

NEW FOREST NOTES MARCH 2014

Stalking horse trails in the Forest

The National Park's plans for "community routes" in the New Forest are probably a great deal more significant than the authority would like the Forest to appreciate. Huge sums of money have been made available (under the title of Sustainable Transport Fund) for all sorts of schemes designed to "improve" sustainable access to the New Forest and elsewhere. I remember that when the original bid for this money was made, the Verderers were almost alone in seeing the danger to the Forest and in opposing the application – unfortunately with no success. Now they have been proved right by the Park's attempt to establish these community routes across Open Forest land and on Forestry Commission tracks.

The precise details are not entirely clear from the Verderers' minutes, but it would seem that the Park is seeking seven new trails across the Forest, in addition to an unspecified number on other Forestry Commission tracks and on some rights of way off the Forest. The nature and location of these Commission tracks is not defined, but details of the new trails are clear enough. They are said to be "specifically for walkers and horse riders". That wording may be important, because it does not say "*exclusively* for walkers and horse riders".

There are several obvious problems with these proposals. First of all it is not the business of the National Park Authority to interfere in the management of the commonable lands of the New Forest. That is exclusively the concern of the Forestry Commission under the regulation (where the law so provides) of the Verderers' Court. The Park is a planning authority with additional limited powers to affect private landowners, and to provide information for visitors. It can, and does, promote tourism and other business interests. It is supposed to, but does not, give priority to conserving natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage in any serious conflict with its commercial and recreational promotions. In short, the creation of trails across the Forest is not its business. The tranquillity of the Forest has taken a terrible battering from excess recreation promoted by the Park since it was established, and the community routes scheme is one more turn of the ratchet.

There is next the question of what the trails are actually for. We are told that they are for walkers and horse riders, but I am not sure who is supposed to be fooled by that. The Park knows perfectly well that any walker and any horse rider may go wherever he pleases on the Forest. He does not need the permission of the Forestry Commission or the Verderers and he certainly does not need Park-sponsored urbanizing trails. This freedom appears to be the unintended consequence of a piece of pre-war legislation and can cause problems in the event of emergency such as a foot and mouth disease outbreak. It is nonetheless the law, and given that it is, what is the real object behind the trails proposal? It can hardly be a coincidence that every one of the proposed routes follows a line where previous attempts have been made to establish highly intrusive and damaging cycle routes. That – the making of cycle routes - I am sure is the hidden objective of the scheme. It is a classic boot in the door operation. First of all try persuading the Forest into accepting walking and riding trails. Erect waymarks and information boards, clear vegetation, gravel wet places, "safety-

audit" the routes, publish guides and promote intensive usage until the affected areas are significantly degraded. At that stage it should be a simple matter to force through only one more use in the form of cycling. After all, since the Forest has already been damaged by the existence of the trails, what harm will just a bit more pressure do ?

I don't imagine that the Verderers have been in the least bit confused by this camouflage and it is comforting to see that the Court has issued a robust rejection of the routes on the grounds of erosion, over use, urbanization and encouragement to cycle trespass.

So far as I can see, details of the routes have not been published anywhere, although they can be found on the Verderers' website (in the minutes). For those interested who do not have access to the list, the first is from Matley to Deerleap in an area already under intense pressure and where cycle trespass is a major problem. Next there is to be an attempt to create a trail across Yew Tree Heath from Beaulieu Road to Ipley. From Kings Copse, the Park wants a route to Moonhills, while in the north of the Forest there is to be yet another attempt to break into the tranquil area designated by the New Forest Committee between Fritham and Holly Hatch. There is next to be a route from Moyles Court to Appleslade (off Crown land over the greater part of the length and already a public footpath) and a second branch across the Crown common from Appleslade to Linford. Finally, another of the tranquil areas is to be exploited with a trail from Bur Bush, across the Forest and Bisterne Common towards Ringwood.

