

## **New Forest Notes – May 1998**

### **JEAN COBB'S NEW FOREST BATTLE**

It will probably be a good few months before the obituary writers and committee chairmen exhaust their stock of tributes to Jean Cobb who died in April. Her interests and achievements were numerous, but in the Forest most people knew her as a tireless campaigner against the forces of development and despoliation - especially when these threatened the old hardwood plantations and Ancient Ornamental woods. That meant, of course, that her chief adversary was, at least until recent years, the Forestry Commission. It was a formidable foe.

Those who enjoy the old woods today, too easily forget how close we came to losing them altogether in 1970. In the preceding ten years the Forestry Commission had clear felled, in flagrant violation of the New Forest Acts, over a thousand acres of oak and beech trees in the Forest. The cleared sites were almost always planted up with conifer. The Commission planned, in secret, to convert all but a tiny fragment of the Inclosures to conifer by the year 2000. Had they succeeded, we would now have nothing but an imitation Scottish pulp forest. The policy was portrayed, as it always is when the Commission is seeking to justify rampant commercial exploitation as "maintaining a living working forest" and "not allowing the Forest to become a museum". Its opposers were branded, as they always are branded when the Commission is on the defensive, as ignorant head-in-sand fanatics who believe that trees will live forever. The fact that those who fought the Commission in 1970 included most of the Forest's leading ecologists, historians, and lawyers (to say nothing of several eminent private foresters) was, of course, ignored.

The battle against the Commission took three years and resulted in almost total victory for the Forest. The official case was so indefensible that victory at some stage and to some extent was almost inevitable, although it did not always seem so at the time. However, the fact that it was so complete and so (relatively) rapid, was due in large measure to Jean Cobb. There were a great many people working hard to achieve the same end, but largely through scientific, statistical and legal argument. Jean showed that there was a better and faster route. She attacked the rottenness of the system which was prepared to sacrifice a national treasure in pursuit of profit. She grasped the essential fact that while planning inspectors and judges may be interested in technicalities, the general public simply loves beautiful trees and has little sympathy for a government department intent on cutting them down. She had widespread contacts in the press and television and she used them to devastating effect. Her broadsides sometimes made her more cautious colleagues uncomfortable, but they were remarkably effective. By September 1970 the illegal clear fellings had been stopped by ministerial directive and soon afterwards the replanting of hardwood areas with conifers was banned. Further exploitation of the Ancient Ornamental woods was stopped. The notorious destruction of much of the old timber in Rushpole Wood (one of the finest A&O areas) at

Lyndhurst had been a central plank of Jean's campaign. Finally, the future of the surviving hardwood plantations was secured by the fixing of a minimum 200 year rotation. Altogether, it was a notable achievement.

Having seen what could be achieved by publicity, Jean continued to harry the Commission whenever it seemed to her that it was stepping out of line. The disastrous felling for the Denny power line in 1972 was a good example. In 1982, her complaint of maladministration against the Commission failed to achieve the Ombudsman's condemnation of forestry policy for which she had hoped, but the report was far from uncritical. To this day it is difficult to see how the Ombudsman reached the decision he did reach, in the face of almost overwhelming evidence - much of which is quoted in his report. Perhaps the decision itself was of secondary importance. Preparation of the defence set the Queen's House in a state of turmoil for months and made it clear that in future every one of the Commission's actions in the Forest would be closely watched. The old policies which had dictated that you cut down a tree first and thought about the reasons afterwards would no longer do.

Increasing ill health forced Jean to take a less active role during the 1980s and by that stage the New Forest Association was beginning to take over the tasks in which it had so singularly failed a decade earlier. A fairy tale ending to this story would have been the final abandonment of commercial ambitions by the Forestry Commission in the New Forest, but unfortunately fairies have long been extinct in the Inclosures. Random felling of ancient trees, excessive extraction damage and disregard of agreements and law continue to occur with depressing regularity. They demonstrate the need for that constant critical vigilance which was the hallmark of Jean Cobb's campaigning life.

