

## **New Forest Notes – June 1992**

### **The Minister of Agriculture**

Some of us who had the pleasure of hearing Mr. Gummers recent address in the Verderers Hall have been left with the feeling that he said a great deal and told us nothing. He said polite things about the Forest including the stock phrase about "the living working community rather than a museum piece". He complimented the local the local authorities, the Forestry Commission and the New Forest Committee on their valuable work and even, although very much as an after thought, mentioned the Verderers much later in his speech. He did not give any clear statement about the governments legislative proposals for the national park and was evasive about the extent, timing and detail of the consultation process. Of course he assured us that consultation would be adequate.

All this leaves us no further forward in knowing what is what is to be the future shape of the Forests administration. There was no indication of whether and when the Government will accept the recommendations of the Illingworth Committee that funds should be provided for the Verderers Court, and that is a matter of extreme urgency as the remaining reserves drain away.

If hard evidence is lacking, there is at least a persistent rumour in the Forest that, following the Ministers visit, the Government is backing away from granting statutory sweeping powers to the New Forest Committee and that the national parking of the New Forest may be much watered down. However, it is probably too soon to claim the Forest has been let off the hook.

One extraordinary offshoot of Mr. Gummers visit was the erection of two large notice boards on the Beaulieu Road at Lyndhurst. On one side, facing the A35, these bear the disjointed pony head symbol of the New Forest Committee and the words "The New Forest". On the other side facing Beaulieu, there is "Thank-you for respecting the Forest". At a time when the Forestry Commission is, rightly, trying to cut down on sign boards in the Open Forest, it is difficult to see any for these two totally superfluous notices. Anyone who has driven as far as Lyndhurst, which is about as central as you can get in the New Forest, must be fully aware that they are in the Forest. Why tell them what they already know? The wording on the other side is even more pointless. Those who have just run down a pony or emptied litter out of their cars are not going to be very impressed by thanks which they do not deserve. On the other hand, those who do love and respect the Forest would certainly not wish to see it disfigured by rows of pointless notice boards. Are we to see every road junction in the area cluttered by such signs?

### **Parting Gifts from the Forest**

The May Verderers Court was the last to be attended by Mr. David Perry in his official capacity as Deputy Surveyor. In recognition of his services to the Forest, he was presented with two gifts. The first (from the consultative panel, the New Forest Committee and the Verderers) comprised a specially bound copy of "Thirty Five Years in the New Forest" by Mr. Perry's illustrious predecessor Gerald Lascelles. The book, published in 1915, is now quite rare and valuable. Lascelles was an advocate of many policies which would be repugnant of Forest lovers of today. He was an aggressive commercial forester, a believer of major intervention in the management of the ancient woods and a bitter opponent of the Verderers Court. Despite all this, his book is one of the most delightful ever written about the Forest. It is surprising that, in a period that has seen the re-issue of so many Forest classics, Lascelles book should have been overlooked. In recent years, much of Heyward Sumner's work has been reprinted, together with Wise's "New Forest" and Felicitie Hardcastle's "Records of Burley". There must now surely be a market for a new edition of "Thirty Five Years".

The second gift was from the New Forest Association and comprised three Barry Peckham etchings framed and glazed. Two are of woodland scenes and the third commemorates the major event in the Forest during Mr. Perry's term of office - the defeat of the Bill to construct an outer Lyndhurst By-pass. The Forestry Commission itself was not directly concerned in this battle, but the etching which shows part of the Forest which would have been wrecked if the Bill had been passed, was part of a limited edition produced by the Association as part of its fund raising efforts.

Both gifts should remind Mr. Perry of his days in the Forest when he retires to his Scottish home. They are a measure of the improved relations between the Commission and the local community after the difficult days of the 1960s.

