

NEW FOREST NOTES NOVEMBER 2008

Trouble at the Park

Early last month I attended the Wilverley protest rally called in opposition to parts of the draft National Park Plan. It was certainly impressive and if three years ago the New Forest community had shown half the enthusiasm for resisting bureaucracy which it is now demonstrating, the park would never have got off the ground and we would all have been saved a lot of trouble. As a long-time opponent of establishing a park, I am rather inclined to say that I (and many others) told you so, but I suppose that would not achieve very much. Our two MPs made it very clear at Wilverley that they would like to see the Park abolished and I understand the Salisbury MP is of the same opinion. If and when there is a change of government, the MPs may be able to achieve this aim of abolition and very few tears will be shed for the Park, but for the moment we have to live with it. Given that this is the case, in the short term efforts should be directed firstly to limiting the harm the Park can do to the Forest and secondly to encouraging and supporting those elements of its work which are of value. It is therefore rather a pity that the wholly justified complaints about the retrospective application of some curbs on recreational horsekeeping seem to have got mixed up with just about every imaginable grumble about the plan, whether valid or not. That can only serve to dilute and possibly weaken the horsekeepers' case. Worse still, I am told that the wife of one Park Authority member was accosted by supporters of an anti-plan faction (nothing whatever to do with the horsekeepers) and subjected to very unpleasant verbal abuse. Such behaviour is despicable.

To my mind the Park is absolutely right to seek curbs on traffic nuisance, to seek to protect ground-nesting birds (the Forest has poorer protection in this respect than practically any other area of rural common) and to stop ugly and intrusive development. There are many other excellent provisions of the plan as well as some additional very bad ones which seem not yet to have attracted public notice. If only, back in August, the Park had accepted that its retrospective controls on horsekeeping were unfair, the whole row and its numerous dubious offshoots would have been defused early. Instead, on finding itself in a hole, the authority continued to dig furiously for another six weeks, prejudicing the good elements of the plan along with the bad.

Apart from the controversial draft policies themselves, we have also had the curious spectacle of the Park's deputy chairman reportedly attacking his own authority's plan in very forceful terms. I am a firm believer in the right of any member of a public body to dissent from that organization's official line at every stage. It may be that the deputy chairman has pursued an entirely honourable course of opposing the plan from the outset. I don't attend Park meetings and I don't know, but to the outsider it looked very like a house severely divided against itself, collapsing in panic as the pressure mounted. Describing one's own authority's plans as "tosh" and "red tape" is hardly a measured comment upon a document which, for all its faults, is still a sincere attempt to tackle difficult problems.

As if all this was not enough, there was the regrettable (to my mind) tendency of the authority to push forward its officers into the front line to face public hostility in the early stages. That was corrected by the chairman of the authority, but not until early October and by that time officers had received very considerable opprobrium, not least at the Wilverley rally. Officers do what they are told to do by their employers and if there is a public backlash against what the Park does, it should land on the members and not their employees. Officers who may be perfectly adequate planning technicians were put forward to deal with livestock management questions about which they clearly had no knowledge and had to bear the fury of the objectors. That was hardly fair. Occasionally the Verderers have had to deal with public comment on controversial matters. Then it is always the Official Verderer or the chairman of the staff committee who faces the press. The court does not send out a recently appointed agister to deal with such difficult tasks, but that is the equivalent of what the Park has done with some of its officers.

Wreckers from the railway

On the weekend of 4th-5th October, Network Rail closed the main lines east of Brockenhurst and, on a two mile stretch between Balmer Lawn and Woodfidley, set about systematically obliterating the trees growing on the embankments and cuttings. The work was undertaken by a team of forty or fifty Australians armed with chain saws and backed up with a lot of heavy timber-moving equipment. In two days nothing was left within the railway fencing, nearly everything being thrown or craned over the fence and dumped on the Forest lawn which borders the track. The clearance team then set about hauling the refuse around, digging deep ruts in the saturated clay subsoil and wrecking large areas of grazing. The mess was appalling. The land is a site of special scientific interest and any work such as this is illegal without the consent of Natural England. That consent had not been obtained and Network Rail was subsequently ordered to stop. The Verderers also had not been consulted and it is, of course, the commoners' grazing that was damaged. Moreover, the dumping occurred immediately before the annual drift at Brockenhurst, when ponies are driven to a pound just off the trackside lawn at Tucker's Bridge. Exactly how far the Forestry Commission had been consulted and whether or not permission from them had been obtained, remains rather unclear.

