

## **NEW FOREST NOTES MARCH 2003**

### **New Forest Rubbish Tips**

The appalling litter which scars the road verges and the margins of many tourist parks is only the latest example of man's desire to use the New Forest as a rubbish tip. I suppose we have progressed somewhat, in that the flinging-about of litter by tourists and motorists passing through the Forest is at least illegal – even if the law is seldom enforced and the physical results of the offence are inadequately dealt with. It is only a few years ago that the Forest was regarded by the local councils as a “legitimate” tipping area. Those with memories stretching back before the War will no doubt recall the time when every village had its gravel or sand pit on Forest land into which its refuse was tipped. During the War, the Services joined in and I can remember, as a child, all sorts of exciting detritus from Stoney Cross Aerodrome going in to the Gorley Bushes tip at Fritham.

After the War, things settled down a bit. The old village pits were largely closed down and more or less covered over. Nowadays they are the favourite target of vandals digging for bottles to sell and whose hobby results in the spreading of broken glass as lethal to stock as it was when buried perhaps seventy five years ago. Those pit closures aside, the next phase of dumping was on a much grander scale and comprised the use of immense landfill projects on what the councils regarded as the cheap and virtually worthless land of the Forest. I am not sure exactly how many of these pits there were, but the worst of them were at Setley, Longdown and Ocknell near Stoney Cross. All of them were eventually forced to close under relentless pressure from the Verderers and the Forest societies, but not before they had caused considerable damage and, as we now see, created a time bomb legacy for the Forest.

Perhaps the worst problems were at Ocknell where leachate from the tip polluted Highland Water (the source of the Lymington River) over many years. Eventually the pit was closed and the discharge classified as safe. However, the filthy ooze which may be found from the springs below the site today looks poisonous, even if the authorities now regard it as either safe or so isolated and remote that it may be ignored.

Setley was, I think, the last site to close and the standard of restoration in parts was very poor. I am not aware of any former or continuing pollution problems from this tip.

The present revival of fears relating to Forest dumps has been sparked off by events at Longdown. Over the years, one or two large cavities have appeared in the site and its formerly level surface is now undulating. The most recent collapse has produced a hole so deep and dangerous that the Forestry Commission has had to erect emergency fencing. Further collapse and deteriorations seem inevitable.

At their February Court, the Verderers received a report on the site from the Forestry Commission's land agent. It seems that until 1974, the site had been the responsibility of the New Forest Rural District Council. It was then taken over by Hampshire County Council until final closure in about 1980. I can well remember the constant stream of presentments before the Verderers at that time, complaining of broken fences, dangerous materials and blowing litter. The site was undoubtedly a disgrace and about as badly managed as it is possible to imagine.

The important question today is exactly who will pick up the bill for remedial works. There seem to be no adequate records (at least available to the Forestry Commission and the Verderers) of exactly what the tip contains and how deep it is. It seems very improbable that there are even minimal precautions against the discharge of polluted water, although fortunately the site is on very porous sand. Is it the responsibility of the County Council, or has the duty of maintaining the site been unloaded onto the Forestry Commission? The land agent told the Verderers that legal advice is being sought. This is hardly surprising as the costs involved are likely to be phenomenal. Local memory suggests that in order to cram in as much rubbish as possible during the period when the County Council was fighting to retain the tip, trenches up to forty feet deep were being excavated to receive the waste. The ghost of the Longdown operations is evidently alive and well and will probably haunt the Forest for years to come.

### **The Lyndhurst Golf Course**

In January, the Verderers decided to adhere to their decision of last year to agree to a new ten year lease for Lyndhurst Golf Course, rather than the twenty five years which had been sought by the proprietor. The problem is the old one of too much pressure of too many people on too small an area of Forest, resulting in degradation of the landscape and its vegetation, together with associated problems for livestock and non-golfing public use. It is not a problem peculiar to the golf course, although there the symptoms are particularly acute.

