claim, showing a large area stripped of turf. His estimate of an area sixty feet long proved, on a subsequent site visit, to be more than justified. That anyone, let alone a Crown licensee, should treat the New Forest in this manner is difficult to understand and there were calls in the Court, supported by the Verderers, for the perpetrators to be prosecuted under the Forestry Commission's New Forest byelaws. Under paragraph 5(7) of those byelaws it is a specific offence to "dig up or remove any soil, turf, leafmould . . . etc". Unfortunately the prohibited acts under the byelaws are not the whole story, because the Forestry Commission can authorise most of the acts which they cover and which would otherwise be prohibited. For example, it can allow turf stripping, the deposit of rubbish or filth, the firing of guns and so on. This is something which is often forgotten in complaints to the Verderers, so that the first question which had to be asked was whether the Golf Club (the alleged perpetrator of the offence) in fact had permission to do what it is alleged to have done. As the Verderers were informed in committee, it certainly did not have such permission. From time to time the Club may cut small areas of turf in agreed locations and on a "take one and leave two" basis which in the distant past used to govern the exercise of turbarry rights. The material thus taken is used in repairs. Huge areas of continuous stripping are entirely contrary to both the Club's permission and the byelaws.

It is an undeniable but sad fact that there seems to be one law for the Crown's licensees in the New Forest and another for the rest of us. Suppose a commoner at the end of the winter decided that he would like to repair his fields and for this purpose went onto the Open Forest and tore up an expanse of turf. The Forestry Commission would very quickly and quite properly have him before the magistrates and there would also be a large bill for repair. Similarly, if a party of caravanners at Hollands Wood decided to dig up the turf of Balmer Lawn to build a "den" for their children, they could hardly expect much mercy from Queen's House. Both commoner and caravanners would have deserved their fate: no-one has a right to abuse the New Forest. On the other hand, licensees when exceeding the terms of their permissions, seem always to be handled with kid gloves by the Commission. I suppose one can have some vague sympathy for a pipeline contractor, labouring under appalling weather conditions, who deviates from an agreed access route or for a timber haulier who is slow in carrying out proper restoration, but what the CDA describes as reckless vandalism seems hardly deserving of restraint. We shall have to see how the Forestry Commission reacts in this case and in the light of the Verderers' request that there should be firm action.

An incident such as that at Lyndhurst Golf Club in May should not be considered in isolation. There is a long well-recorded (and well photographed) catalogue of complaint against the Club, stretching back over many years. Things seem to get no better. The simple fact is that the sort of intensive recreational use carried out here is utterly incompatible with the original natural qualities of this piece of Forest. It damages the landscape, interferes with grazing and livestock management and results in excessive wear. A few years ago the Forest authorities were very keen on a bright new slogan "Forest First!", which we all took to mean that the natural beauty and animals of the Forest should take priority over other uses. One hears less about Forest First these days, but at Lyndhurst Golf Club the Forest comes a very poor and degraded third after recreation and urbanisation. Individual Verderers come and go, but the Forest has a collective memory and the events of last month should not be forgotten when, in a few years time, the future of the course comes up for consideration.

Dames Slough

To the south of Burley Lodge and running through to the A 35 Bournemouth road is a large timber Inclosure made in 1859 and named, appropriately, Dames Slough. As its title suggests, it is in part a very wet place and was no doubt rather worse until the timber-planters of the 19th Century installed a network of drains to carry off stagnant water to the river Blackwater which bisects the plantation. They and later foresters improved the Blackwater so that it flowed more freely and removed the output of the side drains more effectively. My use of the word "improved" will, I am sure, cause some hackles to rise. If you are a believer in creating or restoring the maximum area of bog for wildlife, the drainage works carried out in Dames Slough were a disaster to be corrected at the earliest opportunity. Moreover, the straightening of the Blackwater replaced earlier and certainly more attractive meanders of the watercourse. It is the old question of what period in history the New Forest should landscapes be adjusted to reflect. Should Dames Slough be a productive and well drained timber plantation, or should the trees be cleared from it and the floodplain maintained as a well-drained grazing lawn for the livestock? What is actually happening is neither of these things. Under the last fling of the Life 3 European-funded project, the trees have been cut down, the 19th Century lateral drains have been blocked with clay and the river is being returned, so far as possible to its former course. Huge machines hired by the Environment Agency are at work there and will remain for some weeks to come.

