

NEW FOREST NOTES MAY 2004

Headquarters for the National Park

Last month's back door announcement of the approval of a national park in the New Forest raises some interesting questions as to where the new authority will be accommodated. Lyndhurst is the traditional seat of New Forest government and may well be the first choice. To judge from West Country examples, national park authorities have a penchant for fine buildings and beautiful sites. The Exmoor offices occupy a lovely site on the River Barle at Dulverton, while Dartmoor inhabits a gracious National Trust mansion at Parke. There is certainly no shortage of such buildings and sites in Lyndhurst. Foxlease, Northerwood and Parkhill are a few examples, but all have thriving existing uses and are unlikely to be available. That leaves new building as an option and would require the acquisition of land and the setting aside of existing planning protection. In this respect, Lyndhurst has some unique advantages in the form of large areas of government land known as "Crown Freehold", free from the inconvenient protective powers of the Verderers' Court. Superb sites are available in Pondhead, Park Grounds or New Park. Leaving aside the immense damage to the Forest which would result from such development, any of these areas would give a headquarters setting to rival that of any park in the country. New Park in particular is a likely target, notwithstanding the extra traffic through Lyndhurst. Not only does it already possess a most appropriate name, but the Forestry Commission has long been toying with plans for further developing this recreational honeypot. However, new building presupposes the immediate availability of perhaps millions of pounds and I don't think that can be taken for granted. If development is not an option, the park may have to cast its net rather wider.

Most Forest villages suffer from the same constraints – difficult planning, poor access and shortage of available properties. That means looking at the fringe areas and of these probably only Lymington and Totton possess suitable buildings and/or the right planning environment. Lymington would probably be ruled out on access grounds. It is remote from the one of the park's customer bases (visitors arriving by motorway), it is far from the council offices from which the park authority members and perhaps policies will come. Almost all of those calling at the headquarters would add to undesirable cross-Forest traffic. Totton on the other hand has great advantages. It is within five minutes main road drive of the Forest, it has direct access to the motorway and to Southampton which are the source of most visitors and it has easy communications to Appletree Court and to The Castle. Planning restrictions there are likely to be less tight and conversion of existing commercial premises, rather than the occupation of a Georgian mansion, might be a relatively small price for the park authority to pay for such convenience. Moreover, the choice of Totton would ram home the subtle but firm message that control of the nation's New Forest playground is henceforth in the hands of urban and suburban representatives and the rural locals had better start getting used to the idea.

The NFA in Colour

This year for the first time in its history, the report of the New Forest Association is illustrated with colour pictures, greatly cheering up what can sometimes be a rather lifeless document. The pictures include examples of Forestry Commission sins and achievements, together with a party of trespassing mountain bikers. From the detached viewpoint of a retired committee member, it is interesting to contrast the activities and achievements of the New Forest Association with those of its sister societies on Exmoor and Dartmoor. By far the most striking contrast is in membership figures. Exmoor and the New Forest are roughly equal in area (public access land only), yet the membership of the NFA is 608 as against 2731 for the Exmoor Society. In other respects the two societies are very similar. Dartmoor, on the other hand, possesses a little more than twice the Forest's area of public access land, but the Preservation Association there has achieved a membership of 2259 – three and a half times that of the NFA. The DPA has recently adopted a trendy format for its publications while those of the Exmoor Society are poor quality and distinctly dated. Both have websites, but that of the NFA is far better and its publications are generally of a higher quality.

I am at a loss to understand why the NFA attracts such a miserable membership compared to those of the West Country societies. The only material difference in structure is that both DPA and ES have geographical sections in addition to the parent body, but I doubt whether that greatly enhances membership. Having been a member of all three for many years, I don't think that the performance of the NFA is particularly inferior. Indeed, in some conflicts it has proved decisive and successful to an extent which its larger sisters might envy. Notable examples were the campaigns against the Lyndhurst Bypass and against Shell oil drilling. Where there is a clearly defined target such as these developments, the Association is at its best.

