

NEW FOREST NOTES - NOVEMBER 2000

Teaching the Commoners about National Parks

Last month, the New Forest Committee presided over a most interesting meeting designed to explain to the New Forest's Commoners the implications of living under a national park administration. The meeting was held in a barn with the guests seated on straws bales, the panel of speakers was on a farm trailer and tea was served in a cow shed. All this was no doubt intended to put the rustic students at ease, but I am not sure that most of us would not have been as happy in a comfortable chair in the Lyndhurst Park Hotel. We can experience straw bales and cow muck at any time.

The panel of speakers had been imported from Dartmoor and Exmoor, with one farmer from Yorkshire. It was not, perhaps, quite the impartial group described by New Forest Committee Chairman, Ted Johnson, because its leader was Professor Ian Mercer, secretary of the Association of National Park Authorities and he was supported by the Dartmoor National Park Officer and an employee of the Exmoor National Park. However, the remainder (landowners/farmers) were evidently very genuine people trying to be fair. Unfortunately their status, problems and understanding of our difficulties were about as relevant to the New Forest as those of a group of Martians. For a start, all of them farmed on an immense scale by our standards. None had less than three hundred acres and one farmed two thousand five hundred acres. As one of the audience pointed out, there are a good many New Forest Commoners who think themselves lucky if they can rent a couple of acres. The Countryside Commission's (now Agency's) own figures from 1984 show only three commoners in the entire Forest whose holdings even approached the smallest of these West Country mega-farms. Their large acreages, of course, enable the occupiers to undertake all sorts of diversification development to tap into the tourist-attracting activities of the parks. For example, one farmer had been given planning permission by the Park (presumably in pursuance of its objective of providing public enjoyment) for the flying of powered model aircraft on part of his land - a pastime which he admitted is very noisy. On another (detached) part of his farm he had been given permission to build a house for a family member. His one complaint was that he had not been given an entirely free hand in either enterprise. Another farmer had opened part of her seven hundred and fifty acre estate to public rambling and was being paid to do so by the Park. Some were being paid to restore ancient stone walls or create footpaths.

How any of this is supposed to impress the average New Forest Commoner with, say, five acres of rented paddock and twenty ponies, rather escapes me. Perhaps a few big landowners would be able to milk a New Forest Park: most of us would just suffer. The great promise of the pro-parkers has always been that money would pour into the Commoners' pockets from a beneficent council-controlled New Forest national park, but the evidence for this remains entirely lacking. Grants payable here and now and presumably for most small farmers in parks, are designed largely to foster conservation projects. As a FWAG advisor

told the meeting earlier, they are not a means of putting substantial incomes into farmers' outstretched hands. Certainly, all the panellists seemed wholly unaware of the immense sums of Forestry Commission and European money now being pumped into the maintenance of the common grazings of the Forest and almost undoubtedly exceeding any likely park expenditure in substitution on such work.

It was obvious (and freely acknowledged by the panellists) that they live in a different world so far as their local government is concerned, with many farmer-councillors on park committees, farming-related electorates and a generally sympathetic attitude to rural interests and agriculture. Contrast that with the urban-fringe environment and commuter-dominated electorates of the New Forest.

My overall impression was that the landowners and farmers of the panel had never known anything different from park administration. In a world of large acreages, relatively low recreational pressures (certainly in the case of Exmoor), no protective shield from a Verderers' Court, no agisters, no tourist and technical management by the Forestry Commission, no comparable funding from MAFF and Europe, and above all no urban-dominated hostility of the councils, they were happy enough with what they had. What works well enough in those circumstances would still be ruinous to the New Forest if applied here. To take a slightly extreme analogy, a witch doctor may comprise the best medical care available to a remote tribe, but that is no justification for putting him in control of an efficient modern health service in a developed society !

There was one other very telling piece of information which emerged from the meeting. The chairman rightly pointed out that the New Forest has a planning system said to be equivalent to that of a national park and that therefore little change might be expected in this respect. Commenting on this, the Dartmoor National Park Officer said that his authority had been very successful in winning little battles, but had lost many of the important ones - reservoirs, bypasses, quarrying, army training and so on. That is the exact reverse of what has happened in the New Forest which has won nearly all its contests against major (largely council-supported) developments. Shell oil drilling, the Lyndhurst Bypass, the Stoney Cross schemes - are examples, while we have lost little battles over such things as road signs and the occasional sports field. It is a measure of the relative worth of the two conflicting administrative systems.

