

New Forest Notes – June 1993

Forest societies united

After a long period of division and uncertainty, the old-established Forest societies (Commoners' Defence, Pony and Cattle Society and New Forest Association) are now united in their opposition to the grant of statutory powers over the Forest to the New Forest Committee — the potential quasi-national park authority. The two former bodies reached their decision before Christmas, but at that stage the New Forest Association was committed to support much of the government's park proposals, although only by a single vote in the committee. That policy was, however, overturned at the annual general meeting on a resolution proposed by Mr. John Broughton, a well known Forest vet and commoner. He was ably supported by the lately retired Official Verderer, Lord Manners, who clearly felt able to take a forceful line against the government's proposals once freed of the constraints of his office. His opposition was the more telling because he has served on the New Forest Committee and seen its workings from the inside.

This unity of the three societies is, of course, of immense importance for the protection of the Forest, It was they who led opposition to the more objectionable elements of proposed legislation in 1949 and it was they who effectively forced the Verderers to reject the County Council's takeover bid of 1975, so that it failed to make progress in Parliament. It is also too often forgotten or brushed aside that the policy of the Societies accords exactly with the recommendations of the New Forest Review which envisaged a committee without statutory powers. It was that Review which gave birth to the New Forest Committee, but the latter, like the broomstick of the sorcerer's apprentice, has now developed a momentum of its own..

It must be said that there are sincere, people in each of the societies who do support all or part of the plans for the "tailor-made national park" and the late chairman of the New Forest Association, Peter Frost, is one of these. He has taken the honourable course of resigning following the change in the Association's policy. However, a good deal of anger has been expressed by a circular letter issued by the president which, in the view of some members, seeks to circumvent the decision of the general meeting, and which was sent out without the knowledge of the committee The New Forest Association is rather prone to such dissension and upheaval, probably because it seeks to represent the, views of so wide a spread of Forest opinion. Only in such universally threatening contests as that for the outer Lyndhurst bypass is one likely to find such widely ranging opinion pulling in one direction. It is then that the Association comes into its own. However, such public disagreements have occurred three or four times in the hundred and sixteen years life of the Association and it will no doubt survive this one as it has done the others.

Privatisation

The unions representing forestry workers have done a very effective job in alerting the. public to the possibility of so-called privatisation of the New Forest and some of the suggested consequences are

certainly horrific. Anything can be done by Act of Parliament, but I suspect that the carving up of the Forest into private shooting reserves from which the public is excluded is about as remote a possibility as a Bill to turn the Palace of Westminster into chicken houses. If privatisation is attempted, it is likely to be far more subtle if no less unwelcome.

At the moment the Forest is governed by a series of Acts which give powers to the Minister of Agriculture (who acts through the Forestry Commission) and the Verderers' Court. The revenue producing elements of the Forest are the timber plantations where commercial policy is severely limited by statutory and ministerial controls, and the camp sites which cannot be extended or developed without the consent of the Verderers. Against this, the Forestry Commission spends large sums on maintenance and the provision of free recreational facilities such as car parks, although there is now talk of charging for some of these services. The Commission always maintains that the Forest runs at a substantial loss and there seems little reason to doubt this. On the surface, therefore, it is not an attractive proposition for a potential purchaser. Unless the intention is to allow the entire Forest to fall into disrepair and to squeeze, the plantations and camp sites for every penny they will produce, there is simply no money in the project. Moreover, the legislation necessary to wipe out the existing protective measures like the powers of the Verderers and the spending obligations of the Minister would promote an environmental battle of nineteenth century proportions and one which would make Twyford Down look like a row over a pothole in a residential cul-de-sac

One more likely route open to the government would be to sell off the camp sites and plantations with the minimum alteration to existing controls necessary to make the package financially attractive. The unprofitable elements of the Forest could then be handed over to local authority control, perhaps through the agency of the New Forest Committee. That legislation too would be hotly contested, but it represents perhaps the best chance for the government to succeed in raising a little money from the Forest. But would it really be worth the violent public hostility which such measures would produce? I suspect not, but it must be admitted that the present uncertainty is very worrying and not only for those whose job security is at risk.

Rights after the Railways

In a recent presentment to the Verderers' Court, the Denny Lodge parish council raised one of those curiosities of Forest history which can prove to have far reaching practical and financial consequences. Their specific complaint related to some problems at Beaulieu Road Station which are a little obscure, but the underlying principle is of fairly general application.

When the first railways were built through the New Forest, the authorities of the time drove a hard bargain with the developers. Vast sums were paid in compensation for land which was, in the mid-eighteen forties, virtually worthless. In those days the eventual closure of railway facilities must have seemed as remote as the breaking up of a modern motorway and its return to pasture, but it has happened and the Forest has reason to be grateful for the foresight of the Office of Woods and Verderers of the time. They insisted on the inclusion in the railway Acts of a provision for the revival or

recreation of common rights over the land in the event of its ceasing to be used for railway purposes. The Forest benefited from this in the 1970s with the reclamation and return of the line from Brockenhurst to Dur Hill (Southampton and Dorchester Railway) and compensation was paid for the sale of some houses along that line. At other times and in other places, the legal niceties seem to have been less scrupulously observed. The parish council has asked the Verderers to consider whether or not its present concerns fall within this category. Clearly there would be problems if any substantial property is found to remain illegally enclosed and developed after it should have been cleared and returned to Open Forest under the railway acts.

The New Management Plan

The Hampshire Wildlife Trust and English Nature have rightly challenged the Forestry Commission over its newly published management plan which has not been the subject of prior consultation. Both of the earlier plans were issued in draft and extensively amended before a final version was decided upon. Although a great deal of the new plan is non-controversial, it does have some serious shortcomings in respect of the old hardwood inclosures. It conveniently sidesteps the question of the future of the beautiful early 19th century plantations which are at risk of felling over the next two decades, A significant suggestion of the New Forest Review on their future is also ignored.

There are, perhaps, very few Commission officers still serving who remember at first hand the hardwood battles of 1969 to 1971, so that the potentially explosive nature of this subject may have escaped present-day management. Any serious assault on these woods is likely to lead to a quick revival of the old hostilities, because on the conservation side of the argument many of the original protagonists are still very active. Disputes over some technicality of forest management seldom fire the public imagination, but a gang of men with chain saws in Broomy or Fletchers Thorns would be a very different matter.

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