

New Forest Notes – March 1994

National Park delay

After almost two years since the publication of the Governments proposals for a quasi national park authority, the beneficiary of these plans - the New Forest Committee is becoming understandably fidgety. Denied for too long what it sees as its rightful share of influence over the Forests management, the Committee has been whipping up its supporters to put pressure on the Government for some action. Strong rumours in the Forest suggest that its pleadings have found a sympathetic ear in the new man at the Department of the Environment and that bodes ill for those local organisations which are solidly opposed to granting the Committee statutory powers over Forest land. They include, of course, the New Forest Association, the Pony Breeders, the Commoners Defence, the Hampshire Field Club and the Verderers.

The battle is not yet lost (let alone the war) and it is widely said that the Minister of Agriculture is unhappy with the park proposals as are the local people. As a long-standing "park sceptic", I have been increasingly worried at the extent of the Committees attempted intervention in strictly Forest concerns as opposed to planning matters. This seems to me a fair indication of how its policies will develop if it eventually grows teeth. However, that is still a long and uncertain way ahead and a spirited resistance can be expected to any proposed legislation which would upset the present balance of Forest management.

More Wartime Memories

In December I mentioned the Hampshire Field Clubs recently published history of the Millersford explosives range. The booklet has evidently excited a good deal of interest amongst former workers at the secret experimental station, with anecdotes and technical details flooding in from all parts of the country. At least two rival histories of the range have been prepared and, fifty three years after Millersford opened, a reunion of former workers is to be held at Woodfalls on June 25th. Any local workers who have not received details may like to contact Mr. G. Lovegrove, Sunnyside, Forest Road, Hale. Present indications suggest an attendance of about twenty, which is not bad out of a workforce of one hundred after half a century.

Horse Survey

This month sees the start of the latest survey of horsekeeping in the New Forest. It will assess the number of horses kept and ridden in the Forest area, the effect of horsekeeping on the landscape, the extent of agricultural land which it absorbs, its effect on the commoners' so-called "back up" land, and its implications for planning policies. The results of the survey will undoubtedly provide more interesting for those of us who delight in precise facts and figures, but whether it will justify the expenditure of £15,000 of public money is an entirely different matter.

This will be, I think, the fourth or fifth report on, riding and related subjects in seven years, to say nothing of the Forestry Commission's Appointment of a special officer (now departed) to study the problems of riding in the Forest. Moreover, I have not the slightest doubt that any reasonably intelligent person with a detailed knowledge of the Forest and of horses could anticipate the findings of the survey in half an hour without, of course the statistical detail. We already know the pressures on the Forest, the consequences for land prices of horseyculture, the difficulties experienced by

Commoners as a result of high land values, and the effect of fragmenting agricultural land into shed littered pony paddocks. Why spend yet more time and money studying it again?

Goodness knows how much money has already been poured into studying the problem over the years, but I would be surprised if it is less than fifty thousand pounds. That would have repaired a lot of damaged tracks and crossing places and restored a good deal of horse erosion. However, carrying out surveys is a chronic disease which affects the New Forest whenever there is a danger that some practical action might have to be taken to resolve a problem. Never actually do anything if you can help it; carry out another survey to see what should be done.