

NEW FOREST NOTES MAY 2008

Headquarters building for the Park

It is not easy to understand why, after two years of intense secrecy, the Park decided last month to publish the locations of two sites which it is investigating for the development of its new headquarters building. Two insiders that I questioned about this gave different explanations. Perhaps after a long period of fruitless search, it is anxious to test public reaction before becoming too deeply committed to a particular site. It may be considered better to face comments now, rather than to be forced into an ignominious retreat by hostile public opinion at a later stage.

From the very start it seemed probable that the Park would go for a Crown Freehold property. Crown Freehold is government land and thus relatively easy for the authority to get hold of. Moreover, the Crown Freehold sites in the New Forest are mainly fine woodland or agricultural locations, possessing what one famous Deputy Surveyor used to describe as “quality” when planning his car parks and camp sites. Now, with the choice of New Park as one of the two preferred locations, initial assumptions as to how the Park Authority would jump seem vindicated. On the other hand, the second possibility, the garden of the Lyndhurst Park Hotel, is more unexpected and interesting.

The gardens at Lyndhurst Park are one of the unpublicised gems of Lyndhurst (although not open to the public), but their development with a new local government office block would certainly have little direct effect upon the Forest. They adjoin the grounds of the New Forest District Council’s office at Appletree Court and could thus secure savings in joint maintenance etc. The site would effectively concentrate much of New Forest local government in one vast complex, with increased convenience for the public and professionals. Services are good (road congestion always excepted) and the village location would be very attractive for staff members. Lyndhurst Park thus has much to commend it.

From the point of view of the Park’s image, I can see some disadvantages. Firstly, building effectively in the back yard of the District Council would not convey the right image of power and prestige for the new masters of the Forest. Worse still, such proximity to the council offices would emphasize to the public that it is now paying for two councils, two headquarters buildings and two sets of expensive planners where a single body had formerly done the whole job well enough. On balance I would expect the Park Authority to go for New Park if they can secure it, rather than for the hotel grounds. Even the name is auspicious.

New Park would definitely project the right public image – opulence, independence and power in a grand setting. It was also once the headquarters of a branch of Forest administration for a while before 1850 and it has a history at the heart of Forest affairs going back for centuries. By a combination of new building and the conversion of existing structures there is scope for a really impressive headquarters here, rivalling those of the other national parks. What it would do to the Forest is another matter. A few years ago when New Park was still under the direct control of the Forestry Commission, I would have been very reluctant to

see such development. It was then a quiet, if neglected farm, surrounded by beautiful and unspoilt woodland. Today the racket from showground loudspeakers dominates the surrounding Forest on an increasing number of days each year. The verge of the A 337 is littered with an ugly collection of sign boards advertising various uses within the farm. The New Forest Show has become overpoweringly large and disruptive. Finally, the present tenants of the Park have demonstrated an interest in further development, which in the view of many, is not conducive to the good of the Forest. Altogether New Park might now be seen as liability to the Forest rather than an asset. The building of a modern office block here could hardly be worse than some recent proposals for the site and the presence of the Park Authority (justifiably concerned to protect its own backyard) might act as a calming and restraining influence on the more aggressive uses which have threatened the area. If the Park Authority cannot or will not secure premises in Totton or the Waterside and if it decides to abandon the Lyndhurst Park idea, New Park could be a solution.

There remains one big question about the proposal – that of precedent. The national parks make much of their areas being special and needing exceptional protection against development. How would the Authority square this with building an office complex at the very heart of the Forest? What would they say to the next big company which wants to build a headquarters at Bartley, or a national charity which wants to develop a recreation complex at Burley Lodge? No doubt there would be a lot of talk about public benefit, an assertion that the development would be compatible with the Forest and that it would “only” be carrying on a long tradition of management from the site. We have already been told about the high quality design. Perhaps even a few supporting planning policies might be discovered, but the fact remains that morally the Park’s grounds for controlling similar developments elsewhere would receive a severe blow. “Do as I say and not as I do” would be its philosophy as it strikes at the physical heart of the Forest. There will also be embarrassing questions about traffic generation. We are told that the complex will house eighty five employees. Many will drive to work. Staff with outside duties may leave and return to the premises several times a day. There will be visits from architects, engineers, surveyors and applicants for planning permission. Delivery and service vehicles will call; councillors will visit; meetings will be held and there will be education and corporate entertainment events. I would be very surprised if the headquarters promoted less than three hundred vehicle movements per day and probably a great many more when the complex is running at full stretch. That is an unwelcome contribution to the traffic problems of the Forest as a whole, let alone those of Lyndhurst and Brockenhurst.

