

NEW FOREST NOTES MAY 2009

A mobile shop for the Forest's camps ?

Since their opening in the early 1970s, the New Forest's camp sites have been a continual source of friction between the local community and the Forestry Commission. There is now every sign that a fresh row is developing, only months after the defeat (the Commission would call it withdrawal) of the major development plans at Roundhill and Hollands Wood. The evidence for the renewed problems came in a presentment from the Commoners' Defence Association at the April Court. The Association attacked the repeated early opening of the sites and the "commercial and suburban approach to the campsites run by Forest Holidays". It then went on to break the news that the camping company is seeking to introduce a retail van to save campers having to travel off-site to make purchases and that it has started hiring-out caravans and tents. The Association considers these trends to be entirely unsuitable for camping in the New Forest and that they smack of Centre Parcs.

Important as these questions are, they do not reflect the full extent of the issues which the camps are raising for both the Forest and the Verderers. The Forestry Commission (as partner and landlord of the managing company – Forest Holidays Ltd.) has started to question the need for the Verderers' consent to both of the developments now proposed. Altogether there are some complicated and controversial points to be sorted out and their roots go back a long way.

In the 1960s, visitors could camp more or less where they pleased in the New Forest, outside the Inclosures, Mark Ash and Queen Bower. The consequences in terms of damage, fouling, litter and so on were immense. Accordingly the "wild" camping was brought to an end and a series of defined camp sites, most with minimal facilities, was established throughout the Forest with the Verderers' consent. Nobody much liked the new development, but it was worlds better than what it replaced. Most camping continued to be very low-key and informal with facilities limited to perhaps a water tap and a lavatory block. That the Verderers regarded as being within the spirit and letter of what they had granted. The exception was Holmsley which had been permitted a few years earlier and where permission for seaside-camp type facilities had been given.

If things had remained unaltered after 1971, I doubt if there would have been too much problem, but it quickly became apparent that the Forestry Commission, and more especially its camp-warden employees, would lose no opportunity to boost profit from the sites and to introduce new street furniture and facilities, often without bothering to seek permission from the Verderers. The Court's minutes are full of complaints about such operations. Sales of all sorts of goods started to take place from the camp wardens' offices. A mobile shop was started, only to be closed down again in 1996 in the face of massive protests from local traders. Bike hire was attempted, but eventually withdrawn because of opposition. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s the disputes intensified. In 1997 the Deputy Surveyor tried again for his mobile shop and the Verderers refused. In the same year the

number and variety of items sold from the warden's hut at Ocknell was increased to the annoyance of the local shopkeepers. The Forestry Commission also applied to sell more goods from its wardens' huts generally. There was another furious response, mostly from small shopkeepers throughout the Forest who maintained that they depended upon summer trade from visitors to tide them over the quiet period of the winter. If the Commission was to cream off the lucrative camping season sales, how were they (the shopkeepers) to continue providing an essential service for locals during the winter? The Verderers refused consent for expanded camp sales and bike hire, but by the following summer the Deputy Surveyor was back again, pressing once more for concessions. This was countered by a numerously signed petition, presented to the Court in September 1998. The Verderers held firm on the main item in contention – the sale of gas cylinders – but allowed the sale of Forestry Commission publications.

A further push to expand sales, again opposed by presentments, was made in 2004 and the Verderers refused it.

Not long after this the Forestry Commission, with breathtaking disregard for local opinion (which it knew would be against it) leased all the camp sites to Forest Holidays Ltd. It was an unparalleled snub to the Forest. Never before, outside wartime, had the soil of the Forest been leased in such a manner, exploiting a loophole in the legislation which protects the common land and the interests of local people. In the years since then, one development after another has been sought or undertaken in a massive push to upgrade the camps and render them more profitable. That brings us to the latest proposal for a mobile shop (also selling hot food and drink), together with the hire of caravans and tents.

There are really two issues which have to be considered by the Verderers and the Court has been careful to keep them separate. Firstly there is the contention by the Deputy Surveyor that he does not need the Verderers' consent to commence either of his latest schemes. The second is the proposals themselves and their effect upon the New Forest.

