

## **NEW FOREST NOTES MARCH 2010**

### **National Park's plans for running Forest recreation**

The National Park's latest plan for the New Forest, under the title "A sustainable recreation management strategy for the New Forest National Park", seems to be in the final stages of its gestation. Successive drafts have been drifting into the Verderers' office like snowflakes. The plan seems to be designed to please everybody, or at least everybody who uses the New Forest for recreation or for tourist-related business. As a consequence it is likely to achieve little if anything in the field of protecting the Forest. In the latest version I have seen, some of the positively damaging proposals which appeared in earlier drafts have, mercifully, been deleted. Still, if the best that can be said of a plan is that the damage it will do is limited, some people might think we would be better off without it.

The plan seems a poor thing compared to some of the great management documents of the past. The Conservation Report of 1970 highlighted the damage which was even then being done to the Forest by exploding recreation and recommended firm and clear remedies. Within months the bulldozers were on the ground implementing those recommendations. Much of the Forest's lost tranquillity was restored, despite howls of rage from the "drive and camp anywhere" lobby and for a time the line was held. The Park's offering barely acknowledges the present degraded state of the Forest. If it did so, it would have to acknowledge the need for correction and that would make it unpopular. Indeed, the plan gives the impression that the Forest can take anything that it is thrown at it in the way of more pressure, provided only that there is "management" and that users are properly advised and educated. As missed opportunities go in the New Forest, there are not many higher up the scale than this document.

While everybody has been very busy considering the detail of the recreation plan and its failures, a much more fundamental question seems to have escaped all notice. Why do we have a National Park recreation plan for the Forest at all? What business is it of the Park to interfere in land management which is strictly the concern of other authorities and for which those authorities already have management plans and policies?

National parks are required by law to prepare plans formulating their policies for the management of the park. Management is not defined but must surely be confined to its own sphere of operations. That, it seems to me, is the plan which everyone spent the last two years fighting over – a plan essentially focussed on development control. It is the proper business of the park authority. In addition, the New Forest Park, like all other park authorities, has various minor duties in relation to education, information, grants etc. Except in matters of development control (or if it decides to exercise compulsory powers) it is not entitled to intervene in the day-to-day management of the commonable lands of the Forest. That is strictly the business of the Forestry Commission and other owners, regulated so far as the law allows by the Verderers and Natural England. I can see nothing which entitles it to dictate policies to these agencies. The managers must pay due regard to national park

purposes, but they are under no obligation to pay regard to national park plans and especially plans which are of dubious validity in the first place.

In some national parks the authority owns a significant area of land and there, of course, recreation plans along the lines of that proposed for the New Forest are perfectly justified, although one might hope for policies better directed to protection.

Altogether it seems to me that the Park is trying to invade territory to which it has no right except in the matter of development control and for a few marginal purposes such as education and information. It is territory which the authority does not properly understand and from which, on the evidence of the recreation strategy's shortcomings, it should certainly be excluded.

### **Verderers' Stewardship scheme passes the starting line**

By the time these notes appear, the Verderers will have signed their agreement with DEFRA which will see huge sums of money pumped into the New Forest every year for the next decade. It is not, perhaps, quite so glittering a treasure chest as at first appeared, but still has the potential to do a great deal of good – or a great deal of harm.

The chief beneficiaries of the scheme will be the Verderers themselves and the Forestry Commission. Each will receive £800,000 a year. In the Verderers' case the money will be spent on direct support for commoners, the extent of which after 2013 has yet to be determined. It will also help with community projects such as part financing the agisters and their equipment, building pounds, maintaining drift fences and so on.

The Forestry Commission money will go largely on stream filling and diversion (they call it restoration) and other ecological work. So far as I can see this simply replaces one source of public spending with another, because the stream operations have been in full swing for a number of years. In other words, the spend on the Forest may not greatly increase, but the funding for eliminating much of the Forest's improved drainage systems will be secured in the long term.

