

## **NEW FOREST NOTES MARCH 2013**

### **The future of forestry and the New Forest**

Last month the government published its response to the recommendations of the Independent Panel on Forestry, which had in turn reported on the government's proposals to sell off or otherwise dispose of the "National Forest Estate". This is beginning to be an extremely tangled web and I doubt if the pundits actually understand it much better than the casual observer. Things are not made any easier by the fact that the response is saturated with incomprehensible jargon which manages to confuse even the simplest of ideas. The government is throughout "fully committed, working with partners, driving forward policies, seeking resilient delivery arrangements and promoting sustainability". For example, it is fully committed to: "Working with the Natural Capital Committee and the Office of National Statistics to develop a set of natural capital accounts for UK forestry assets and use this to inform the development of a set of natural capital accounts for the Public Forest Estate". I suppose somebody knows what this means. There are forty six pages of such nonsense! This is definitely a report which should be avoided unless one is forced to read it. After the first few pages, I found myself longing for the beautiful clear English of the Baker Report on the New Forest published in 1947. In little more than half a century and through an addiction to jargon, government has almost destroyed its own ability to communicate with the public.

What does all of this mean for the New Forest? The answer seems to be virtually nothing if taken at face value. Commercial forestry will be promoted nationally, but presumably not in the New Forest because it is limited here by legislation, conservation designations and ministerial guarantees. The regulatory functions of the Forestry Commission will be separated from its landholding, the latter being handed to a new national body as yet undefined. Tourism and access are to be promoted, although again without specific mention of the New Forest. Finally, and probably most significantly, some of these objectives will be achieved by legislation. The timing of such legislation is unclear and it is difficult to believe that it will receive a high priority in the government's programme. If it is not passed by the next election, it is quite possible that a new government might have other ideas. All in all, it is probably not worth getting too excited about before there is at least consultation on a Bill.

The underlying danger of the report is, as I explained in my Notes of August last year, that small, seemingly innocuous, provisions could be slipped into legislation to override or weaken the protection given by the New Forest Acts – protection which limits damaging recreational development in particular. Such weakening might no doubt be welcomed by the National Park and Forestry Commission because it would boost tourism still further, allow more money-making exploitation of the Forest and dispose of those irritating powers of the Verderers to protect what little tranquillity the area still possesses.

Even the government seems to be woolly-minded about its objectives. It will, it says, protect the nation's woods against threats, but goes on to say that it will manage woodland to promote some of the greatest threats to areas like the New Forest, in the form of more access

and economic growth. It will, it says, strike the “right balance” between maximising profit and protecting the natural environment, but no attempt is made to define the right balance. We are also told there will be a new initiative to involve local communities in the Forest Estate, but what this means is left to the imagination.

So far as I can see, there is little to be done at this stage except to remain vigilant and ready to challenge the first signs that damaging national policies might be applied in the special circumstances of the New Forest.

### **The great freeze and the appalling wet**

Exactly fifty years ago the Forest was about to emerge from two months of misery which started with the heavy snow of Boxing Day 1962. Freezing temperatures continued until early March and it was a terrible time for the ponies of the Forest. Most cattle were removed to holdings, but it was impossible to do that for the ponies and feeding points had to be established for them around the area. In those days, strange as it may seem, many ponies did not know what hay was and it took a little training to acquaint them with the new food and to get them to visit the same feeding point each day. Because of the depth of the snow, animals were reluctant to move long distances and this, combined with the severe frosts, made access to water a further problem. In the end, water holes were opened and maintained in the tops of many valleys, with ponies attracted to them initially by trails of hay. Thereafter they were used constantly. The Forestry Commission also gave permission to commoners to fell holly on the Forest and ponies would stream in to the felling sites each day as soon as they heard the sawing commence. The Verderers hired a large barn in Lyndhurst which was stocked with hay, much of it provided for by a national appeal or donated by local farmers. By the end of the emergency an efficient feeding system was in place, but it had been a close run thing.