Things are not so straightforward where the threats are less clearly defined, such as the uncontrolled growth of recreational pressure, over which the Association has not performed well. True it has drawn up a policy, but it has had such policies in the past and yet the damage has continued. It persists in regarding recreational damage as a possible future threat rather than something already out of control. Similarly, its policy (if it can be called such) over the national park was a good deal less than inspiring. Some leading members of the Association were very anxious to see the imposition of a park, while a substantial portion of the membership loathed the idea. Faced with a perfectly clear-cut set of legislative provisions which required no special knowledge to understand, there was a great deal of dithering along the lines of "We need more information" and "We don't know what is involved". For this there was eventually substituted a sort of non-policy.

There is inevitably a degree of amateurism about amenity societies and I suppose this affects all three bodies to some extent. I once heard a very impressive speaker address a meeting of the Exmoor Society, in which he said that the business of a campaigning group is to campaign. It is worse than useless to write letters of objection and then fail to pursue the

matter. If you are not prepared to fight something through, don't start it. He went on to say that the production of beautiful or technical reports was equally useless unless you acted on them. A report by itself never achieved anything. I don't know exactly how far the West Country societies are guilty of these crimes, but the NFA is an offender on both counts.

The conflicting interests and objectives of its members also tend to weaken policies and lead to indecision. For example, in the NFA, part of the membership wants to go off and hunt something and the another part would like to stop them doing it ! The subject is therefore carefully avoided. All sorts of little tensions like these pervade the Association and make its voice, and hence perhaps its membership, much weaker than it should be. One has only to look at the thriving and vigorous New Forest Commoners Defence Association to see what can be achieved when a group knows its own mind and has a leadership capable of delivering what the members want. Not everyone may like what the CDA does, but it gets the job done.

Ancient history under threat

Not since the Forestry Commission's huge road building programme of the 1960s has the Forest's archaeology been so threatened as it is today. The problem arises from the Life III bog and river restoration programme being undertaken by the Commission and the Environment Agency. This involves huge earth moving operations within the river valleys and slightly lesser works on the streams. Theoretically there should be no disturbance of previously undisturbed ground, but that is a good deal easier said than done. The operator of a giant excavator, however skilled, may be moving a ton or more with each sweep of his bucket. He may not see the fine distinction between disturbed and undisturbed layers in the mud fifteen feet away. A fragile site dating back perhaps 4000 years can be swept away in ten seconds. I don't blame anyone in particular for this. It is just a simple fact that if you undertake major earth-moving operations in the Forest you will destroy archaeology.

In the hope of being able to minimise the damage, the New Forest Section of the Hampshire Field Club has been hard at work over the winter, searching the threatened stream courses in advance of the engineering work. It is an unfortunate geographical coincidence that the Forest's most common form of archaeological feature – water heating sites dating from the Bronze Age – is concentrated along just such watercourses as are receiving the attention of the engineers. In and around Sluffers Inclosure, for example, the Section located eight "boiling sites" in advance of the machinery moving in. Unfortunately, these slight features are often impossible to find in the absence of ground disturbance and when under dense vegetation. As a consequence, a further three sites came to light as the machines hit them. The contractor working at Sluffers, Bascombes of Verwood, has an excavator driver who has become skilled in recognising these sites. He tells me that over the years he has uncovered nearly a dozen. Useful as his records are, it is not until the root fork of his excavator has torn out a tree stump revealing the tell-tale scatter of calcined flint, that the site is recognised. By that stage damage has inevitably been caused.

Other river courses which have been searched include Highland Water and Blackensford Brook. New finds have been recorded on both, but Blackensford seems to hold a particularly rich reserve of previously unrecorded archaeology. It is sad, but apparently unavoidable, that the New Forest's stock of historical sites should be further depleted, but at least the advance survey is keeping losses to a minimum.

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