### **THE HOLMSLEY RIDGE DILEMMA**

Holmsley Ridge lies to the south of Burley and was, until the late 1960s, a beautiful and unbroken stretch of heathland. It was also of considerable archaeological and historical interest due to the presence of dozens of tiny bee garden enclosures, probably dating from the 17th Century or earlier. Unfortunately, in 1969, things started to change. The Forestry Commission constructed a wide gravel road along the top of the ridge from Holmsley Lodge and obtained planning permission to extract hoggin gravel from a site which eventually exceeded 20 acres. The top of the ridge which comprises this sticky binding gravel used in road and car park construction, was dug away through to the underlying sand and the archaeology within the pit boundaries was destroyed. Altogether, it was one of those pieces of environmental vandalism which were all too common at the time, but which would fortunately not be tolerated today. It was the period when the Forest was under sustained attack by gravel operators. Gorley Hill common had just been destroyed, Rockford was being torn apart, work had just started on Ibsley and even Hyde was threatened. The only other major pit on Crown land (lessee operated at Godshill) had just closed. Small wonder that the Forestry Commission should want a piece of the cake for itself.

As the years went by, Holmsley produced much of the gravel used in constructing the recreation sites built in response to the "Conservation of the New Forest" report of 1971. The pit encroached steadily north and westwards and as this happened, the southern parts were graded and "restored" to heathland. The restoration, largely the work of nature, was remarkably successful - far more successful than the efforts of the commercial operators in the north west, with the possible exception of the work at Godshill. A strong growth of heather was established, although some of the early success now appears to be threatened by the spread of gorse.

By the late 1980s, the Forestry Commission was beginning to tire of Holmsley and increasing amounts of gravel were being bought in from outside producers. The Holmsley gravel has a high clay content, making it ideal for footpaths and horse routes, but not very hard wearing under pressure of motor wheels. The quality was also becoming increasingly variable as excavations progressed. By 1993, the pit was effectively abandoned and the Verderers were told that phased restoration was imminent. However, nothing happened. Thereafter, and apparently without any of the necessary permissions and presumably in violation of the SSSI status of the Forest, the Commission started to use Holmsley as a tip for contractors' waste. Many dozens of lorry loads, infested with nettle and thistle and containing tarmac, concrete, steel, clay and old posts are there for all to see. I have not seen the original planning permission, but it was quite common for such consents specifically to prohibit the importation of waste. What happened at Holmsley was unfortunately not an isolated case. Huge quantities of similar waste were disposed of in Alderton Gravel Pits (otherwise Black Gutter) in 1991 and into the old target area at Leaden Hall about the same time. If consent for any of this waste disposal was obtained, the application escaped my notice. Why English Nature and the other appropriate authorities did not challenge these operations is difficult to understand.

I am told by the Commission that Holmsley later fell within the scope of new planning legislation which required the preparation of a restoration plan and this is now being considered by the Verderers. As to the work proposed for the western part of the site, that is probably fairly uncontroversial. The quarry face will be graded and topsoiled. There is every chance of a fairly rapid re-establishment of heather here. The quarry floor and some bare areas have evidently become attractive to various rare species of plant and insect and minor measures to protect and encourage these are likely to be accepted. The disposal of the waste dump, on the other hand, presents considerable problems. One option seems to be to push it against the western quarry face and then to collapse clean gravel on top of it. I know little of the law relating to waste disposal, but this option may have some difficulty with the fairly stringent legislation on the subject. The only other course is to load up the lot and take it away to a licensed landfill site.

After the waste has been dealt with, there remains one more major problem to solve. This is the treatment of the long northern face of the quarry. On aesthetic, safety and stock

management grounds, it demands grading to a gentle slope and topsoiling. That will be expensive, but the Commission, just like any other developer, should not be allowed to walk away from its responsibilities (moral if not legal) on grounds of cost.

By a remarkable piece of good fortune (for the Commission), it has just been discovered that the north face of the quarry contains subsoil distortions and silted-up watercourses which are of geological interest and which, I am told, should be preserved for future study - thus conveniently removing the principal element of cost. I am assured that the anticipated cost in no way influenced the discovery. It is a classic New Forest dilemma with opposing interests pulling in different directions. I hope that I am not unduly prejudiced against scientific study, but in this case it does seem that science may have to give a little ground. The quarry face is already obscured to within a meter of the surface by clay and gravel scree. Vegetation is re-establishing itself and the valued features will certainly disappear within a few years. The pit face would, if left, remain to scar the Forest for all time. Its top would have to remain fenced for safety reasons and the fence would inevitably become neglected. Finally, the justification for retaining over 600 feet of quarry face to preserve features which could be well illustrated in 100 ft, must certainly be questioned.