Holmsley Crossing Cottage and Common Rights

At the end of September, the former railway crossing cottage (damaged by fire) was sold by auction for £162,000. This cottage, in a lovely heathland setting beside the defunct Southampton & Dorchester Railway, has long been a thorn in the side of the Forest and looks likely to remain so.

Shortly after the sale, I was telephoned by a commoner from Boldre who wanted to know what was going to be done about it. As she rightly pointed out, the site of the cottage has long been claimed as subject to rights of common. She naturally expected that the building would have been cleared away and its plot returned to the Forest grazings rather

than being sold for a huge sum, presumably with a view to renovation. So far as I could see, there was nothing wrong with her reasoning, but there is a world of difference between a correct theory and getting that theory put into practice. Her assumption that the Verderers should deal with the matter was rather more questionable.

Why anyone should want to purchase a cottage subject to common rights and with (I suppose) no prospect of agreement to extinguish those rights with their holders, is difficult to understand. I was not present at the sale, but I presume that the status of the property would have been made clear in the usual way, so the purchaser evidently decided upon a gamble.

How this strange state of affairs came about is rather complicated. Back in the early years of Queen Victoria's reign, the railway acquired land from the Crown in the New Forest by means of the Southampton & Dorchester Railway Act 1845. That apparently included the site of the Holmsley Crossing Cottage. The Act provided that if the land ever ceased to be used for the Company's purposes, it should be returned to the Forest with common rights restored. In the 1960s, the railway did indeed close. The line was torn up and opened to grazing, all in accordance with the requirements of the statute. Certain railway buildings such as Holmsley Station were retained and (improperly) sold off by the Crown Commissioners to whom the former railway land had reverted. In due course and thanks to the persistence of the late Mrs. Jean Cobb, the Commissioners' mistake was acknowledged and compensation was accepted by the Verderers on behalf of the Commoners. It was a practical solution to a difficult problem, if one which tended to gloss over obscure legal technicalities. All involved expressed themselves satisfied. For some reason, which now escapes me, Holmsley Crossing Cottage was not part of that settlement. Perhaps it had been sold off earlier or perhaps it was still occupied by an ex-railway employee. The details are unimportant. Eventually it did become vacant and was subject to all sorts of abuse including hippie occupation. The Verderers were then asked to take action against the encroachment, but there was some doubt as to whether they had the power to do so. Their lawyers advised that the Commoners of the New Forest would be in a better position to have the encroachment thrown down, but they (the Commoners) took no action and the Verderers also did not pursue the matter. That remains the position today and since the purchaser was presumably informed of this history, he must be content to live with the threat of demolition (if and when the Commoners decide to move) hanging over his investment.

So far as my complainant is concerned, I suggested to her that the Verderers might, because of the legal uncertainties, be reluctant to reopen the matter, but that her best course would be to work through the Commoners' Defence Association.

Verderers' Election

On Friday 24th November there will be an election of two Verderers of the New Forest to serve for a period of six years. Although nominations have not yet closed, three candidates have already declared themselves, so the election will be contested unless there are withdrawals. Those residents in and around the Forest whose names appear in the current Verderers' electoral register of New Forest Commoners will be entitled to vote. For

the Forest, their choice will be of great importance. The newly elected Verderers will have to wrestle with numerous threats and challenges to the Forest, including the dreadful state of the pony market, road accidents, Forestry Commission attempts to evade the Court's jurisdiction over certain recreational developments, the threat of an imposed council-run national park management, and the unsustainable and growing public demands on the Forest.

The New Forest Commoners' Defence Association has called the traditional candidates' meeting, to be held in public, at the Lyndhurst Community Centre on Wednesday 15th November at 7.30pm. At this meeting, the candidates will each be invited to deliver a short address and thereafter to answer questions from the floor. In addition, it is customary for them to issue circulars to the electors, setting out their views on Forest matters. I have a number of these manifestos going back over many years. They range from clear statements of what the candidates believed to "politicians' " evasions of the issues. It will be interesting to see what this election adds to my collection.

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