

NEW FOREST NOTES JUNE 2006

Holmsley Lodge and the Campsites

Two events in May raised fundamental questions as to exactly who will own or lease the New Forest of the future. The first was the leasing of the camp sites to a new joint venture partnership comprising the Camping and Caravanning Club and the Forestry Commission. The second was the Forestry Commission's consultation on the sale freehold of Holmsley Lodge, its extensive grounds and its service cottage.

I find it strange that the leasing of the camp sites for a period of seventy five years has produced no response from those whose business it is to protect the Forest. There were no public presentments at the May Court and the "current" issues on the NFA website (as at 21st May) seem to have remained static for many months. The move is unprecedented and comes without any consultation whatever so far as I can see. Certainly the Verderers were unaware of what was intended so far as the land disposal was concerned, although the establishment of the new company was well known. The press announcement says that the agreement "opens the door to Forest Holidays developing even more camping and cabin sites on Forestry Commission land", that "over time one of the aims of the joint venture partnership will be to modernise the facilities across the network of Forest Holiday sites" and that the deal "has resulted in a partnership in which everyone is a winner". Perhaps one might be forgiven for questioning whether that "everyone" includes the people of the New Forest or even those from further afield who are old-fashioned enough to value its traditional qualities. I wonder if it can really be a simple coincidence that the announcement was made only days after the national park started to operate.

We have not been allowed to see the lease, so the extent of the new company's powers over the Forest is uncertain. The camp sites occupy 357 acres in total, with many times that area adjoining them effectively sterilised by disturbance. The mere fact that land on such a scale has been leased at all is unprecedented. I am aware of only tiny patches of land having been leased or licensed in the past – usually no more than a few square yards for a sewage pumping station or a telephone installation or a few acres for allotments.

The immediate question which arises from this deal is how far Forest Holidays will be able to exploit its position in the New Forest – especially in developing new camps and modernising existing facilities. The theoretical answer, of course, is that it will be able to do nothing at all without the consent of the Verderers. The trick will be to organize such pressure that the Court is forced into submission. For years past the Verderers have been pressed to allow more and more upgrading of these sites. There have been demands for electric hook-ups, new wash houses, new wardens' buildings, new pitches, new site sales with a wider variety of goods on offer and so on. This was pressure which the Court steadfastly resisted, to the fury of successive Deputy Surveyors – as witness its recent outright rejection of the plans for expanded camping at Roundhill and the upgrading of Hollands Wood on a reduced area. I am sure that the present bombshell in part reflects the frustration of recreational

managers blocked at every turn by policies which give priority to the protection of the Forest. When the crunch comes over Hollands Wood and Roundhill, the new company will be an effective weapon with which to batter the Verderers. Instead of a faceless government agency leading the attack on the Forest, there will be a people's recreational group (it describes itself as "the friendly club") operating within, and perhaps supported by, the people's national park. From a political point of view, that is a much more powerful threat to the Forest's protection and the Commission knows that very well.

When it comes to building new camps on the commonable land of the Forest, it seems that Forest Holidays will still have to operate through the Commission, with the latter applying to the Court for approval and then (if consent is given) leasing the land to the company. Unless I have underestimated the strength of Forest Holidays, I think that the establishment of entirely new camps is still very unlikely, even in the context of a national park, because conservation interests still carry weight. The real pressure will come in attempts to "modernise" (in Forest terms this means urbanise) the existing camps.

I have been asked how it is that the Forestry Commission can simply dispose of bits of the New Forest in this manner and it probably requires a lawyer to give a definitive answer. My understanding is that there is absolutely nothing to stop the Commission selling off or leasing every last square inch of the Open Forest if it chooses to do so, and it can do it without consulting the commoners or local people, as the present case demonstrates. What it cannot do is to sell or lease the land free of common rights and the common rights cannot be extinguished, unless the national park steps in using its compulsory powers, without the consent of the Verderers. The Court thus stands as the chief and increasingly isolated bulwark against damaging change. Of course it would be ridiculous to suggest that the Forestry Commission, or the Park, or Forest Holidays, would ever intentionally seek to destroy an invaluable national asset such as the New Forest. I am sure that they do not even see how upgrading could possibly be damaging. What could be more reasonable than a high standard of comfort and convenience for their visitors? This is, after all, the 21st Century and it is almost a human right to be provided with electric hook-ups, shops, entertainment, play areas and perhaps a few little luxuries not yet mentioned like security lighting or a swimming pool. The notion of quiet unsophisticated camping in natural surroundings is so dreadfully outdated.

