

## **NEW FOREST NOTES NOVEMBER 2006**

### **Planning the end of the Forest's plantations**

Last month saw the publication by the New Forest Association of a report entitled "The New Forest Design Plan: Recovering lost Landscapes". I have an aversion to glossy New Forest reports which do no more than take up scarce space on my bookshelves and the NFA has, in the past, been as guilty as others of producing such shelf-blockers. However, the present fairly modest volume is in a different category altogether. At the least it is going to stir up a great deal of controversy and at most it could alter the appearance of the New Forest beyond recognition within two generations.

The report seeks to influence the Forestry Commission's Design Plan discussions. These are directed towards planning the future of the Inclosures (the timber plantations) which occupy roughly twenty thousand acres of the Forest. We are currently half way through the second round of such discussions. The first round, in the 1990s, went further than most Forest people would have thought possible towards safeguarding the future of some of the most beautiful of the old oak and beech plantations. The second round, by comparison, had looked like being something of a damp squib, merely fine-tuning some of the earlier decisions.

I suppose the report could be interpreted as the NFA, having tasted success in the earlier concessions, being now determined to deliver a knock-out blow to coniferous forestry and almost (if not quite) to all commercial forestry operations in the New Forest. Such a suggestion is denied in the report, but that, I am sure, is how the Forestry Commission and the timber industry are going to see it. This is what the report proposes.

An area of Inclosure woodland bounded on the north by the A31, on the east by Minstead, the south by Brockenhurst and the west by Burley has been subject to detailed study. This land was fenced-in and planted at various times between 1698 and 1870. It occupies the site of former ancient woodland, lawns (grass grazing areas) and heath. Ignoring all the detail, it is to such a landscape that the report believes this land should return. Except for a small number of Inclosures (of which more below), the fences would be removed and the conifers would be cleared at or before maturity. Thereafter, nature would, in theory, take over the management – recreating deciduous wood and heath. Our grandchildren would walk through a re-emergent 18<sup>th</sup> Century landscape managed by the grazing and browsing of the commoners' animals and little else. All this supposes, of course, that global warming has not destroyed the beech woods by then, that the Forest is not converting to a sort of Mediterranean environment and that the commoners are not too busy with their olive-growing to bother about ponies, but I suppose one must try to be optimistic.

Coniferous forestry would be finished and in the eleven or so Inclosures earmarked for retention, hardwoods would be grown. Exactly why those eleven Inclosures have been chosen to remain is most unclear. At first sight they look like a match for those existing at the time of the 1814 edition of Driver's Map. That has been used by the authors as a sort of baseline, but closer inspection shows all sorts of anomalies. Puckpits is down for

abandonment, while Clumber and Wooson's Hill are marked for retention, to take only three examples. I expect there is some logic to this, but it is not explained.

Perhaps a more fundamental question not answered in the report, is what the NFA sees happening to the remainder of the Forest's Inclosures. The block of woodland studied is certainly important, but no more so than many other parts of the Forest. The report covers only about a quarter of the Inclosures' area and many key woods remain at risk beyond its boundaries. What, for example, does the NFA see happening to the outstanding oak of Islands Thorns or the ancient coppice sites in Wilverley? A clear answer to this is needed. There is really no point in half doing a job. If you are going to promote a first-class row, make sure the prize you are after is the best one obtainable.

The scope of the NFA's demands is so breathtaking that it is a little difficult anticipate what the man in the street will make of them. Perhaps most will find the whole subject too complicated and remote and will just want to get back to walking the dog or admiring the ponies. On the other hand the commercial timber interests will be bitterly opposed. We will be told of the huge investment the industry has been made in the Forest – mills, machines, training - and, of course, there will be jobs at risk, or so it will be claimed. Interestingly, the Association has somewhat pre-empted these arguments. It points out that clearing the conifer will be a major source of income and employment stretching over, perhaps, sixty years. The run-down of the industry would be so protracted that the pain would be effectively dissipated.