At a site meeting a few days before the drift, a programme of clearance of the debris was agreed by all parties and at their Court on 15th October, the Verderers prepared a claim for compensation for damage to the grazing. That, unfortunately, is not the end of the story. It is clear that Network Rail intends to continue its blitz northwards, right through to Ashurst. On the two mile stretch so far dealt with the damage to the landscape has been small because the line is well screened on each side by mature timber plantations lying just beyond the linear lawn. From Woodfidley to Beaulieu Road the picture is very different. Here the trees within the railway reservation play a key role in screening the line from the Forest. Remove them all and the track with its frequent trains will dominate the view over a wide area. There are also many fine individual trees – mostly open-grown Scots pine – which have been

a feature of the landscape there for generations. Some of them are likely to date back to the early years after the line was constructed following the 1845 Southampton and Dorchester Railway Act. Their felling would be a terrible loss.

At the moment the National Park's landscape architect is to meet with Network Rail in the hope of averting disaster, while the Verderers have made it very clear that in future they will not expect contractors to ruin the grazing by dragging waste about on the Open Forest.

Solution to the Storm Bushes puzzle

Following last month's "Notes", two people have kindly written to me with the answer to my query about Storm Bushes at Burley. It will be remembered that I asked about some unexplained markings on air photographs of the 1940s, comprising a rectangular enclosure and pathway just outside Oakley Inclosure.

I first of all heard from a lady who, at the beginning of the last war attended a school run from a house called "Brush End" in Forest Road. She told me that a searchlight had been placed at Storm Bushes and, because it was feared that the Germans would "fire down the beam" putting the school at risk, the pupils were evacuated to Cornwall. My other correspondent was born in Burley in 1930 and lived there until 1999. He confirmed the existence of the searchlight and added that the soldiers manning it were billeted at "Brush End". The path from Forest Road was, he says, surfaced with concrete slabs "until the soldiers moved on". As to the name of the site, he comes down in favour of "Storm Bushes", a view shared by Forest experts I have consulted and at variance with the Ordnance Survey's name "Stormy Bushes". I am very grateful to both informants.

The Storm Bushes searchlight does not seem to have conformed to the more usual pattern in that it occupied an unembanked rectangular platform. A more standard site can be seen not far away on the Forest at Black Heath, Linwood. Here there are roughly circular earthworks protecting the light positions. Perhaps this site was related to Ibsley or Stoney Cross aerodromes, but the purpose of the Burley searchlight is as yet unknown. If lights were considered potential targets, it is not easy to understand why sites so close to private dwellings were chosen. No doubt there are many other searchlight positions in the New Forest which have yet to be recorded.

The road-signs rash spreads

Despite efforts by the National Park to reverse the tide (resulting in the removal of some signs) the overall trend seems to be towards more and more of them. Not only did the Park itself promote a rash of its own placards on the boundaries, but the recent expansion of 30mph speed limits in Forest villages (otherwise very welcome) has added greatly to the flood. Particularly hideous examples are to be seen right out in the Forest at the approaches to Fritham and near Woodgreen on the west side of Hale Purlieu.

There is also a re-run developing of the old row between the Verderers (who dislike unnecessary signs) and the councils who seem to regard their own ability to secure a proliferation of notice boards as a sort of virility test. A few years back the County Council tried to plaster the B3078 (Fordingbridge road) with name plates right through the Forest.

The Court demanded their removal. Last year the Council tried again and again they had to remove them. Now we have efforts by the District Council to erect new signboards on heathland roads which have never had them and which will serve no purpose at all – except perhaps to boost the image of the council in its own eyes. The Verderers have challenged the council's right to put up such signs on the common land, but it is doubtful if even the Verderers could authorize such encroachments. Of course it is perfectly reasonable to name streets full of houses, but the only residents between Crow and Burley (the latest target) are a few buzzards and Forest ponies.

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