

## **NEW FOREST NOTES JUNE 2008**

### **An obsession with access**

It may come as a surprise to many people that the New Forest National Park extends for more than a mile up into southern Wiltshire, incorporating farms and villages which have only the most tenuous connection with the Forest. Here the population was traditionally concerned with small-scale industry such as brick-making, iron-working and besom manufacture, rather than with the pony and cattle keeping of the Forest. Such farming as there existed was principally livestock and, because this was not (until recently) a high-priced and fashionable area, a handful of small farms survives to this day, untroubled by the policies of the national park – or so it seemed until last month.

Early one morning in the middle of May, I received a phone call from an alarmed neighbour. She said that a team of rambling volunteers, apparently working under the auspices of the Wiltshire Highways Department, had started to tear down the stiles on a fenced footpath across my farm. I paused just long enough to telephone a complaint to the council, before heading for the battlefield. Here I found one stile already demolished and the bank beneath it levelled. The gang was then at work on an adjoining holding and my second stile was next on their list.

On being questioned as to what they were about, the work-gang leader said it had been decided that my stiles were unnecessary and constituted an obstruction to the footpath. They desired to open it up to the semi-disabled (the footpath officer later told me how invaluable it would be for people with recent hip replacements) and that was the reason for the demolition. The fact that the stiles are essential to the efficient management of my cattle, which are constantly being moved from one side of the path to the other, was of no interest to the ramblers. It was also not their concern that nobody had seen fit to consult me and the fact that the stiles constitute a barrier to motor-cycle and mountain bike trespass was irrelevant.

In the face of all this, it took a considerable effort to remain polite, but I made it very clear that if the stile was not replaced by nightfall, there was going to be trouble. By lunchtime it had been re-built.

How far this assault can be attributed to the national park and how far to Wiltshire Highways, I do not know. I have enjoyed perfectly harmonious relations with the latter for the last forty years, so I suspect that the Park is implicated. That view is reinforced by a placard on a new gate where the path enters nearby land, proclaiming that the structure was supplied by the New Forest National Park.

As to the supposed justification for the work, I have seldom heard anything so ludicrous. This path is about half a mile long. Its base is very wet clay and there is a marked cross slope over much of its length. It rises one hundred feet and is just about as inhospitable to the disabled as any path in this part of Wiltshire. Not infrequently, I have to chase errant cows along it and it is tough enough, even for a reasonably fit person. This is yet another case of political correctness gone mad. The farms in this area are part of the countryside –

not some adjunct of Southampton Common. Footpath users should surely expect to encounter stiles, to push aside twigs, combat muddy areas with Wellington boots and generally accept the hazards of nature and farming if they also wish to enjoy their beauties. Of course there is a place for carefully constructed disabled trails in appropriate locations, but the authorities seem intent on trying to squeeze both the Forest and its surroundings into a sort of urban-determined template.

An even more serious manifestation of this attitude to the countryside has arisen in the Crown lands of the Forest, although here I think that the Forestry Commission rather than the park may be chiefly responsible. Hunting gates in the Forest are traditionally provided with spring catches comprising a vertical bar which terminates in a handle. They can be operated by horsemen without the need for dismounting and are reasonably safe. Now some rather hideous galvanized contraptions have started to replace them – most recently at Woods Corner at Burley. They are, it seems, intended to facilitate disabled access and no-one denies that they are easy to open both on foot and on horseback. However, they suffer from a serious and frightening drawback. Instead of the vertical bar, they depend upon a retractable spring-loaded bolt which protrudes from the leading edge of the gate. If struck head-on, this bolt automatically withdraws, but if the pressure comes from the side (as from a horse trying to rush the gate opening), it is capable of ripping open an animal's flank. Any rider who has never experienced a panic or impatience by his horse in going through a gate is very fortunate indeed. On busy tourist paths with dogs and bikers, the risks of panic are even greater than normal. A horrible accident is waiting to happen and there will be a heavy responsibility on the Forestry Commission when it does. If such catches are to be widely inflicted on the Forest, then they should at least be redesigned with a wooden flange giving cover to the protruding bolt.