Exactly what will happen in the years following completion of the works is very far from clear. Local people with long experience of the area believe that choking up the side drains together with the impeding of the river channel will create an impassable swamp of little value to livestock and virtually impossible to cross on foot or on horseback unless adequate fords are provided at this stage. Supporters of the scheme, on the other hand envisage a fine streamside lawn interspersed with a few wetter areas, easily accessible to livestock and people alike and all centred on a charming sinuous sparkling river course. No doubt the actual outcome will be somewhere between these two extremes. On the question of access, however, the Verderers are taking no chances. They believe that the two crossing

points only which the Environment Agency intended to provide are insufficient for the proper management of livestock, including good access on horseback. A third (although temporarily inaccessible) ford at the centre of the wood must be reinstated and upgraded to combat the anticipated consequences of inundation. Through the Deputy Surveyor they have made this requirement clear to the Environment Agency and a response is awaited.

If Dames Slough had remained a timber inclosure, flooding and inadequate access might not have been so important. In fact the Inclosure will be thrown open to grazing in large part and will thus again become part of the Open Forest after 146 years of timber production.

New Forest Association leaflet

The New Forest Association has just issued a very attractive leaflet inviting new members to join this longest-established guardian of the New Forest. A copy dropped through my letter box with the double glazing and loan-shark literature, so I assume it has been very widely distributed. It contains a lovely coloured picture of the view from Abbots Well car park looking across Latchmore to Hasley and Sloden Hill – one of the finest in the Forest. The leaflet also carries the reassuring message that the establishment of the national park is no threat to the Forest, although the Association does expect to advise, support and “occasionally put pressure on” the park authority. The implied message is that there is nothing at all to fear, but that the Forest still needs the support of a knowledgeable, active and well financed amenity body, even though our future is now in the safe hands of the park.

This is very reassuring, but how far such confidence should go unquestioned may be another matter. Indeed, the leaflet almost seems to be facing both ways as it commences with a series of crucial questions – to which it gives no answers. “Will house prices go up ?” Will the place be crawling with tourists ? (their racy language – not mine). Will our children be able to find jobs here when they grow up ? Will we be able to put up that new conservatory ? Will the New Forest become a theme park ?” These are questions with few simple answers. House prices will of course go up here (as elsewhere) and estate agents are, very properly, already pushing the park for all it is worth in their clients’ interest. We are invited to buy in England’s newest and most accessible national park. If that does not help to boost prices, the agents don’t know their job. The Forest is already “crawling” with tourists and designating it a park (national playground), with increased advertising, more tourist services, enhanced accommodation provision and better access may not be the best way to limit that over-use. As to the future jobs for children there is every chance that the park will be highly beneficial – more administrators, more tourism-related business, more emphasis on “economic wellbeing” and growth. I don’t know about the conservatory: I built mine before NFDC imposed a conservation area designation on me.

Finally there is the intriguing possibility that the Forest becomes a theme park. I think that is very unlikely – if one considers the Forest as a whole. Within it there are already innumerable actual or potential theme parks and I have no doubt that these will flourish and expand under a park administration. They are what many of the visiting public wants and what the tourist businesses want to provide – with suitable green camouflage of course, such

as “outdoor education, interpretation, promotion of public understanding and enjoyment of special qualities” etc. Altogether, I think that there is likely to be quite a bit for the New Forest Association to do in the future. Only the will to do it may be uncertain.

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