My own memories of the great freeze are scanty. I can remember breaking open the brickwork of the cow shed wall to get at a frozen water pipe whose supply was essential at milking time. There were also long periods without a water supply to the house as deeply buried pipes froze up, but the livestock at home all survived well.

Now, fifty years on, we are (I hope) coming out of the wettest winter anyone can remember. Water is running out of the ground where no springs have been known before and many paths on the Open Forest seems to have been reduced to a swamp in the vicinity of the car parks. The so-called parallel-tracking is evident everywhere as users seek drier routes adjoining those destroyed. There was a time when such damage was blamed upon riding schools, in the days when there were many more of them than today, but now it is sheer weight of feet which is causing the damage.

In the south of the Forest the peculiar phenomenon of the quaking bog, always present, has become widespread across the heaths after weeks of incessant rain. In wet areas pressure of water builds up under a thick and impervious crust of peat and vegetation so that as an unsuspecting walker crosses the affected area the ground heaves up and down giving the sensation of walking on the surface of the sea. There is no real danger of sinking,

except in the bogs proper, but it can be un-nerving. In places if the crust is punctured a small fountain erupts through the hole, while in others gas (I assume methane) is emitted in a jet.

For the animals it may not have been as bad as 1963, but constant wet on the ponies' backs, combined with freezing night time temperatures, has a serious effect on an animal's ability to survive on the Forest and many are now being removed by their owners or as the agisters enforce the welfare regulations. It is all a great contrast with last year which was one of the best winters on record for animal condition and when we experienced a mini-heat wave in March.

### **A bridge of anger**

In the first decade of last century the renowned artist and archaeologist, Heywood Sumner, painted a charming watercolour of Newlands Bridge near Linwood and the approach to it from Rockford Common. The watercolour was later reproduced as a line drawing (with the addition of deer) in Sumner's 1910 "Book of Gorley". Then, in 1987, nearly fifty years after the artist's death, the original manuscript complete with its colour illustrations, was republished under the title "Cuckoo Hill" (the name of Sumner's house adjoining Ibsley Common). All this might have been no more than of historical interest but for a furious row which has developed over Newlands Bridge. For those who know nothing of the geography of that part of the Forest, the origins of the dispute need a little explanation.

From North Hollow in Linwood, nearly to Moyles Court, the valley of Dockens Water is lined on the north side by impassable bog separating Ibsley Common to the north from Rockford Common on the south. That is a distance of over one and a half miles and the only crossing place for riders is at Newlands Bridge. The bridge and its adjoining ford and approach passage is thus a crucial link for commoners and other local equestrians. However, the bridge carries a public footpath only – not a bridleway, and that is a significant distinction. Locals on horses of course have a right of access by virtue of their common rights, so the legalities are not of great importance to them.

Until last year things were relatively peaceful with Newlands Bridge (the successor to Sumner's picturesque structure) and its ford existing without conflict between riders and walkers. Then the County Council replaced the old bridge with a fine new structure of foreign hardwood and utterly inappropriate design and materials, more fitted to Southampton Common than the New Forest. The National Park authority seems not to have a clue when it comes to traditional design for structures on the Forest. Worse still, the County erected gates at each end of the bridge with the objective of excluding horses, an unnecessary and stupid piece of provocation because the bridge is more than adequate for horses and the number of equine users so few that significant conflict with walkers is inconceivable. In due course the gates disappeared, whether officially removed or because of theft or vandalism, I do not know.

At the February Court, the Verderers received a presentment on behalf of local riders objecting to the lack of consultation in the provision of a gated bridge and raising various legal points relating to the access. Of course this site is not on Crown land and the Verderers'

jurisdiction is limited. The Court accordingly declined to intervene, however provoking the recent gating of the bridge may have been. In fact the present absence of gates (provided that they are not replaced) and the clearly sound condition of the adjoining ford should, I hope, now satisfy everyone and perhaps things will quieten down for another century or so.

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