

# NEW FOREST NOTES MAY 2015

## The New Forest Association

The New Forest Association is in considerable difficulties. That is not just my outsider's perception of its situation, but it is set out very clearly in the association's spring newsletter and annual report. The group has an acting chairman, in the absence of any volunteer to take on the job. The long-serving secretary has just retired. One of its three standing sub-committees is no longer functioning as it has no chairman and the newsletter editor has also just retired. In short, the report describes 2014 as "a disappointing and not very successful year". In the light of these accumulated problems, it was hardly surprising that last week's annual general meeting at Minstead involved a good deal of navel gazing.

The NFA is a society set up almost one hundred and fifty years ago to protect the Forest. Over the years it has fought, and quite often won, numerous important battles, but in between there have been long periods of decline and inactivity. Now the main strategy for overcoming its difficulties is a comprehensive reorganization of its governing structure, with detailed proposals to be worked out over the coming year. This plan the membership approved in principle, but as the acting chairman pointed out, reorganization alone will not cure all the association's ills. Active and enthusiastic volunteers are needed throughout all parts of the association. Anyone familiar with the workings of voluntary societies will know that such support from the membership is extremely difficult to secure – even more difficult than raising money. Actually money is one of the resources the NFA is not short of, with assets of around a quarter of a million pounds.

At the meeting there was much talk of the failure to attract younger members, but in this respect I think the air of pessimism was unjustified. The membership of groups such as the NFA has always been dominated by older people and their achievements have been none the worse for that. Young people with families and businesses to attend to have often neither the time nor the inclination to devote effort to this sort of work. In due course they too will retire, perhaps having in the meantime acquired a deeper understanding of the importance of beautiful and tranquil places. They will then become the next, if equally elderly, generation of supporters.

My own view of the association's problems very much echoes the opinion expressed by the acting chairman (John Ward), that the NFA has lost the ability or inclination to be "brave" (his word). The association, like the national park, wants to be friends with everybody and is sometimes not prepared to take a firm stand in support of the Forest when that would make it unpopular with the public. He cited the control of wild camping and unrestricted car access in the 1970s, which was pushed through in the face of great public hostility, because it was the right thing to do for the Forest. Today I think there is a reluctance to spell out what is wrong with the Forest and the simple but tough measures necessary to improve things.

Such woolliness is not confined to the NFA. In the current edition of "Dartmoor Matters", there is a shocking chronicle of vandalism and abuse by the public, but under the evasive title of "Is

Dartmoor too popular for its own good ?". It is as though everyone is frightened to say that abuse of Dartmoor (or the Forest) is intolerable and needs to be tackled firmly and at once. There was much talk at the general meeting about educating the public to respect the Forest. I have been hearing the same thing said for the past fifty years, through campaign after campaign, both national and local and, presumably, while generations of school teachers have sought to convince their pupils that they should not behave like savages. Education has not and will not work by itself. A much tougher approach is needed by both the authorities and by groups such as the NFA. A significant proportion of the British public seems to be dirty, selfish and insolent when it comes to "enjoying public access".

As to the inability of the NFA to tackle the insidious threats to the Forest, the chairman rightly pointed out that it is much more difficult to do this work than to fight a major external threat. I am sure that if BP applied for a fracking site at Boltons Bench tomorrow, the Forest would immediately close ranks to repel the invader. That is the sort of thing the association is good at, but the divided sectional interests represented on its committee, which are so often said to be its strength, can equally be its great weakness.

### **Matley**

Over the spring months I have been assisting with a project in the Forest at Matley south of Lyndhurst. This has necessitated parking my car in the Matley car park first thing in the morning, returning to it at lunchtime and then leaving in the late afternoon. It has provided an interesting opportunity to study a Forest car park in use over a long period.

Matley car park is not much different from many such facilities in the Forest. It is dirty and poorly managed. Piles of cut branches and timber have been pushed up in heaps around its margin rather than being cleared up. Into these the visitors throw their rubbish which, mercifully, will now quickly become screened from view by the growing bracken. At the moment violets bloom amongst the plastic bottles and soiled tissues – it has been an outstanding year for violets. One or more visitors to the car park has also developed the endearing habit of throwing his plastic bags of dog excrement under the cars of other users rather than adopting the standard practice of hanging them on the nearest gorse bush.

If Matley is a fairly normal example of a Forest car park in its state of uncleanness, it has one use which is specially determined by its location. It is a prime starting point for cycle trespass. I have watched as cars loaded with bikes sweep into the park, are unloaded, and as the occupants set off to trespass through Matley Wood and over the heaths and lawns beyond. This is a favourite line of attack on the Forest and a little to the north of the car park is a second trespassing line running through the old deer park of Lyndhurst towards the south.

Several years ago the Forestry Commission gave an undertaking to the Verderers to trial signs with wording along the lines of "No cycle routes from this car park", to be affixed to the entrance ladder boards so as not to proliferate free-standing signs. The signs were to be trialled in a series of car parks in the north of the Forest, where trespass is particularly serious. The signs have never been

erected and, so far as I know, the Verderers have done nothing to hold the Commission to its agreement.

Now of course the majority of those cycling from Matley and similar parks are perfectly well aware that they are abusing the Forest, but the presence of deterrent signs would make it far easier for the keepers to challenge such use, while there may also be some more law-abiding people who are genuinely unaware of the rules. Unfortunately there seems to be a complete failure on the part of the Forestry Commission to interest itself in such abuse of the property which it is supposed to protect on behalf of the public.

### **Inclosure drains**

Drainage is hardly a subject to set the pulse racing, but in the Forest's plantations (called Inclosures) it has been an important and controversial subject since the process of tree planting became widespread in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. At this time of year and for a few weeks only, when the vegetation is at its lowest, the intricate pattern of original hand-dug drainage ditches becomes visible. There must be thousands of miles of such drains in the New Forest, but until the publication of lidar a couple of years ago it was difficult to appreciate the full extent of the network. Now, on the lidar prints, it is like looking at the image of woven cloth viewed under a microscope. In the early Inclosures (Napoleonic and before), the drains were laid out in a random fashion to clear water from wet places, so that they are sometimes no more than ten to fifteen feet apart. In those days too, maintenance of the Inclosure rides was important. Where water had to be carried under them, finely crafted brick culverts were constructed. These are now very rare and I doubt if any remain functional after two hundred years, but silted-up examples may still be found in Amberwood and no doubt in other plantations of the period. One thing which I find very curious is that there is also evidence of tile draining in the plantations of the period. Horseshoe drain fragments have turned up in Little Holmhill (1829) and in New Copse (1808) although one might assume that such under-drainage would quickly have been destroyed by tree roots.. Perhaps it was intended to have a limited life only while the trees became established.

In the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century there was a radical change in the method of Inclosure drainage. As thousands of acres were taken in and planted, the old site-related pattern was abandoned and a blanket system of herringbone drains was laid out, irrespective of the need. This led to furious rows within the Office of Woods and the correspondence between the opposing factions makes entertaining reading today. A good example of such drainage may be seen in Oakley (planted in 1853).

As the plantations matured the drains were regularly maintained (labour was cheap), although exactly when this ceased is unclear. Probably not a great deal was done after the Second World War. Today the old intricate pattern of drainage ditches is smashed and neglected, as every felling and extraction of timber leads to more and more damage – damage which is almost always left uncorrected. The consequence is that many of the rides are becoming impassable and that is

something which would have been unthinkable in the old pre-war hunting days. This inundation in turn gives an excuse for closing up gates and abandoning parts of the ride network, to the great disadvantage of the local community, but no doubt to the satisfaction of the Forestry Commission's accountants.

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