

## **NEW FOREST NOTES - MARCH 2000**

### **New Recreation Facilities for the Forest**

February was not a good month for the New Forest. It was one of those periods which demonstrate the short-sighted attitude of management in permitting the relentless piecemeal erosion of the Forest. It is a policy of giving in to one recreation demand after another. The string of minor works approved or promoted during the month included nothing of a catastrophic nature, and perhaps that is the problem. There were no easy targets such as fifty acre car parks, pylon lines or sports centres. Those would have been easy to overcome. All were relative pin-pricks, difficult to contest in isolation, but collectively representing a rate of attrition which the Forest simply cannot survive except as a poor shadow of what it once was. Management (and the Verderers can be as guilty as anyone else in this ) seems incapable of appreciating the consequences of actions which will, in the words of one writer, lead to the death of the Forest by a thousand cuts.

First of all, there was the approval of a new formal woodland walk, the circuit of which will occupy much of Holidays Hill Inclosure. It will include waymark posts, some gravel, presumably an entrance signboard, a publicity leaflet and promotion by the Forestry Commission's recreation department. Its disguise, now wearing extremely thin, is "education". More people will be enticed deeper into the Forest. One more wood will have lost what little tranquillity it still retains. Anyone who has watched the development of similar facilities in the past, will know that the rustic seats, picnic tables and information boards will follow as a second phase as soon as the initial grant is forgotten. That plans for a scheme such as this should be approved without a presentment in Open Court (or indeed at all), is quite wrong.

Next, the New Forest District Council (incidentally one of the two councils which would run the Forest under a national park) , is seeking to establish a Millennium Cycle Trail in a district already groaning under the pressure and disruption of recreational cycling. Much of this would be on public roads, but one lengthy and deep penetration into the Forest is proposed (Bolderwood to Burley through once quiet woods) and a lesser Forest length which could make life fairly unpleasant for the residents of North Weirs at Brockenhurst. Of course both of these are existing cycle routes, but with the major selling for which the Council's tourism department is renowned, the number of cyclists should be massively boosted. The Council regrets that the Lottery did not look with favour on its proposal for a "gateway feature" on the trail costing £39,000. However, there is still the interesting prospect of decorating the route with Millennium Stones which, as the Council says, will "add something 'new' to the Trail" ! They will cost the taxpayers only £3,000, while the route itself will amount to £7,000. This, I suppose, is how one interprets planning for the New Forest with conservation of its natural heritage as a priority. Naturally, there is the usual camouflage of "sustainable transport" for what will in fact be more people, more cycles strapped to the roofs of more cars,

more trade for the cycle shops and ice cream vendors and more litter and disruption in the Forest.

To round off this month of pin pricks, the Forestry Commission has instituted (without consulting the Verderers) a programme of guided cycle tours through the Forest and a sports pavilion is to be enlarged. The drip of recreational pressure which once eroded granite is now a significant trickle biting into soft sandstone.

### **Aircraft Beacons**

The Forest has a remarkable way of converting current management problems into history and then erasing records of their passing. This has been demonstrated by my so far unsuccessful attempts to discover much detail of the Ibsley Common aircraft beacons. These peculiar structures dominated Ibsley Common and the skyline above Linwood for nearly half a century and will be clearly remembered by many people living in the Forest. These (latterly) civil aircraft guidance beacons were appalling blots on the landscape, but little trace of them now survives. The last was built in about 1972 at the head of Great Chibden Bottom. It was eventually demolished about 1988, but the skyline power cables which fed it remained, serving no purpose, for years afterwards. The late Lesley Errington recorded the intriguing spectacle of Ringwood & Fordingbridge Rural District councillors running about the common with flags on twenty foot poles, assessing the visibility of the proposed beacon during consideration of the planning application.

The 1972 beacon replaced an earlier structure further to the north east above Linwood and was known to one of my informants as the "Spy Hut". That is supposed to have been built about 1957. However, it was by no means the first site to be used on Ibsley Common. Between the end of the war and the erection of the Spy Hut, there was some sort of structure built near to the earlier air raid shelter and ruins of an accommodation building which may still be seen east of Chibden. I have not been able to come up with any memories or record of that site beyond what appears on contemporary Ordnance Survey maps.