On a wider scale, it is becoming increasingly difficult to see how some intensively-used recreational facilities can continue to be accommodated in the fragile woods and heaths of the New Forest – at least if the traditional respect for quiet and unspoilt natural beauty is to be maintained. Facilities which may have been acceptable fifty years ago, when there were relatively few visitors, less residents and in every respect less pressure, now constitute a real and growing problem. If a national park is imposed on the Forest, its first major test is likely to be its attitude to intensive recreation. Will it stick strictly to the requirements of the park Acts, or will it pay lip-service to them while actually taking the politically comfortable course of backing demands for formal recreation?

### **Lost Visitors**

To those of us who live here, the Forest often seems small and overcrowded. Its open woods and Inclosures are almost as familiar to us as our own back gardens. The possibility of becoming lost is unthinkable. Occasionally at night or in thick fog we might take a wrong path for a few minutes and I must admit that the rapid changes in some of the Inclosures can be confusing, but there is always the roar of traffic and (in the south) the railway, to re-establish a correct sense of direction. For visitors, I think, it is rather different. Anyone who spends a lot of time in the Forest is repeatedly accosted by perplexed walkers who, if not actually lost, are totally disorientated. Part of the problem is that they tend to use 1/50,000 Landranger Ordnance Survey maps (which show only the larger tracks) instead of the more expensive and comprehensive 1/25,000 Outdoor Leisure maps. For adults, such disorientation may be merely an inconvenience or at worst a mild worry. For children, especially children from a town, it can be quite terrifying.

In the old days, before the perceived rise of the paedophile, there was no problem. One simply questioned lost children as to their car park of origin (was there an ice cream van ? was there a stream ? etc) and then loaded the unfortunate orphans into the back of the land rover and transported them back to their grieving and very grateful parents. Now all that has changed. Even if one were incautious enough to provide the transport, there would probably be a lynch mob waiting in the car park rather than grateful parents.

Three years ago I encountered two small boys at the east gate of Roe. The younger (about ten) was sobbing. They were hopelessly lost, having wandered off from the Linford car park. Fortunately in this case it was a simple matter to place them on the gravel road with firm instructions not to deviate from it and set them off in the right direction, but they had clearly hoped for transport back to their families. It is a horrid world where simple prudence and self-protection demand the denial of a small act of kindness.

On another occasion I found a small boy on his knees in Suburbs Wood, praying for divine intervention. When he opened his eyes, it was to see the large chestnut face of my mare peering at him – not exactly the angel of deliverance he had been expecting. Anyhow, he toddled along behind the horse for the vast distance of about five hundred yards back to the safety of the family motor.

#### **Recording the Forest's Past**

Over the last few months, a small team from the New Forest Section of the Hampshire Field Club has started preparing a comprehensive inventory of the Forest's archaeological sites. It is hoped that this will eventually be accommodated in the New Forest Museum in Lyndhurst. The slow painstaking work is being largely financed by the Christopher Tower Foundation, with small contributions from the New Forest Association and the New Forest Section itself. On completion, the record will list every earthwork and other archaeological site on the Crown lands and may in due course be extended to cover other open country in the Forest. Most of it will be available for public inspection, with only sensitive details which could assist treasure robbers being withheld. Genuine researchers will have access to the whole on giving suitable assurances as to the security of vulnerable sites.

The record will cover everything from the smallest charcoal pit to huge earthworks like the Lyndhurst Deer Park which run for miles through the woods. Forest archaeology is not generally of the spectacular "Time Team" type. Mostly it is made up of faint traces of former pastoral activity which survive in the form of banks and ditches. That may seem rather dull, but to those who understand such fragile relics, they contain the key to how the Forest was managed and developed over thousands of years. They are valuable in a national context because in so many areas this type of earthwork has been destroyed by agriculture. The Forest thus forms a vast open-air museum. Work on the project is expected to be complete by the early summer.

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