There is no doubt that this is the National Park's most determined and most damaging proposal for the Forest to date. The Verderers' minutes tell us that the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Naturalists' Trust has taken the lead in opposition and it will now be for the Forest societies to match the Trust's stand.

Avoidable conflicts in the Forest

Over the years I have very occasionally seen examples of extreme bad manners and lack of consideration exhibited by people on horses pushing past or overtaking pedestrians at speed, apparently oblivious of the fact that many townspeople find such large and apparently domineering animals extremely intimidating. That is why police horses are so effective. Such bad behaviour should, in my view, be punished (for a first offence) by a six months ban from taking a horse on the Forest. Of course that may not be possible, even though practicing any game or sport in such a manner as to disturb the peaceful use of the Forest is a byelaw offence. However, for every rare example of such stupidity by horse riders, there are probably ten thousand instances where it is the equestrian who is the victim of bad or ignorant behaviour on the part of visitors and many local users of the Forest. In some of the heavily used suburban fringe areas like that in which I live, it is almost a matter of course that riders will be molested in some way or other at least once a week if they ride regularly on the Forest. The tragic case in which a rider in the south of the Forest was killed when his horse was spooked by a cyclist, allegedly trespassing off the permitted routes, is an extreme example of the problem, but much more common are dog attacks from uncontrolled pets running wild off leads

and deaf to the yelling of their owners. There seems to be a sort of assumption that one is entitled to let a dog run at a horse, snarling and barking, so long as it does not actually sink its teeth into its victim. Any remonstrance is often greeted with a torrent of abuse from the dog owner who sees this as an attempt to infringe his human rights and the legitimate fun of his pet ! Such attacks are an obvious and inexcusable source of danger, but another dog-related problem arises from the increasingly common use of ball throwing devices comprising a pole with a cup on the end which is used to launch balls for a dog to chase after. Many thoughtless users of these things wait until a horse is level with them, raise the pole above their head, and then launch the ball with a swift downwards movement of the arm. Horses (too many of which will have been struck with a stick at some time in their lives), immediately assume that they are under attack and take violent evasive action, to the great danger of their riders.

Although dogs and trespassing cyclists are a prime source of danger, a little more consideration for riders from all users of the forest would not go amiss. Last month I encountered fifteen or twenty runners dressed in bright fluorescent clothing and shouting at the tops of their voices. They were coming directly at my horse. I asked the child leading the column if she would stop for a moment because of the risk of frightening the horse. She did stop, but only until about five yards separated us and then the headlong charge of the runners and the shouting broke out again, provoking an inevitable response from a normally steady mare. So many people visiting the Forest have not the slightest idea how to behave in the countryside or around animals.

The tourist attraction

In January I drew attention to the stripping of all vegetation from a target mound in Ashley Walk – vegetation which had at last begun to soften the outline of a large intrusion on the landscape and which had been nurtured for sixty years. At the same time I suggested, tongue in cheek, that somebody would next try to open up the underlying concrete structure as a tourist attraction. I could hardly believe my eyes when, in the newspaper a few weeks later, a (presumably authorized) officer of the National Park suggested considering exactly that. Not only would this seek to attract yet more people into the depths of one of the quietest parts of the Forest, but the whole idea is quite preposterous having regard to the nature of the buried structure. This is not Tutankhamen's tomb. It is a horrid concrete air raid shelter with a hole in the roof. Opened up it would immediately become a victim of spray paint graffiti vandals who have disfigured other structures in the area and, inevitably for any building on the Forest, would be used by the public as a latrine. A correspondent, writing in response to my original note on this subject, summed up the Park's attitude very succinctly as follows "The NFNPA appear desperate for validation - in other words, for continued support and funding - and so they continually appear, puppy-like, saying "look what we've found". I see that a further mound of gravel on Beaulieu Heath has now been stripped of vegetation in a similar manner, presumably again with the idea of some type of tourist development. It really is time that somebody got a grip on this sort of activity.

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