In addition to the 1.6 million pounds going to the principal management agencies direct, the Verderers, Forestry Commission and Park will be able to apply for special project money which could take the total per annum to well over the two million pound mark. Because this is a rather ill-defined area except in the initial stages, it poses potential threats to the Forest if money is spent in inappropriate ways. Some rather frantic last-minute negotiations were necessary to limit the potential for such harm. As a result of their successful conclusion, the protection of the Forest from abuse of the scheme seems more secure. That protection is multi-layered. For a start there is the conservation objectives of the funding providers. Secondly, the Verderers have a third share of the voting on the management board. Clearly that gives potential scope for the Park and the Forestry Commission to outvote the Court on every issue, but there is the hope that decisions will be taken more by agreement than by force of votes. Next, the Verderers have secured a "key test" for all projects considered by the board. They must be shown to "protect the New Forest's unique agricultural commoning practices, and conserve the Forest's traditional

landscape, wildlife and aesthetic character, including its flora and fauna, peacefulness, natural beauty and cultural heritage". That, it is hoped, will prevent any massive tourist-promoting schemes such as new biking routes, ice cream parlours or new car park building. Finally, if all these safeguards should fail, the Verderers' statutory power to protect the Forest remains as a powerful block to new development, however well financed.

### **A sticky welcome**

Visitors who obstruct barriers and gateways by inconsiderate parking have for a long time been subject to mild correction by Forestry Commission staff, including the use of windscreen stickers. The problem is a growing one, not least because motorists, understandably fearful of having their cars broken into and robbed in screened car parks, have taken to verge parking as a safer alternative. Still, it is one thing to park tidily off the carriageway on a wide verge and quite another to block up an entrance which may at any time be needed for emergency access. Of course one of the principal victims of such parking is the Verderers' team of agisters. The agisters need constant access to the Open Forest for dealing with animal emergencies. Now they too are to be issued with Forestry Commission windscreen stickers.

The Verderers devoted some time to discussing the subject of glue at the Court on 17<sup>th</sup> February. Stickers which are simply torn off by enraged motorists, even if followed up by a stiff letter from Queen's House, have a limited deterrent effect and quite probably add to local litter problems. I recall how the National Trust solved this problem at one of its properties in West Dorset a few years ago. They had the usual "unauthorized parking" message printed on labels and then secured them to motor cars with a bucket of old-fashioned glue of the type which used to be employed in cattle markets to fix lot numbers. On one occasion my permit was overlooked by the warden and I received the full treatment. Half an hour scrubbing off the filthy mess would have convinced even the most hardened verge parker that a repeat offence was not worthwhile. I have not seen these glued labels recently. Perhaps they are now thought to infringe human rights.

### **Tailing**

In sorting through some old family papers recently, I came across a VHS tape which contained two interesting items. The first was a copy of Eric Ashby's superb film of New Forest ponies, narrated by Peter Scott. The film bears no date, but from the fact that workmen are seen driving in posts for the "new" A 31 fencing, it must be either 1964 or 1965. I suppose any amateur can secure exciting pictures of a pony drift, but the painstaking shots of stallion contests, play fighting, interaction with other Forest animals and tailing require the patience and skill of a real expert such as Eric.

The second part of the tape is devoted to tailing and appears to comprise all the various scenes of this subject recorded by Eric Ashby, but not actually used in the film. Tailing is the process in which commoners chase after a young pony on horseback, catch the quarry by the tail, hold on until someone else grabs its mane and perhaps a third secures it with a halter. In modern times, now that the whole Forest is littered with pounds, this process

is rarely necessary, but in the 1960s and earlier it was common. Some of the film shows unfortunate riders being dragged from the saddle by victims determined to escape. It must have been exceptionally difficult to film, because the quarry was running free and could have ended up anywhere. Several clips show tailing on Wilverley Plain (traffic streaming down the long-closed road by the Naked Man). Commoners' faces from half a century ago are well-remembered, although I can no longer put names to some of them. Not one of them is surmounted by a safety helmet. The final clip is of my late parents and Raymond Bennett doing furious battle with a yearling on Ocknell Plain and finally ending up triumphant.

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