

NEW FOREST NOTES MAY 2006

Farming in the park

In common with a good many farmers, farm workers and commoners, I attended last month's national park meeting on how New Forest farming will be affected by the establishment of the park. The meeting was helpfully arranged by the Lymington Growmore Club and was squeezed into a rather small committee room at the Minstead Social Club. A panel of eminent speakers had been laid on, the chief of whom was the park's conservation and enhancement director, Mr. Stephen Trotter. Mr. Trotter explained how the national park's planning policies will apply in future, but assured the audience that they would notice little difference from those under the former New Forest District Council regime. He went on to say how much the national park authority values the commoners and their contribution to the maintenance of the Forest as a whole. The panel then took questions which had been sent in before the meeting and some unscripted ones from the audience.

Although the questioning was quite sharp – “Why are the park officers being paid such large salaries ?” – I think the audience was more bemused and perhaps disappointed than hostile. It quickly became clear that the crock of gold at the end of the national park rainbow is very much of a myth. The commoners may be the foundation of the Forest's welfare, but at the moment it seems they will receive little more than kind words from the park authority. It is true there will be all the old and worthwhile support formerly administered by the District Council, the Forest Friendly Farming and the Enterprise Agency. In addition, such initiatives as the Commoners Housing Scheme will continue, but as to “new money”, there was clearly little on offer for individuals. Grants such as that just approved for a fleet of gleaming new landrovers for the agisters are in an altogether different category. There will be £20,000 available for historic buildings, but the average commoner operating from within a corrugated iron stable or cow shed does not possess likely qualifying structures. Then there is the Sustainable Development Fund to be distributed, amounting to £200,000 annually and to this the commoners can certainly apply. However, it is such an odd fund with such peculiar conditions attached to it, that it is hard to see much of it ending up in the commoners' pockets to support marginal farming businesses. I have recently filled-in an application on behalf of a registered charity, and even there it was difficult enough to meet the conditions. An application must show advantages in each of three categories. There must be an economic benefit from the spending of grant aid, a conservation advantage and a social benefit – preferably such as support of young people or disadvantaged groups. I suppose that a commoner converting part of his holding to nature trails and employing out-of-work youngsters from Southampton in the scheme would certainly qualify but, altruistic motives aside, it is difficult to see why he would want to undertake such work. It was said that if anyone had a really good idea needing grant aid, the park might be able to secure Lottery money, but again this is vague and remote from day to day farming problems. It was certainly not what the audience was looking for. There was clearly a gulf between the small farmers,

acknowledged by the park as being key to the Forest's survival and perhaps existing on little more than the national minimum wage, and the park administration where the payment of large salaries has been necessary to secure the right people.

To be fair to Mr. Trotter, he had a difficult task in responding to precise questions on park policies at a time when those policies do not yet exist. Answers which may have seemed evasive and vague were no more than the natural caution of a public servant who cannot commit his appointed and perhaps less well qualified masters.

Perhaps the highlight of the evening was an address by a Dartmoor commoner, Mr. Arnold Cole, on the advantages and trials of farming within the Dartmoor National Park. On occasions such as this it is usual to import a well-briefed yes-man who will tell how wonderful it is to live under a park administration. Mr. Cole certainly proved not to be one of these and it is thus to the park's credit that he was invited at all – unless that credit is properly due to the Growmore Club. While acknowledging some distinct advantages, such as the Dartmoor park's support for a stallion scheme, he was not slow to emphasise the problems of public pressure – trespass, dog attacks, traffic-blocked roads, holiday homes, environmental restrictions and the difficulty of securing accommodation for agricultural workers. We were also told of the bitter conflict over Vixen Tor where it seems likely that the park will use its compulsory powers to force public access against the will of the farmer owner.

