

NEW FOREST NOTES NOVEMBER 2005

First six months of the Forest Park

The New Forest Park marked the end of its first six months with a small triumph and also something of a public relations setback. The former was the securing of temporary office accommodation at Efford after a difficult search. It seems that this has not overjoyed all residents in the vicinity, but it removes the pressure from vulnerable sites in and around Lyndhurst, if only in the short term. The authority continues to discuss alternatives in private.

The setback was more significant. At the end of September a leading member of the park resigned, reportedly saying that the authority is a “top-heavy bureaucratic organisation”. It is a judgement which confirms the view of many people when the imposition of a park administration upon the Forest was under discussion. It also carries considerable weight, coming as it does from someone with an inside knowledge of the park’s working and a wide experience of local government. Of course the fact that the park is a top-heavy bureaucracy does not of itself mean that all its works will necessarily be damaging to the Forest. It is possible to survive rule by bureaucracy, however inefficient it may be. So far, the park’s capacity and will to do either good or evil has been little tested, although the danger signs have already been appearing. To date it has been the mere existence of a “national park” which is most threatening. Those whose noses are firmly fixed within Acts of Parliament know very well that national parks have dual and arguably contradictory purposes. They must protect their areas, while at the same time fostering opportunities for public enjoyment and understanding. In the event of irreconcilable conflict between the purposes, the former should (in theory) prevail. The problem is that the visiting public is not bothered by such legal niceties. It firmly believes that the Forest has now been designated a great national playground to be used and developed for its enjoyment and it expects the park to deliver accordingly.

Last month I attended a Forestry Commission consultation exercise on an aspect of Forest management quite unrelated to park matters. There was a modest turn-out by members of the public. Perhaps a dozen people gave up their Saturday morning to learn about proposals for one of the Verderers’ Inclosures, so they may be presumed to be among the more thoughtful and intelligent users of the Forest. Discussions ranged far beyond the intended purpose of the outing and one gentleman welcomed the fact that the Forest is now designated a national playground – his words. He was at pains to point out (with complete accuracy) that the density of cycling routes here is less than on an “ordinary” piece of countryside segmented by bridleways. He was clearly looking to the park to remedy what he saw as this serious shortcoming in recreational provision. The fact that the density of fish-and-chip shops is also probably less and that increasing the provision of either is of questionable value to the Forest, seemed to have escaped him. It is thus the public perception of a national park which is so threatening to the New Forest.

The park authority is spending huge sums on the salaries of officers whose business it will be to drive forward the purposes of fostering public enjoyment and understanding. Assuming that they are hardworking and ambitious people building careers for themselves,

they must inevitably crank up the pressure upon the Forest under the completely respectable cloak of fulfilling national park objectives. I am sure that many people will have seen the recent television interview of a “forest ranger” (a Commission volunteer for whose words the national park has no responsibility whatever). She proudly announced that on guided walks they were succeeding in getting people into parts of the Forest which they would never normally visit. The implication was that if you have an underused resource, it must surely be there to be exploited. It clearly never occurred to her that this might not be a good thing and I am sure that she was unconsciously meeting both the letter and spirit of national park purposes.

So far the scales seem weighted against protection and in favour of recreation and development. It remains to be seen what (if anything) the park will throw into the balance on the other side. Of course there will be money. The shopping lists are already being prepared by eager potential recipients of grant funds. The sponsors of such worthy projects as the purchase of land to be made available to commoners, or the buying of a fleet of new vehicles for Forest use, or the commissioning of interesting if obscure scientific studies are all anxious to join the queue. No doubt the park will embrace this opportunity to provide sweeteners for a local population which may still not be entirely convinced that a park administration was all it needed to make its life content. But money is a side issue. The Forest needs clear actions to secure a cleaner, quieter, less cluttered worn and over-used environment, but this side of the scales remains conspicuously empty. Six months only of preparing to become our rulers is too short a period to make a fair judgement, but the signs so far are not good. Moreover, I see that the former head of the New Forest Committee is also leaving the park, presumably in search of greener pastures. I never felt that the Committee achieved much for the Forest, but its head was always courteous and helpful on the rare occasions when Verderers’ business and Committee activities met. I imagine the Park can ill afford to lose an officer with some years experience of how the Forest actually works.

