

NEW FOREST NOTES MAY 2012

Park plans for more cycle routes

Within days of the New Forest National Park Authority setting out to expand cycle trails in the Forest, its plans received a firm rebuff from the Verderers Court. In March the vice chairman of the Authority, Ms Vicky Myres, had asked the Verderers in a presentment to the Court, for their support over plans for new cycle routes at Knightwood near Lyndhurst and at Ashley Walk in the north of the Forest. Her presentment was opposed at that time by several Forest organizations and individuals, but the Verderers' policy is to wait a month before making a decision on controversial presentments. That allows for further representations to be made in Open Court before the matter is determined. In April the New Forest Association reiterated its opposition, while Ms Myres herself put forward further argument on the subject. In committee afterwards the Verderers made their decision.

I understand that immediately before the Court, the park authority, seemingly fearing adverse publicity, made efforts to distance itself from its vice chairman's presentment. The basis of this repudiation was apparently along the lines that Ms Myres was not speaking on behalf of the authority (something which she herself confirmed), but on behalf of a nominally independent body called the Recreation Management Strategy Working Group. This convenient and largely technical distinction no doubt allows the park to take credit for the working group's activities when there is any to be had and to wash its hands of any failures.

The Recreation Management Strategy Working Group is effectively a recreation, sport and tourism promotion body, however bland its terms of reference may make it appear. It is designed to "implement the (Park's) Recreation Management Strategy and monitor progress". It comprises about twenty members drawn from recreation groups, local authorities, cycling interests and so on. Several Forest bodies are also permitted to send members, but those seeking to protect the Forest are in a permanent minority. It is quite informative to read the group's constitution on the Park's website. The Park provides secretarial services, it provides meeting places, it is entitled to appoint two members and it publishes the proceedings of the group. The Park's chief executive and several senior officers normally attend its meetings. The group is, in respect of cycling, seeking to implement a Park policy which many people believe is highly damaging to the Forest. In short there is very little independence about it. It looks, walks and quacks like a national park duck, so that there is no room for doubt about its parentage and loyalties.

So what exactly was the Park (or the working group if one goes along with the fictional independence) attempting to impose on the Forest? Firstly, it sought to establish a new cycle trail through the largest of the Forest's "tranquil areas" – areas identified by the late New Forest Committee as relatively free from disruptive uses and disturbance. It is significant that one of the criteria for such designations was "absence of well used cycle routes". This trail proposal had nothing to do with the much-trumpeted "linking of communities". I think it can hardly be a coincidence that it would have been very convenient for a major recreation provider operating from a site close to its start – a provider which pours hundreds of cyclists into the New Forest on a daily basis. The second

route, near Lyndhurst, would have linked up two major tourist honeypots, creating a continuous zone of disturbance at the heart of the Forest. It was substantially the same as a route rejected by the Verderers only a year or two ago. Both routes were to be on a "trial basis". That is a classic foot-in-the-door strategy. Force your opponent to agree to a trial, secure in the knowledge that the trial will inevitably become a permanent grant. After all, the Park would only have to proclaim that the trial had been an outstanding success and its objective would have been achieved – "and by the way, could we now have another six routes on trial?"

The Verderers are a very diverse group of people (although all with a single objective of protecting the Forest) and it is rare that such absolute unanimity is demonstrated as in respect of the Park's application. All were opposed to the "trial", although Ms Myres's suggestions of volunteer cycle wardens to control trespass off the approved routes was welcomed.

I think there is now growing acceptance amongst Forest protection organizations that we can take no more recreational pressure and that the Forest is already suffering unacceptable damage from such use. The Park's latest policy on increasing cycle routes was probably predictable from the start. If that had been understood ten years ago before the Park was established, we might not have been faced with our present difficulties.

Forestry Commission Verderer leaving

The Verderers' Court comprises five elected members and five appointed by various public bodies like the planning authority and Natural England. The latter group has a theoretical built-in majority because of the casting vote of the chairman, the Official Verderer. In fact I can never recall a case of one group lining up against the other. All work, in their individual ways, for the protection of the Forest.

Among the appointed Verderers is the Hon. Ralph Montagu, chosen by the Forestry Commission, who has served for the last nine years and who, under the "Nolan Rules" of public service is now near to the end of his time in that position. I understand that it is possible for him to serve a further year, but the Commission has decided to commence the process of appointing a successor. At the April Court, the Deputy Surveyor announced that a vacancy would be advertised very shortly and that details would be available on the Forestry Commission's website and the Verderers' website.

I can remember very clearly that when Ralph Montagu was first appointed there were a good many people in the Forest who expressed some disquiet along the lines of: "With his Beaulieu connections, he will be pushing for more and more tourism." I suppose that was a reasonable assumption to make, but in fact they have been proved very wrong. During his years of service, he has brought a thoughtful, restrained and always pro-Forest voice to the Verderers' deliberations. Some of us tend to become over-absorbed in the conformation of a particular stallion of the failure of the Forestry Commission to repair some key passage, but Ralph has always been able to look beyond such trivial detail. He will be much missed and the Forestry Commission will be lucky to find a replacement of equal stature.

The Deputy Surveyor told the Verderers that he would be looking particularly for a candidate with a sound knowledge of land management and a general understanding of national forestry policy.

His appointee would not, however, be under instructions as to how to vote on matters brought before the Court. That is a good start and preserves the valuable tradition whereby, in the event of a conflict, appointed members put the Forest first and the interests of their appointing authorities second.

The forgotten road to nowhere

The New Forest possesses a series of forgotten roads, several of them relics of grand 18th century landscaping schemes and far removed from today's filthy litter-strewn intrusions with their noisy burden of fume-producing vehicles. In building these fine drives, the great magnates of Forest management indulged their interest in landscape just as a private estate owner of the period might have done. The most famous is the Cut Walk from Burley Lodge to Lyndhurst, built in long straight sections with side earthworks and cut deeply through the Forest's most beautiful woodland. A similar if less clearly formed ride runs from Matley Ridge to near Bury Farm at Marchwood and its purpose is less obvious. A more formal highway runs north from Lyndhurst before merging with the A337 near to the Foxhound kennels. Its date is unknown, but a Roman origin, sometimes suggested, seems rather improbable.

Last month a shorter, but even more enigmatic carriage drive was surveyed. It lies near Ashurst and at first sight would seem to have been designed to serve the great house of Ironshill Lodge which was demolished about 170 years ago. Ironshill was built, as I am informed by Richard Reeves of the Christopher Tower Library, about 1750, but very probably on the site of earlier buildings. Its main entrance seems to have left the A 35 where the corner of Lodgehill Inclosure is now and to have wound its way in a picturesque sweep into the Ironshill Park. However, if you diverge from this drive at Whitebridge Hill, another and more formal road alignment can be traced running a little west of north for a further half kilometre. It is neatly formed with a well shaped camber and two side ditches giving an overall width of about 9m or 30ft. That is not far short of the "half chain" dimension popular in Forest management and about half the size of the Cut Walk. The really odd thing about it is that it goes nowhere. It ends abruptly against the western boundary of the Park, on top of Redbridge Hill. There is just a hint that it turned into the Park, but here the carriageway ceases and in any case the gradient up to the house would have been unreasonably steep. One can imagine, perhaps, the desire of some aristocratic lady resident for a drive or vista through Rushpole Wood, possibly with some obelisk or ornamental planting at its end. Today it is like Kipling's closed "road through the woods" and it is easy to imagine on a summer's night "the beat of a horse's feet, and the swish of a skirt in the dew". As with Kipling's road, it may be that only the keeper now sees its hidden alignment amongst the trees.

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