

New Forest Notes – June 1997

Peace in the New Forest Association

It seems that at last peace is returning to troubled New Forest Association after a boisterous spring. It will be remembered that the Association late president, Major P. Baillie, objected to various actions to the committee in its attempts to protect the old woods of the Forest and to ensure that the Forest commission observed the New Forest Acts. The majority of the committee in turn maintained that the Major was undermining the Association's work and a special general meeting was called to seek the president's removal. At the meeting the president, in the words of the Association chairman Peter Frost, "jumped before he was pushed". The inevitable fight back came at last month's annual general meeting, when the late president's supporters put forward a series of resolutions which, if they had been passed, would effectively have disabled the Association's long established policies.

It promised to be a memorable evening, with Brockenhurst College hired because the usual venue at Minstead was not large enough.

Over the years I have not always seen eye to eye with my late Verderer colleague (now chairman of the New Forest Committee), Mr. Maldwin Drummond -especially over the national park proposals for the Forest. However, at the Brockenhurst meeting he was responsible for as deft a piece of manoeuvring as I have witnessed in Forest affairs. There can be no doubt that his intervention prevented a disagreeable internal squabble from becoming a very public exchange of virtriol. Right at the beginning of the discussions, he moved that the resolutions should not be considered, but that they should be referred to the Committee to deal with.

Champions on both sides who had for days been sharpening their verbal swords, while at the same time praying for deliverance from battle, greeted his proposal with acclaim and it was carried overwhelmingly. It has to be said that the success of the proposal was probably due as much to the conciliatory and cheerful manner of its making as to its substance. Maldwin Drummond possesses the rare gift of being able to make even an unpalatable proposition seem as attractive as an invitation to a first class dinner.

Unfortunately not everyone found it quite to their taste and one or two walked out. Altogether it was one of those evenings when (a few grumbles apart), honour was satisfied on all sides . The ex-president and several of his supporters were elected to the Committee , thus giving him the assurance that his views will continue to be heard there. His choice of successor in the person of Lord Manners was also backed by the meeting. On the other side , the membership gave overwhelming backing to the leaders of the campaign to protect the Forest woodlands by returning them to the Committee, mostly at the top of the poll. A solid majority for continuing the existing policies was thus confirmed and after the meeting the chairman of the woodland subcommittee , Tim Dixon, expressed satisfaction. It would now, he said, be possible to resume negotiations with the Forestry Commission free from damaging distractions.

It might be supposed that all this uproar would have weakened the Association's membership strength. Exactly the reverse is true. I understand that up to the beginning of May two members had resigned and over one hundred had joined - some as life members. The resigners may by now have been joined by one or two of the walkers - out from the meeting, but overall the events of 1997 have

been the most successful membership drive in years. Perhaps this goes to prove that a campaign society succeeds best when it is actually campaigning rather than reclining in a self-congratulatory stupor as has sometimes been the state of the NFA.

For the chairman and vice- chairman in particular, the outcome of the meeting must be a considerable relief. They, whose work for the Association has been the most untiring, had been under particular pressure. They now have every prospect of being able to pursue the NFA's long established objectives with the backing of a clear majority of the committee and the membership.

New Forest Books

Thirty years or so it was possible for anyone of fairly modest means to build up a good library of New Forest books ranging from such classics as John Wise's " History and Scenery of the New Forest" (1863) to rare and beautifully illustrated volumes by Heywood Sumner. I can remember a time when the third floor of Gilberts Antiquarian Bookshop in Southampton contained an entire shelf of brand new Sumner books which had somehow survived the blitz as Above Bar fell in ruins around the shop. The highly prized " New Forest Roman Pottery Sites " of 1927 (originally published at 12/6) had admittedly suffered severe price inflation and was selling 26/ " Local Papers" on the other hand, remained at the 1931 publication price of 12/6.

Today I suppose that the pottery sites book is likely to sell for well in excess of £50 for anyone lucky enough to find a copy. Local Papers is perhaps half that sum. Most people, like me, failed to recognise this investment opportunity. Today such chances are gone for good. Most of us must rely on libraries, not -least that of the New Forest Ninth Centenary Trust which has been built up over the last few years and which is housed above the visitor centre Lyndhurst. Now the custodian of, that fine collection, Jude James, has published what is probably the most comprehensive and well designed New Forest bibliography ever to appear. It is called the "New Forest and South West and Hampshire Bibliography and " Researchers Guide". It is divided into twenty seven separate subject sections ranging from archaeology to silviculture and covering everything published up toDecember. The section general descriptive and historical works is particularly useful as many, of the 19th Century books and articles are very difficult to track down. I am sure that the learned compiler will know that the publication of a bibliography acts as an immediate challenge to users to discover what he has missed out ! The temptation is irresistible and if I have a criticism as a result of giving in to it, that complaint is against the archaeology section. While some of the early work of the New Forest Section of the Hampshire Field Club is carefully listed, the record seems to stop abruptly so that most of the important excavation work and local history research of the last twenty years is not indexed This may be intentional, and the Section's reports are collectively listed as a " journal", but everyone using the guide as an index to published archaeological material will be faced with an important gap. Similarly,, there are several crucial omissions from the list of Parliamentary papers - especially those of this century.

Leaving these points aside, the bibliography will be immensely useful to anyone carrying out serious research into the Forest. A particularly worthwhile feature is a list of unpublished theses and dissertations -- material which is always elusive. Copies of the bibliography can be obtained from the Ninth Centenary Trust at Lyndhurst (£3)or from local bookshops.

Brown Signs

The New Forest is a repository for the most dreadful clutter of unnecessary road signs, and conditions now threaten to become a great deal worse. Local authorities love to erect them, presumably under the impression that they somehow enhance the council's image. The more street furniture that goes up, the better, the job the council is doing. Now there has been a government decision to relax control on 'brown' tourist signs and the Forest is threatened by a further rash of ugliness. These signs are straightforward advertising for commercial establishments, the proprietors of which presumably, regard the Forest as a convenient site for promoting their businesses. Several such commercial concerns are already demanding Forest advertising space - some on the Open Forest, some on the fenced road verges and some outside the boundary. In some cases applications for eight or more hoardings have been made for one business alone. The Verderers have expressed concern at the principle of advertising on the Forest and no consent has so far been given. The Court's permission must of course, be obtained on Forest land. However, someone (I do not know whether council or advertiser) has jumped the gun and erected signs without consent. This has been done on one of the fenced roads through, the Forest, presumably upon the, assumption that the court will be unable to demand their removal.

This raises, an interesting legal point. When the main roads across the Forest were fenced, the enclosed land - was sold to the county council, but the common rights- were not extinguished. They were, in the words of the New Forest. Acts "interfered with" and compensation was paid for that interference. Other provisions of the acts do refer to the effective extinguishment of rights, so a distinction was clearly intended. It therefore seems that the rights of common still apply within the road reservations (an important matter in the event of accidents involving stock) and the Verderer's powers over the land remain unaltered. Those of the Forestry Commission, on the other hand, no longer apply. If the Verderers stand firm against this new rash of advertising, there should be no way to evade their control by using the fenced road verges .