Driver’s Map

Several years ago, a considerable donation was made to New Forest Association funds by the sale of digital copies of Richardson King and Driver’s map of the New Forest (original survey 1787), kindly given by Graham Cooper. Anyone who then failed to secure a copy can now have access to this wonderful map entirely free of charge through Graham’s website (www.hants.gov.uk/newforest/index.html). The whole map has been included at two different magnifications and with a rather easier indexing system than formerly.

Window to a lost Forest landscape

For anyone who is fascinated by old views of the New Forest, the Hampshire Record Office’s online collection of 10,000 historic Hampshire photographs is an invaluable resource. Most New Forest pictures are identified (although not precisely dated), but some of the woodland views in particular are impossible to place. Wonderful old pictures of Lyndhurst High Street and the surrounding lanes are among the most interesting. There are some rare pictures of the former Crown Hotel in about 1880-1900. Many of the photographs are from

glass plates prepared by the Short family of Lyndhurst at the end of the 19th Century and one of these presents what at first sight seems an insoluble puzzle. It shows a hunting party (in those days seen as the essence of the New Forest rather than as a politically incorrect anachronism) on an open grassy area. Behind them is a gravel road on an embankment and beyond that an expanse of open Forest, dotted with grazing ponies, sweeps up to a low ridge. To the left are cottages of a village edge and to the right a young conifer plantation.

I know the geography of the Forest quite well, yet this was a place entirely new to me. The gentle topography was suggestive of Lyndhurst or the eastern outskirts of Burley, but nothing fitted. The creators of the database simply described it as a "New Forest landscape". In the end I decided that there were only two possibilities: either the glass plate had been printed backwards (I don't know if that is a technical impossibility), or this is simply a piece of Forest which has been completely obliterated over the succeeding century. A mirror applied to the computer screen eliminated the former possibility. The landscape remained impossible to interpret.

In the end, and after seeking the views of various knowledgeable friends and a certain amount of walking, the mystery was solved. This is a view taken from Lyndhurst Racecourse looking west, probably in the 1880s. The white gravel road on an embankment is now the A 337. The lovely sweep of open Forest beyond is the Lyndhurst allotments, now partially built-upon with ugly modern structures, partly still in use and partly abandoned. The cottages are the settlement of Pikes Hill and the "conifer plantation" is in fact the original shelter belt around the now beautiful oak wood of Folds Gate, which was then only fifty years old. It is an area of Forest which was completely destroyed in the 1890s when the allotments were made. Almost the only things to remain unaltered are two massive oaks in the garden of "Norlands". The picture must surely be unique and provides an amazing opportunity to see what this lost part of the New Forest once looked like. It can be seen at calm.hants.gov.uk/DServeA/search.htm and the reference number is HPP39/005.

A filthy Forest

Last week the Forestry Commission released some remarkable statistics on the extent to which the New Forest is being contaminated by dogs. Copies were supplied to the Verderers on the notepaper of "Progress", the European funded group dealing with "Promotion and Guidance for Recreation on Ecologically Sensitive Sites" and reflect the results of what is described as a recent study. The study found that 25,000 dogs are exercised in the New Forest National Park area each day. These dogs deposit 9.5 tonnes of filth per day, or about three thousand five hundred tonnes per annum. A comparison with the Commission's "fact file" shows that is one and three quarters times the annual output of hardwood saw logs from the Forest. Progress says it is the equivalent of one hundred articulated lorry loads of mess per year..

I suppose anyone who walks in the Forest was already aware that things were bad, but these figures demonstrate the magnitude of the problem. Car park surroundings in the south and west have always been regarded as the most contaminated, but there are really no areas which are now unaffected. Indeed, I think that one of the very worst parks is not even within Forestry Commission control. That at West Wellow Common, owned by the parish council, probably qualifies as the most foul in the Forest, closely followed by the surroundings of Moyles Court sand pit (National Trust) near Ringwood. As one of my colleagues pointed out, it is not just unpleasant, but a hazard to grazing stock. Moreover, if the Commoners were to spread even one tonne of nitrogen on a re-seeded area, there would be an immediate prosecution by English Nature for damaging the SSSI. A blind eye is turned to several thousand tonnes.

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