### **Agisters' areas**

At the May Court, the Verderers considered draft maps for a revision of the present agisters' areas. This has been made necessary by the forthcoming move of the agister for the north of the Forest, Peter Rix, to Burley. Maps of the new areas are to be issued shortly, in time for the changeover.

The agisters areas are fixed in such a way as to ensure a fair division of labour, minimum waste of time and cost in travelling and particularly the need to give speedy attention to animals run down on the roads. Tying in all these requirements with available housing for the staff has always been a real problem for the Verderers and it is one which seems unlikely to go away. Unlike the Forestry Commission, which has an adequate stock of tied cottages available for its keepers, the Verderers own no suitable property. The agisters must rent or buy their own houses. While by the standards of most rural workers, they are not at all badly paid, they must compete in a property market where prices are set by the rich commuters and the retired who fill the Forest villages and drive up costs. The nature of an agister's work also makes it desirable that he should have land adjoining his house and that

just makes matters worse: he must compete with the super-wealthy residential recreational horsekeepers.

Over the years the agisters have succeeded in solving the problem of housing reasonably well. Sometimes it has been by prudent investment, sometimes by inherited family property and sometimes through the assistance of sympathetic landlords. The agisters have a lifestyle which affords opportunities for various subsidiary incomes from such things as horse-breaking and dealing, pony breeding, cattle keeping, subsidies and so on, but it is not one ever likely to produce rich men. This means that when the Verderers have to take on replacement staff, the availability of housing almost inevitably dictates a revision of areas. The Court cannot simply tell a successful candidate that he must acquire a base within a pre-determined area.

Changing areas is almost always undesirable. It goes without saying that all the agisters must be familiar with all parts of the Forest, because they must cover for colleagues during sickness and holidays and assist at drifts in all areas. The real problem comes over the more intimate knowledge needed within an allocated territory. The agister must know the stock which runs in his area and who it belongs to. He must get to know his commoners, including who can be relied-upon for assistance and who is likely to be trying to twist the system. All this can be re-learnt in a new area, but it takes time.

I can see no way in which the Court can resolve the problem short of acquiring its own stock of tied holdings and for that no money is available. From time to time, various charities have suggested that Forest-lovers might like to leave property to them to assist commoners, but I am not aware that they have been particularly successful in these appeals. It is one thing to leave five thousand pounds to a good cause, but quite another to donate half a million pounds for a modest holding to accommodate an agister. Perhaps there is scope for a middle course involving donations of bare agricultural land, exceptional planning permission under the Commoners' Housing Scheme and then charity-funded building costs, but the administrative difficulties of all this would be immense.

### **Stealth-widening to meet its Waterloo ?**

The Forest community and particularly the Verderers have become increasingly annoyed by the constant widening and smoothing of Forest roads under a cloak of "maintenance". A few inches of Forest are taken here and there without consent, allowing for greater speed and consequently the danger of more animal deaths. The process is known as stealth-widening. It has recently been happening at Linwood, at Forest Road in Burley and at Hale Purlieu. In the two former sites, the Verderers have had enough and are requiring the removal of the widening. No doubt this will cost a lot of public money, but the point needs to be made. At Hale Purlieu the problem is even more serious because the widening, albeit with cement-bonded gravel, is measured in feet rather than in inches and has led to greatly increased speeds. How to tackle this problem is still under consideration by the Court.

### **Camp site abuse**

Ever since the extraordinary and highly secretive leasing of large pieces of the Open Forest to a commercial company for camp sites, a series of abuses has been going on. Bitter complaints about these have been presented at one Court after another, with the main focus of trouble being at Hollands Wood and Roundhill. In the measured words of the Official Verderer, no doubt agreed with the Forestry Commission, both the Court and the Deputy Surveyor feel that the way works have taken place at Roundhill has not shown sufficient respect for the Forest and the site itself. Now even the planning authority (the NPA) is challenging Forest Holidays over the enlargement of lavatory blocks, fencing, the cladding of buildings, the establishment of gas bottle compounds and the provision of new electric hook-ups. It will be interesting to see the outcome of a meeting of all interested parties which is due to be held on 6th June.

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