

New Forest Notes – May 1994

Roads Threat to the Forest

LAST MONTH the Government announced that two of the three major road threats to the New Forest had been lifted, at least for the time being. The Wellow bypass and the A31 improvements have been struck out of the trunk roads programme, leaving only the Lyndhurst bypass (not a trunk road scheme) as a major highway threat.

The two schemes now defunct were, I suspect, already reduced to being more imaginary than real dangers to the Forest. Certainly there were elements of the A31 proposals (such as the Stoney Cross junction) which would have had a very damaging effect and we are well rid of them. However, over the remainder of the road, most of the land-take was to have been from within the already fenced reservation and there was a real possibility of substantial visual and acoustic improvement by sinking great lengths of the road in cuttings. Since the existing A31 carriageway is undoubtedly the worst blight on the New Forest for miles around it, I regret this lost or deferred opportunity. It is difficult to believe that the plans will not reappear in a few years time with traffic set to double in a decade or so.

At Wellow the original threat was real enough with the predictable demands of some residents to "put the bypass in the Forest". The Forest at this point is inalienable land of the National Trust and it quickly became clear that the Government was not anxious to challenge the Trust's very clear determination to protect its property. To be fair, also, the Department of Transport's own consultants made a strong recommendation that the Forest should not be taken. I think we can be reasonably hopeful that the Forest will no longer be a target if the Wellow proposals are eventually revived.

Now we are left with only the most damaging and intractable of the proposals - that for an outer Lyndhurst bypass. Here there continues a curious stalemate situation which seems likely to become permanent, depriving the Forest of any long term sense of security and Lyndhurst of any relief for its traffic problems. A large group of Lyndhurst residents has said that it wants a bypass deep in the Forest or no bypass at all. The inner route which would be granted tomorrow by those who protect the Forest is not deemed a "proper bypass". If this is, their final word on the subject, so be it; there will be no bypass'. On the other hand, I think it far more likely that the supporters of an outer bypass still believe that they can succeed in beating the Forest into submission and who knows, they might be correct. They are evidently gambling on three rather doubtful propositions. Firstly, they assume that conservation and countryside protection will become of less importance in the years ahead than they are at present and secondly that the local authorities who have supported an outer bypass will gain an increased measure of control over the Forest. Finally, perhaps the voluntary and statutory bodies who protect the area will be weakened or made impotent by fresh legislation. I think they are wrong and that, if anything, protection of such areas as the New Forest will be given increasing weight as the degradation of other parts of the countryside becomes more and more apparent. Perhaps the defeat of the Lyndhurst Bypass Bill should have shown them that, but we are all entitled to our own beliefs and hopes. I shall continue to believe that the Forest will successfully resist an outer bypass while ensuring that the option of an "improper" inner route remains open.

Poisoning the Forest

There have been a lot of silly stories going around about the Forestry Commissions squirrel control experiment using poison. Forest ponies, it has been said, are going to be put at risk as part of a program portrayed as obliterating anything which moves in the Forest or flies over it. The unfortunate Commission really cannot win as they are seen as destroying a cuddly, furry, harmless animal friend instead of the obnoxious pest which the grey squirrel in fact comprises. Of course when fears for the safety of wildlife, are expressed by so eminent an authority as Colin Tubbs, they must be taken seriously, but it is to evaluate such fears that the Commissions experiment is being undertaken.

If a material risk is demonstrated, then no doubt the poisoning will be abandoned. I do, however, think it is wrong to suggest that squirrel damage is not a very major and proved threat to the future of the Forest's woods. I am not concerned with timber revenue - that to my mind is a very secondary issue. The damage and destruction of beech throughout the Inclosures and Ancient and Ornamental Woodland is widespread, extremely severe and very well documented. In Mark Ash Wood, for example, the Commission has, over the years since 1949, established small plantations of beech with the object of providing successors for the old trees now nearing the end of their lives. The desirability of such planting may be questioned on aesthetic and other grounds, but its success in the early stages was unquestionable. Then the damage got out of hand and the thriving plantations I photographed in the 1960S were steadily wrecked. For many years students I have taken parties of students to Mark Ash and each year the contents of these planted-plots has degenerated. Finally in 1992, the last surviving beech trees were eliminated from two of them and all will eventually die at the hand (or rather teeth) of the grey squirrel. The same story is being repeated in Denny, Parkhill and dozens of other sites throughout the Forest.

Before we condemn the Commission for striking down our furry friends, we should spare some thought for what they are trying to protect. Go into the woods over the next few weeks when the young beech leaves are the essence of spring in the New Forest, or in the autumn when the copper and gold of the great beeches outshine every other tree. This is what the aptly named tree rat is threatening and the Forestry Commission is right to try every means at its disposal to stop it.

Lyndhurst's Past

In accordance with standard New Forest policy of never erecting only one sign board where more than one can be accommodated, two Forestry Commission style notices have recently appeared in Romsey Road at Lyndhurst. They proclaim the existence of "Gales Green" on the northern edge of the village. So far as I know, this is not an ancient village place name, but a piece of trendy naming of a green which has existed for centuries in happy anonymity.

I suppose that the name is intended to record one of the last New Forest dame's schools. It occupied the picturesque thatched cottage above the green under the superindendence of two elderly sisters - the Miss Gales. As one of the probably dwindling bands of ex-pupils of the establishment, the appearance of the notice boards stirred some memories for me. One of the sisters kept house, while the other conducted the business of the school on, for its time, progressive lines with extensive use of the radio. One of my earliest memories is of being terrified by Nancy's murder at the hands of Bill Sykes! On another occasion, as a reluctant recruit to a squad of fairies gyrating around the dining room table under the despotic commands of "Music and Movement", I was saved by a sudden break

in transmission. There followed the sombre announcement that King George VI was dead and that broadcasting would be suspended as a mark of respect.

In those days Lyndhurst lived more or less at peace with the Forest. "Gales Green" was grazed to a level velvet (give or take a few dung piles) by cattle and donkeys. Ponies lounged about the High Street, launching occasional lightning raids on the treasures displayed outside Cheesman's greengrocers shop. In summer they filled the bus shelters outside the Grand Hotel (now Lyndhurst Park), or waited hopefully for some careless person to leave open the gate of the churchyard.

Purist historians will tell you that even this was not a truly pre-bypass era, but it seems infinitely remote from the smart commuter dormitory represented by much of Lyndhurst today.