Selling the family silver

These days we look on the New Forest as comprising heath and woodland only, but it is in fact a great deal more than that, despite a steady decline over recent decades. At the beginning of the 20th Century it was regarded as a great national estate made up not only of the public areas of the Forest, but of farms, opulent mansions, modest country houses, and even shops and other business premises. It was rather like a giant version of the National Trust's Holnicote Estate on Exmoor. As the century progressed and control was handed to the Forestry Commission from the Crown Estate, the process of selling-off these assets began to gather pace. By the 1980s it had become almost a national scandal and if it had not

then been checked, there would have been little left today. Property which anywhere else would have been cherished and perhaps purchased to save it for the nation was being disposed-of to the highest bidder.

Matters came to a head with a considerable row over several small properties, ideally suited for use by commoners, which were sold at about this time. Chief amongst these was a little place adjoining the Forest at Fritham. The problem was considered in the Illingworth Report on Forest grazing in 1991. At that time the area of enclosed grazing which the Commission managed in the New Forest was a little over 600 acres. As a result of Illingworth's recommendations, the Commission is now required to consult the relevant minister before getting rid of property. Where possible, land and houses now have to be used to accommodate staff or to provide a base for practising commoners. The new system seems to have worked well. We are told by the Forestry Commission that they still manage about 66 properties in the New Forest and of these 29 are let at reduced rents to commoners – an increase from 24% in 1992 to 44% today.

The making available of rented land and houses to commoners, vital as it is, is certainly not the only reason for retaining intact what remains of the New Forest estate. The consequences of past sales have sometimes been very damaging, as purchasers have sought to exploit their acquisitions for profit, often after a change of planning use. Once free of the restraining influence of a lease and in the absence or effective restrictive covenants, all sorts of undesirable and often traffic-producing activities commence on these former Crown properties.

Last year there was what looked like the beginnings of a shift in Commission policy with the sale of a picturesque thatched cottage at Swan Green. Now they are consulting on a much larger and potentially more damaging disposal – that of Holmsley Lodge near Burley. The building, a very substantial five bedroomed house set in thirteen acres of landscaped grounds, has the appearance of having been built about a hundred years ago. It is on the site of a much earlier cottage. Miss Hardcastle, in her "Records of Burley", says that it was used as the home of Deputy Surveyor Osmaston for a time in the 1920s. The site of the Lodge is outstanding, surrounded as it is by the Open Forest and by a plantation, still partly oak, made in 1811. It also has a two bedroomed service cottage which, with land, could be severed from the main house. I have no idea as to its condition or standard of fitting, but it is difficult to see how the whole impressive package could be worth much less than 1.2 million pounds with vacant possession. Altogether it is the sort of place a pop star or football hero might give up a year's salary to secure.

It has to be said that if the Commission decides to sell, there is nothing that the Verderers or anyone else can do about it. The Court has no control over any of the so-called Crown Freehold of which Holmsley Lodge is a part. The Verderers, New Forest Association and Commoners' Defence have simply been "consulted" – a welcome courtesy conspicuously absent in the leasing of the camp sites.

I get the impression that the Forestry Commission is expecting a rough ride and they have accordingly provided what purports to be a juicy carrot for the Forest donkey. Part of the proceeds would be invested in the construction of a new three-bedroomed house to be built on Crown land (location undisclosed) and let to a commoner. Since such a dwelling and outbuildings should cost less than £100,000, allowing a profit in excess of a million pounds, the carrot appears in fact more like a diminutive pea with which the donkey may not be entirely satisfied.

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