As to a request for consent (deemed by the Commission to be unnecessary), it is difficult to see that the developers have any grounds for their arguments. The Acts of Parliament which govern the matter say clearly that the Verderers' consent is required in respect of shops and the provision of accommodation for visitors. A mobile shop is still a shop, wheels or not, and what are caravans and tents if not "accommodation for visitors"? On 20th April, the Official Verderer issued a press statement drawing attention to the proposed operation of a retail van and making it clear that this requires the consent of the Court. The Forestry Commission is invited to make a presentment this month (20th May), failing which the Court will itself announce the proposals. Public responses will then be received at the 17th June Court when commoners, shopkeepers, members of amenity societies, campers and others will be welcome to express their views.

The substance of the applications is a matter on which the Court has, of course, made no judgement at this stage. It will wait for public comment and for further details from Forest Holidays before doing so. On the other hand, it is a matter of history that the intensified

development of the camp sites has not found favour with the Court on past occasions. Decisions have always been made with reference to the effects of schemes upon the character of the Forest alone. The representations of local shopkeepers, while given a courteous hearing, have not hitherto been allowed to determine the decision. This time it is at least arguable that the Court may wish to take a rather wider view of the matter. The Verderers, like other public bodies, must take account of national park purposes in making their decisions. Those purposes are firstly protecting the quality of landscape etc and secondly (and subservient in the event of a conflict) promoting public understanding and enjoyment. However, a park authority must also “seek to foster the economic and social well-being of local communities in the park”. So far as I can see, that obligation does not extend specifically to the Verderers, but perhaps by implication it is not entirely irrelevant. If local shops fear ruin (as they claimed to do on previous occasions), thus depriving the local community of essential facilities, should that also be taken into account when primary park purposes are being reflected? I don't know, but it will be interesting to see how matters progress at the May and June Courts.

Little Eye Green

Just off the B3079 road west of Cadnam is a very beautiful area of ancient woodland called Bignell Wood, although unfortunately much of it is blighted by the appalling noise from the A31 along its south eastern edge. Bignell Wood contains a series of grassy clearings known as “Forest lawns” which are particularly valuable to grazing ponies and cattle. The largest of these has the rather charming name of Little Eye Green, but if you had visited it last year there would not have been much green actually visible. Years of colonization by birch had almost completely taken over the clearing and would, if left to itself, have absorbed the green into permanent woodland within a few more decades. Over the winter the Forestry Commission has been very busy felling these trees and returning the lawn to its former extent. At the moment it has to be admitted that the result is not very attractive as the whole area is littered with felled timber awaiting drier conditions for extraction, but this should be a short-term problem. Provided extraction damage is properly restored, this will have proved a very worthwhile operation. I am not so happy about the clearance of a further area adjoining the A31. Here similar felling has opened-up Bignell Wood to even greater noise penetration. Sometimes a little restored grass can be bought at too great a price. As so often happens, the planners failed to take account of how badly the Forest is degraded by noise.

I sat on a pile of logs eating my lunch and looking out across Little Eye Green on a beautiful spring day. While doing so, a half-memory came to me that the Green has seen a much darker episode in its past. I seem to remember that about fifty years ago it was the scene of a murder, but the details now quite escape me. I expect there are elderly residents of Cadnam who can remember. Still, the Forest has no doubt seen a lot of blood spilt over the centuries and at the opposite end of Bignell Wood is the most famous murder site of all (if legend is to be believed) – the site of the killing of William Rufus.

Warwickslade discoveries

This summer the major stream-filling and realignment project at Warwickslade Cutting is to go ahead. For the first time with such work (and following dreadful damage in earlier schemes), the Forestry Commission commissioned a detailed archaeological survey of the site. The results have proved remarkable. In addition to the half dozen or so features already known-about, the survey has revealed eight previously unrecorded charcoal pits, several new earthworks and a Bronze Age boiling site. All these sites will be pointed out to the contractors and it is hoped that a repeat of past damage to the Forest's ancient history can thus be avoided.

Anthony Pasmore