### **Improving Forest Ponies**

There has been an almost audible collective sigh of relief that this year has seen a significant improvement in the overall condition of ponies on the Forest. A number of factors have contributed to this including the mild early spring, tighter supervision by the Verderers through the appointment of an additional agister and a growing recognition that, whatever private views are held on what does or does not constitute an acceptable standard, the only real opinion that carries any real weight is what the public regards as satisfactory. Of course there are still lapses and shortcomings in the system allowing some very thin ponies to escape the net. Local variations in condition are also apparent, but in general 1992 has seen considerable progress with the number of complaints to the Verderers office at a record low level. Unfortunately it is often late May or early June that the greatest number of poor ponies are to be seen. Although some grass growth is by then apparent in the Forest, there is a time lag before its effects are seen in improved bodily condition of the animals. Another problem is that poor mares heavy in foal cannot be rounded up so that their removal may be delayed until after foaling, by which time they look a good deal worse.

## **Rufus Stone Problems**

Bramshaw parish council has asked the Verderers to consider the predicament of the hamlets of Brook and Canterton if, as part of the A31 upgrading, the turning to the Rufus Stone at Castle Malwood is cut off. They fear incessant two way tourist traffic visiting the monument along totally unsuitable lanes. Since it is most unlikely that the tiny junction at Malwood can for too long remain on what is a motorway in all but name, it is clear that Brook has a very real problem. A bridge or underpass to Minsted might partially solve the problem at great cost and, no doubt, to the disgust of Minsted residents. There is on the other hand, a tidy, complete and totally cost free alternative and that is to remove or relocate the stone. Such a suggestion will no doubt seem heresy to many people. In an ideal world without traffic pressures, I too would prefer to see the stone remain where it is and where its 19th producer of the iron box intended it to be, but conditions on the lanes of Brook are going to be very far from ideal.

I recall that some years ago, Arthur Lloyds research showed a much more probable site for the Rufus killing to be at Park Farm on the Beaulieu Estate. The exact location may not matter very much and somewhere in the vicinity might be near enough for the average visitor. That "somewhere" could conveniently be within the precincts of Palace House or the Motor Museum. No doubt the tourist pulling qualities of the stone would be much appreciated there while the lanes of Bank would be saved from Bedlam. The redundant length of road from Malwood could be pulled up and returned to the Forest.

Even if the Forest is reluctant to turn over its cast iron monstrosity to private enterprise at Beaulieu, perhaps a home could be found for it in the tourist centre at Lyndhurst.

## **Pressures on the Forest**

This month will see the first meeting of a New Forest Association which is to study the effects of over use of the Forest for recreation. It will consider both the physical to the Forests fabric and the much more elusive effects upon "wilderness quality" of vast numbers of people and especially those pursuing so called specialist activities. In the discussion leading to the establishment of the Committee, one member likened the present state of the Forest to the chaotic conditions of the 1960s when vehicles had unrestricted access to the open heaths. Today the problem is not cars, but sheer numbers of people, all of whom feel entitled to use the Forest for their own particular amusement. In the days when organised events were rare exceptions, their effect on the Forest was minimal and could be absorbed without lasting damage. Now the heaths are pounded day after day by organised walks, charity runs, horse events, hunting, riding, school treks and innumerable other perfectly legal and authorised forms of recreation which are collectively turning the area into little more than a large urban park. It is these problems which the Association believes must be solved if the Forest is to survive. The difficulty is, of course that almost everyone has special cases or exceptions which certainly ought to be exempted from the controls applied to other people. This was

apparent even within the NFA Committee. Similarly, how do you tell a charity supporting sick children that it cannot send 200 sponsored walkers across part of the Forest, because 50 other groups have already battered that part within the last six months.

The establishment of the Committee is well timed as it coincides with the Forestry Commissions appointment of an officer to study the erosion of the Forest by horse riding. It is to be hoped that this official will actually meet groups such as the New Forest Association, the Hampshire Field Club and the Commoners Defence, rather than confining his operations to a corner of Queens House and his own field observations. Within the NFA there is a great deal of collective experience on all aspects of horse riding damage.

I expect that the committee will talk long and earnestly, but its chances of coming up with a clear forceful policy for the salvation of the Forest are less good. The ability of the Association to press home such a policy is also untested, but it is a job which urgently needs doing. Already the recommendations of the New Forest Review on organised recreation have been demonstrated as far too weak.

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