Before civil use of Ibsley Common started, there was military occupation which is much better documented. A timber tower, surrounded to a height of six feet by a thick brick wall, comprised the wartime Direction Finding station. This was used to transmit position fixes to aircraft. The site has been well recorded by the Ibsley Airfield Research Group. They tell the delightful story of a ginger cat from Mockbeggar, which took up residence in the tower, sleeping (for warmth) on top of the radio set. The story goes that the cat was quite unconcerned by outgoing messages, but became agitated by the faintest incoming signal, even if inaudible to humans. The operators were thus alerted to weak transmissions from aircraft in distress. The life of an American pilot flying a P-38 Lightning is said to have been saved by the cat !

If anyone with a long memory can throw further light on this recent piece of lost history - especially the first post-war beacon or any photographs - I should be very pleased to hear from them.

### **Alice in the National Park**

In a most remarkable proposal which, at first sight, seems straight out of Lewis Carroll, the Hampshire County Council has come up with a suggestion for a national park in the New Forest without a national park authority. My initial reaction on hearing rumours of this idea was that it was one of those nonsense stories which are common in the Forest. However, a three page advertisement by the council in the "Parliamentary Monitor" dispelled that notion. Moreover, subject to seeing the small print, it is just possible that in this scheme lies a route to partial salvation for the Forest.

The County Council's argument - and I am told it is supported by New Forest District Council - is that the secretary of state can designate a national park without creating a national park authority. Counsel's opinion has apparently been obtained to confirm this view. It is in the national park authority that the real threat to the New Forest lies. It would permit the councils to carry out recreational development, perhaps unfettered, and it would greatly ease other development projects such as roads. Remove the authority and the threat is greatly lessened. Of course the Forest would still be likely to suffer a massive increase in tourism - "visit Britain's newest and most accessible national park" - but that might have to be the price of compromise. The government would still be able to claim delivery of Mr.Prescott's "Labour party birthday present to the Nation" in the shape of a New Forest park.

The so-called "Greenwood Plan" (apparently after the council officer most concerned in its formulation) envisages a "conservation board" - "created at any time following the designation of a national park". It would need a statutory basis, but at least its powers could be circumscribed. It would not be council controlled, it would not be responsible for recreation, it would have no immediate interest in public development. Altogether, it looks like a chink of light in a very dark tunnel. Of course it would not please the out-and-out national parkers who are determined to see council management, effectively weakening the Verderers and the Forestry Commission, but if the local authorities themselves are backing the scheme and the Forest joins them, it could have a more than even chance of success.

The obvious question is why should the councils, which have most to gain in getting control of the New Forest, be proposing this alternative ? The answer is simply that they are very jealous of their own planning powers. Neither wants a national park authority, which is not within its sole control, to usurp part of its planning jurisdiction. That is a reasonable enough argument. In the past, the two councils have been at each other's throats for ages over as simple a matter as the right to appoint the "planning" Verderer. The prospects of others meddling in minerals or waste planning is not at all attractive to the County and similar concerns exercise the District. The attractions of extra influence over the Forest and the chance to taking those Verderers down a peg or two are evidently outweighed by this concern for their existing empires.

It is unwise to jump too readily at any scheme until its detail is fully understood, but the chance of a peaceful compromise, in place of three years of intense conflict, is an attractive one.

### **Old Woods Saved**

For those who have had enough of national parks, mountain bikers and the other threats to the Forest, there is one outstandingly good piece of news. The Forestry Commission is starting a series of public meetings dealing with the future of most inclosures north and west of Fritham and those in the Cadnam, Lyndhurst, Ashurst triangle. In a significant shift of policy, and subject to final approval after the public consultation, such beautiful old woods as Amberwood and Open Broomy are to be saved from felling. This would otherwise have started in the next few years. Even in the other woods, where policy changes are less dramatic, there is to be a welcome increase in broadleaved trees, some return of land to the Open Forest and a general easing of commercial pressures. If delivery follows promise, this is probably the most important gain for the Forest in thirty years. Full details of the public meetings can be obtained from the Forestry Commission at Lyndhurst.

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