Last of the strong-arm silviculturalists

Dr. F.E. Kenchington, author of the "Commoners New Forest", famously described the old breed of dedicated commercial foresters in the Forestry Commission as "strong-arm silviculturalists". A few weeks ago, perhaps the last link with this class of officer was broken with the death of former Deputy Surveyor Dallas Mithen. He came to the New Forest at a time of great strife following the resignation of the much-loved Arthur Cadman and as the Commission stepped up its drive to eliminate broadleaved trees from all but 4% of the Forest's Inclosures and to exploit the Ancient Ornamental Woods for profit. The policies he pursued (or more probably was instructed to pursue) were universally loathed by conservationists and ordinary people who simply valued the Forest for its beauty and quiet. That led to a near insurrection and a crushing defeat of what the Commission was trying to do, but the cost had been very high. Vast areas of ancient oak and beech had been felled in the years running up to the Minister's Mandate of 1971. Much of the work was patently illegal and this, I think, lay at the root of the change in direction. Anyhow, the Deputy Surveyor was perceived to be the embodiment of the old damaging policies and was promoted away from the Forest. He went on to achieve considerable distinction in his profession, including being made a Forestry Commissioner.

I suppose there are few people now left in New Forest management who worked with (or against) Dallas Mithen. I always find it surprising that, however objectionable the Forestry Commission's policies may be from time to time, the officers implementing them are (with rare exceptions) usually pleasant people. Mithen fitted this pattern. In those more leisurely days it was convention that the Deputy Surveyor was invited to visit the annual excavation

undertaken by the Hampshire Field Club in the Forest. Most officers came for a polite five minutes and left again, but I can remember a visit from Mithen in, I think, 1969 when we were working in Amberwood. The Deputy Surveyor settled himself comfortably against a giant oak tree (which was certainly on his proscribed list), walking stick on the ground beside him and smoking quietly. He was there for an hour or more, saying little but no doubt lulled by the steady chink of steel trowels on dry earth in that summer's afternoon, with dappled sunlight filtering through the canopy of oaks planted only ten years after Trafalgar. Fortunately they survived his rule. That is how I shall remember him, rather than in the angry confrontations which were then so common or from the devastation his policies wrought.

More National Trust land

In March I recorded the purchase by the National Trust of Foxbury Plantation, but that, immense challenge as it is, is not the limit of the Trust's ambitions in the New Forest. They have now purchased a hotly-contested area of common land on the Forest's northern boundary known as Mays Firs. This forty acres or so of heathland lies between the Crown lands at Turf Hill and the existing Trust property of Hale Purlieu and in a legal sense is part of that Purlieu. Early in the 19th Century a bank was thrown up around part of it, no doubt with the intention of making a secure enclosure and eliminating common rights. Whether or not it was ever fenced in is not known. Certainly it had been open to grazing stock throughout living memory. When the Hale Estate was sold up in 1920, the land was bought by a well-known local speculator and fifty years later his descendants tried to enclose it with barbed wire. The Commoners' Defence challenged the encroachment, but failed to pursue their case with vigour. Local commoners were more determined and the wire was cut to shreds on more than one occasion, so that the animals were never effectively excluded. The owners tried for permission to make it into a golf course, while another plan was for intensive pig farming, but all the time the ponies and cattle grazed on. Now the past battles are of historical interest only, but management problems remain. The site is littered with rubbish, including masses of old motor tyres and drums used for horse jumps. There is also the important question of what is to be done with the remaining fences. Clearly the fence cutting off this piece of Hale Purlieu from the remainder must go. The land is in any case open to the public – classified as being subject to the "right to roam". The south and east fences however, serve important management functions. A new pound in the Millersford driftway is dependent upon their continued maintenance and is a crucial tool for drifting and other stock management purposes. Moreover, there are large numbers of animals on Hale Purlieu which would be given immediate access to the B 3080 road (one of the Forest's worst killers) if the fences were allowed to decay. At present their access to the Crown Forest is more indirect and we certainly cannot afford to create yet another killing ground for ponies.

Changes to an ancient landscape

Scots pine clearance from the heaths usually involves the removal of seedlings or, at most, young trees which have sprung up since the last war. Work now in progress at Cranes Moor near Burley is of a rather different character. Here much more ancient trees are being

removed – some of them dating back more than a century. In fact a lot of thought went into the landscape implications of the work and many scenic clumps and trees are being retained, but the loss of any old tree can cause distress to those who knew it well. In nearby Dur Hill also, great changes are going on with the clearance of the 1960s plantation. Even there some of the trees being felled are between 85 and 95 years old (chiefly from the area near the old railway) and must have been fully mature long before the Inclosure was thought of.

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