

## **NEW FOREST NOTES MARCH 2008**

### **Crown Lands Management Plan**

It is thirty six years since the late Donn Small, then Deputy Surveyor of the New Forest, published for the first time a management plan for the Forest, covering the period 1972-1981. Today the latest in this series of plans (in draft form) and for a period of five years is available for public comment. The consultation period ends next week – 7<sup>th</sup> March.

The publication of the 1972 plan marked a turning point in Forest history. There had been plans before that time, concerned chiefly with silviculture. They were called “working plans” in those days and they were highly secret because they contained policies wholly unacceptable to the local community and to the public generally. In those times there was no nonsense about freedom of information or human rights. When the last working plan was leaked to the press and the Forestry Commission’s schemes collapsed like a pack of cards as a consequence, all copies were immediately called in by Queen’s House in an attempt to discover the whistle-blower. In fact he or she never existed. An unsuspecting and entirely innocent official at Alice Holt had made available the entire volume to a researcher in the reference library on request ! Anyhow, the 1972 plan brought to an end the old and evil policies for eliminating broadleaves from the Inclosures and for exploiting the Ancient Ornamental Woods for profit. It was a slim volume of only 25 pages, plus an appendix describing the regeneration of the Open Woods. There were no pictures apart from some line drawings on the cover. The hurtling mountain biker, an essential component of the cover of any modern Forestry Commission publication, had not then been invented. The whole thing was printed on the office duplicator, but it became and remains a key document in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century history of the Forest.

Today’s consultation draft could not be more different. It covers half the time span of the 1972 plan and it is ten times as long with well over two hundred and fifty pages, packed with colour photos and maps. It is so vast that I can hardly imagine that anyone will read it through from beginning to end. In the near future it will probably go the same way as all the other indigestible and redundant New Forest strategies and plans. After all, we should have an even bigger and better one from the National Park later this year. However, there is always a danger that something important will slip through unnoticed. “Provision for the Open Forest candy-floss sales was included in paragraph 17b of page 197 of the management plan. You did not object then, so what is your problem now ?” So the plan should certainly not be dismissed as just another waste of paper. Anyone brave enough to tackle it can find the document at [www.forestry.gov.uk/newforest](http://www.forestry.gov.uk/newforest) .

After struggling my way through most of the plan, I have two principal areas of concern about its provisions or lack of them and its other content. Firstly, it completely side-steps many of the really pressing problems facing the Forest, choosing instead to repeat the usual platitudes. I can see nothing which acknowledges the filthy litter-strewn state of the areas to which the public has easy access; there are no provisions for controlling bike and

other trespass; noise and disturbance is barely mentioned; provision for resolving extraction damage and poor ride drainage in the Inclosures is absent and so on. True, there are passing references to some of these subjects – an untitled photo shows four volunteers beside what one must assume is a heap of litter bags – but they certainly do not figure in the “key actions”. These actions (in the appropriate section of the plan) are largely devoted to enhancing and developing recreational use. It would have been a simple matter to include a statement that litter is accumulating in all parts of the Forest, even the most remote, that existing clearance work is wholly inadequate, that the problem needs to be dealt with as a matter of urgency and that a comprehensive programme for such clearance should be instigated. I suppose that such an admission would be regarded as unfriendly to the visitors and worse than that, it would cost money. Similarly, although there is huge emphasis in the plan upon healthy outdoor recreation, there is no acknowledgement of the fact that over-use is already damaging wilderness quality of the Forest and needs to be stopped.