Money down the drain

To say that the Forestry Commission is about to pour money down the drain in two massive engineering projects at Fritham is not to pass judgement on the merits of the scheme, but to describe (almost literally) what is intended. The projects, at Howen and Claypits Bottoms, were estimated in 2007 to cost £150,000 together and are no doubt more expensive now. The two valleys contain small streams winding between clumps of thorn, oak

and crab-apple and bounded by grassy lawns. In fact they are, or rather were, the essence of all that is most attractive in New Forest landscape. Some drainage work to improve the grazing was probably carried out there as early as the late 19th Century, but it was not until post war years that major alteration of the stream courses was undertaken. Then they were straightened and probably deepened. Spoil from the channels was heaped upon the sides in rather untidy mounds. I cannot remember the drainage being carried out, but it is probable that in Howen at least it did produce a significant improvement in the streamside grazing. Unfortunately, in those days the erosive power of Forest streams was not well understood or was ignored. Over the succeeding years the streams cut down into the underlying clay, creating deep and sometimes dangerous gulleys. Probably nobody would have worried very much if the area through which the streams pass had not been classified by English Nature as in "unfavourable condition" for conservation purposes and thus as priorities for remedial action. They are now to be filled with thousands of tons of clay, gravel and heather bales and their straight courses are to be realigned. The old spoil heaps are to be scraped up and thrown into the streams as part of the filling process. The ultimate objective is to produce shallow winding streams more like those which existed prior to the draining. It will be a huge job and probably lengthy and destructive of the grazing on a temporary basis. Hundreds of lorry movements will be required, together with tractors, trailers, diggers and tracked dumpers. Fortunately for the residents of Fritham, it is likely that the old Powder Mill Road (constructed to ship out gunpowder) will be used to bypass the village.

Where such work has been undertaken in the past, it has usually been in woodland where the scars are quickly softened by the autumn leaf-fall. There will be no such natural concealment of damage out here on the heath. Bare soil where the spoil heaps are scraped up will probably be evident for a long time and may even need protective fencing.

The Verderers have given approval in principle, because it is hoped that in the long term there will be a benefit to the Forest in improved safety for stock, a more natural appearance and (it is hoped) no significant loss of grazing. Much will depend upon the sensitivity with which the work is carried out. The Court has stipulated that there must be no stagnant pools left open on the old stream course. Such pools have marred previous work and apparently resulted from insufficient funds to complete the job properly. Once detailed plans have been drawn up, it will be necessary to specify limitations on felling, the control of debris dam development, adequate properly-surfaced crossing places, proper restoration of access routes and stockpile areas and guarantees for future maintenance.

Lyndhurst bypass down for a generation

The refusal of the County Council to back an outer route for a Lyndhurst bypass (or indeed any other route at present) is a piece of rare good news for the Forest. On past evidence, it will be the best part of a generation before the "put it deep in the Forest" element of Lyndhurst tries again. Actually that element seems to be a great deal smaller than we had been led to suppose as the County's surveys show a majority of Lyndhurst people saying that the protection of the Forest is a priority.

Even the pro-bypass lobby has expressed itself happy with the outcome. I think it had suddenly discovered that there was a real chance of the village getting a bypass, on a route causing relatively little damage to the Forest, but one unpopular with the residents. Presumably the County is happy (because it avoids huge expenditure) and no doubt not least will the National Park be relieved as it can remain comfortably on its fence – not forced to choose between the demands of its councillors' constituents and the Forest. In short, if public statements are to be believed, everyone has ended up content and that is a very rare event in the New Forest.

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