

New Forest Notes – March 1996

Closing the Mark Ash Road

The opportunity to compliment a local authority on its attitude to the New Forest is a sadly rare event. It is therefore particularly good to be able to record the County Council's valuable initiative in seeking to give up a small part of the vast network of roads which has swallowed up so much of the New Forest during this century. To be fair, however, I believe that much credit is also due to the Forestry Commission. The proposal is to close the tarmac road through Knightwood, Mark Ash and Bolderwood Grounds.

This is not, as has been suggested, the original Ornamental Drive. That is the road through Vinney Ridge Inclosure, the margins of which were planted up with exotic conifers in 1859 giving rise to its name. The road now subject to closure proposals was, until the 1960s, a mere gravel track, although like most Forest trackways of the time it was used by pleasure drivers. Indeed, in 1947, the Baker Committee on the future of the Forest had specifically recommended that it should never be widened or tarmaced, although responsibility for its maintenance should pass from the Forestry Commission to the County Council.

In 1971 the "Conservation of the New Forest" report recommended that the whole Forest should be made car free and at the same time an adequate supply of car parks should be provided for visitors. The work of closing off the gravel roads to cars was put in hand at once, but it was too late to save the Mark Ash road. A few years earlier the County Council had taken over the track and, Baker notwithstanding, had converted it into a tarmac motor road. This was the period of seemingly endless highway ambitions when every resident on an unmade gravel road lived in terror of road charges. The road now carries large amounts of casual recreational traffic and a significant number of business motorists for whom it comprises a most convenient rat run from the north of the Forest to the coastal towns west of Lymington.

The County Council's proposal has, not unexpectedly, produced a good deal of complaints from motorists. Nothing is better calculated to cause a fuss than a road closure proposal, however small it may be and however laudable its objective. The average car driver is not prepared to accept the smallest personal inconvenience in the interests of conservation. Perhaps the most forceful and superficially appealing argument has been that the closure would deprive the elderly and infirm of a pleasure drive unequalled elsewhere and effectively ban them from a unique part of the New Forest. How far does this claim stand up to examination? The New Forest probably possesses a denser network of public highways than any comparable area of wild country. There are very few parts which cannot be reached by a walk of less than a mile from a public motor road. A rough calculation suggests that there are, at least seventy-five miles of minor heathland and woodland roads through the Forest ideally

suiting to pleasure driving. I exclude from this total all A and B class roads and all routes through villages. The proposed closure would apply to less than three miles or only 4% of the total.

As to the supposed unique qualities of the Mark Ash road, the Bolderwood road runs roughly parallel to its entire length, at a distance varying between one mile and only one hundred and fifty yards to the east. It has the same wooded scenery, the same liberal provision of car parks, and the same destination at the lavatories, ice cream sales, a deer viewing platform of the Bolderwood picnic site. Of course one can argue at length about the relative beauty and convenience of these two remarkably similar roads and completely miss the compelling reason for closing one of them. However in practice I think that the pleasure drivers and rat runners really have nothing to fear from the County's proposals. I imagine there will be the predictable division of local opinion. On one side there will be the various motoring interests and on the other the Forest amenity societies, the Forestry Commission and the Verderers. The New Forest Committee will secure a seat on the fence by commissioning an expensive three year study of the problem and the County Council will get cold feet and back down at the first convenient opportunity. This may be a somewhat cynical prediction of events, but I fear that Mark Ash will continue to be polluted by the rumble and stench of motor vehicles until the nation's petrol supplies eventually dry up. I hope I am wrong.

Forest Car Park Charges

Only slightly less controversial than the County Council's road closure proposal is the plan by the Forestry Commission to introduce charging for car parks in the New Forest. It formed the subject of a presentment by the Deputy Surveyor to the Verderers Court in January and the Verderers will receive public comments at their meeting on 18th March. The Court's consent to charging is necessary under the Countryside Act 1968 and the New Forest Act 1970. Initially the Commission is considering charges in parks adjacent to Lyndhurst and Burley to tie in with the District Council's parking payment proposals for these villages. Ultimately it wants to spread the net much wider. The Deputy Surveyor told the Verderers that he is considering charges in the central areas of the Forest, leaving parks on the fringe and adjacent to the main roads free.

As a management tool used to protect sensitive parts of the Forest and to concentrate pressure on recreation sites best able to bear it, charging is probably a sensible if highly controversial measure. However, what is required is an assessment of the vulnerability of individual areas of Forest to disturbance emanating from the parks, rather than the imposition of some blanket geographical formula such as that implied by the Deputy Surveyor's presentment.

There are many fringe areas where quiet heathland is under unacceptable pressure from the parks it contains and conversely some centrally situated family recreation sites which should

be able to draw off that pressure without harm. For example, the surroundings of some car parks on the very edge of the Forest near Linwood might benefit from a relatively high "deterrent" charge which would displace casual recreational visits to sites better able to take them. At the same time, the major honeypot at Boltons Bench, although geographically near the centre of the Forest, needs no such protection and should be open and free to football playing families who do not have a specific New Forest purpose to their visit.

The theory of charging may be simple but the practice is an immensely complicated matter. Charging has not the slightest chance of working without absolute prohibition of verge and other random parking outside the designated sites, but within the charging zone. Such restriction can only be achieved by byelaw and to be effective it must be rigorously enforced at presumably, immense expense. Within crown lands this is theoretically straight forward but if the privately owned adjacent commons are not to be converted into a sort of recreational rubbish heap, they too will need to come under control. One late Deputy Surveyor of the Forest was keenly aware of what he called a recreational shunting effect in planning visitor management, and this will certainly take effect with parking charges. Then again there is the problem of manorial waste in the Forest villages. If parking is banned in the Forest surrounding Beaulieu for example, roadside parking within the Manor is likely to explode. The parking restrictions would therefore need to be all embracing which is certainly a good conservation measure in principle, but is likely to infuriate those residents for whom the Forest means nothing more than a convenient dormitory area in which to live.

Unless I have much mistaken my colleagues on the Verderers Court I think it unlikely that they will be very impressed with the present vague request for agreement in principle to charging. A comprehensive and well-reasoned scheme complete with local detail is another matter and would no doubt receive the careful study it deserved. Unfortunately there is a fairly widespread fear that the Commission's objective is not the protection of remote areas perhaps at great cost, but a revenue raising exercise designed to cream off relatively easy profits by charging in the honeypot sites. That may be an unfair judgement, but to counteract it the Commission will have to provide those details which are so conspicuously absent from its present proposals.

Acorn Deaths

Despite last year's record acorn crop the number of ponies recorded as dying from acorn poisoning on the Forest dropped from 30 in 1994 to 15 in 1995. The figures are necessarily underestimates for both years as sick and dying animals may have been removed to their owners' holdings before death, and are therefore not recorded as dying on the Forest. Similar remarks apply to cattle where the figure rose to 13 in 1995 from 5 in the previous year. The quantities of acorns in 1995 were such that very much higher losses were expected, and a possible explanation of the reduction is that the late growth of grass after the drought diluted the effects of the poison. Autumn dung piles which the recent rains have eroded show a mass

of glistening undigested acorn shell fragments, indicating the vast quantities of mast consumed. It is often said that small quantities of acorns are actually good for ponies when mixed with sufficient amounts of other feed and may help build up fat reserves for the winter. However, this is definitely not a theory that I recommend anyone should test on their riding ponies.