The policies for the future are clearly the most important element of any management plan and those policies certainly fall far short of the ideal in many respects and in some instances are actually bad for the Forest, but it is not policies alone that concern me. Very large numbers of inaccuracies occur throughout the document. The Commission has chosen to include page after page of supposed facts on which, presumably, it wishes to imply that the plan is based, yet it has clearly bundled together a mass of information with little regard to its accuracy, either historical or legal. Perhaps that would not matter too much in somewhere other than the New Forest, but here our management is dominated by history and the special legal framework created by our own legislation. Fail to understand the Forest’s past and you are highly likely to make a mess of its future. There has, for example, been a failure to understand the basis upon which the timber Inclosures of the Forest were made. An Act of 1698 which authorized the inclosure of 6,000 acres for plantations is said by the plan to have resulted in only 3296 being taken. In fact the Act (confirmed by an Act of 1808, wrongly stated by the plan to have allowed a further 6000 acres of enclosure) had taken the full original 6,000 acres by 1811. Even after the watershed of the Deer Removal Act in 1851, a further 4,000 acres was lost (via a rolling power) as a result of its provisions. This may be fairly abstruse history, but it led to immense distrust of the Crown after 1851 and has shaped history and attitudes down to the present day. Then there is the list of Inclosure dates which is wildly inaccurate. One of the Forest’s largest plantations (Oakley) made in 1852-3 is claimed by the plan to have been made in 1843, Godshill Wood is said to be A&O woodland, but was in fact inclosed in 1810, Crab Hat was made in 1843, but is claimed as 1924. Other dates are also wrong or omitted altogether although they are perfectly well known.

In the Archaeology and Cultural Heritage section, much of the introduction is very bad indeed, but I am told the Forestry Commission received some poor advice and we may hope for corrections in the final version. A gross example is the statement that the deer parks, woodland boundaries and hunting lodges are of Anglo Saxon origin, although of course they are at least three to six hundred years more recent. Many of the maps throughout the report

are very wrong (computer error no doubt). The residents of Fritham, Bramshaw and Woodgreen will be surprised, if not alarmed, to learn from them that their homes and land is in fact Crown property ! Several golf courses are omitted from the recreation leases map. The Verderers will, no doubt, be happy to learn that the Court's consent is now required for accesses to private property – contrary to the long and vigorously argued position of the Crown and the opinion of Parliament in 1949.

All this is not just a question of the odd slip or typing error which can resist the best of checking systems. The list of mistakes in the plan is endless and does nothing for confidence in proposals formulated in the light of so-called facts. Still, no doubt I will be told that this is a draft and everything will come right in the end.

### **Lyndhurst Bypass meeting cancelled**

Last month the County Council invited interested parties to a meeting in Totton so that it could explain the outcome of the latest studies and opinion polls and tell us what it intends to do next. I duly arrived at the council's offices early on the morning of the chosen day (13<sup>th</sup> February), to be told that the meeting had been cancelled the previous evening. Apologies but no explanations were forthcoming. Rumour has it that there is some intense political conflict going on within the council – probably because the latest consultants' reports and opinion surveys do not support demands for a new road deep within the New Forest. Indeed, they point very much in the opposite direction, emphasising the immense barriers to such a route. The proponents of an outer route for the bypass may have succeeded in silencing the County's presentation, but until they get the offending documents removed from the web, the facts remain for all to read. Their appearance there in December certainly did not receive much publicity that I saw and they are worth reading :

<http://www3.hants.gov.uk/scrutiny/scrutiny-committees/environment-transportation/cx-policyunit-hccencvdeptevidence.htm> The are deeply buried in the website under confusing titles – hence the over-long link.

### **Verderers' Chairman**

This month the candidates for the position of Official Verderer will be interviewed on 11<sup>th</sup> and, apparently, the result will be announced in April. We know that the Chairman of the National Park Authority will be on the selection panel (because he has said so), but I am not aware that the names of the other selectors have been made public. The whole business seems to remain shrouded in mystery. For example I have it on good authority that the Park was deeply involved in the process leading to the recent advertisements for applicants. Why should this be ? In the past it has always been assumed that the Forestry Commission in conjunction with DEFRA (or its predecessor) as direct servants of government have taken the lead in the selection process. It is difficult to see what business it is of a local planning authority (for that, with a few additional powers bolted on, is what the Park is) to concern itself with the choice of chairman of the Verderers' Court. No doubt the Park would, rightly, resent any attempt by the Verderers to meddle with its choice of chairman. The whole rather unsavoury business could do with some light thrown upon it from beginning to end.

I don't suppose we shall be told officially who the candidates for the post are, although the present Official Verderer announced at the Court on 20<sup>th</sup> February that he had submitted an application. The grapevine has suggested several other names and, more interestingly, the fact that various people have been leant-on to apply.

Anthony Pasmore