So far as I am concerned (and I have the good fortune to be appointed to the Design Forum), I will be firmly in the NFA's camp. A little moderation may be needed here and there to curb the enthusiasm of the ecological purists. For example, one can hardly imagine selling to the public the destruction of the great Douglas fir avenues in Oakley, or the loss of the huge conifers of Bolderwood Grounds or the great redwoods of the Ornamental Drive, but these are all questions of detail. The days of running the Forest as a wood factory have long been numbered. It is just a question of whether the axe falls now or in fifty years time. One thing is certain: the Design Forum meeting on 10<sup>th</sup> November seems unlikely to be the quiet and well-planned event which the Forestry Commission had no doubt expected.

### **Verderers' election**

Nominations for the Verderers' election close next week (6<sup>th</sup> November) and the election itself, if there is to be one, is fixed for the 24<sup>th</sup> of the month. The usually garrulous Forest rumour mill has been surprisingly silent as to the identity of potential candidates. At the time of writing it seems likely that the two retiring Verderers, Dionis Macnair and Jeff Kitcher, will offer themselves for re-election, but that is as far as my information goes. If there are other candidates, they are keeping very quiet. That seems to me to be an odd policy bearing in mind that they will have less than three weeks after nomination day to sell themselves to the electorate. That electorate, the Official Verderer announced on 18<sup>th</sup> October, has increased by 145 to a total of 854, but that still seems to me a poor return for all the hard work put in by the Verderers' staff in revising the register. I fear that there is a sort of

defeatist attitude prevailing in the Forest. There is a belief that the Park and the visitors are going to overwhelm the Forest whatever happens, so what is the point of fighting or in electing Verderers to fight for us? This is rather a pity. I know many believe that the Forest and its community has taken a severe blow with the establishment of the Park, but it is a battle lost and not yet the wider war.

### **Pig mania**

The nonsense about pigs has dominated this Autumn from first to last. To start with there was all the media excitement about pig numbers and how the commoners were going to turn out huge numbers to save the Forest ponies from poison. Then there were the so-called "pig attacks" on innocent passers-by, which seem to have got everyone very worked up. No doubt on rare occasions there are real conflicts between humans and pigs, but more usually it is a question of curiosity and/or friendliness on the part of the pigs and irrational terror on the human side. I am told that in one telephone call on the subject, the complainant demanded to know why the animals were allowed to be turned out in "our Park"! What an attitude, but one with which my pig-hating cob would no doubt thoroughly agree.

### **The end of the local meetings ?**

For as long as I can remember, the local meetings of the Commoners' Defence Association have been a high point of the Autumn. They were instituted in 1944, so that members in different parts of the Forest could be informed about management issues and could raise matters which particularly affected their areas. In those days travel was restricted by petrol rationing and the black out. By 1953 the attendance at seven meetings was 215 or 31 per meeting. Ten years later, 231 members attended six meetings – 38 per meeting average. By last year the number of meetings had dwindled to three with only one or two members turning up at Brockenhurst and East Boldre. Now the Chairman tells me that these two meetings have been scrapped and even the sole survivor, Bramshaw Village Hall due to be held on 21<sup>st</sup> November, will be reviewed in future years. I think that this decline is partly due to the fact that the CDA no longer issues a drift card reminding members of the meetings and their dates and telling them of the cattle drifts (long since abandoned). Probably the more important factors are the modern ease of transport and communication. No commoner can drop a pin in Blackfield without it being known in Ringwood in half a day. Still, the end of this longstanding and once valued Forest institution will sadden some older members of the Association.

### **Cattle marking**

Another institution which may be about to fade into history is the annual marking of cattle with coloured plastic ear tags which change like the colour of the tax disc in your car and which indicate that marking fees have been paid for that year. The Verderers have decided that, as an experiment, no tags will be required in 2007. This is because the large yellow DEFRA ear tags are thought to provide sufficient identification of each animal. Commoners will still be required to freeze brand their stock or to mark them with an approved orange "brand tag". The stock must still be inspected by the agister prior to being turned out,

so that he can record ear numbers and make sure that the animals are fit to run on the Forest. The liability for marking fees and the dates by which they must be paid remain unchanged.

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