

NEW FOREST NOTES NOVEMBER 2009

A permanent resting-place for the National Park

The idea that the National Park should find a permanent home in redundant council offices behind Lymington High Street seems to have met with very wide approval. This essentially urban site, the best part of three miles from the Forest boundary (and I mean the real boundary – not the largely arbitrary line between NFDC and Park planning jurisdiction), will avoid the once-threatened building on a green field site in the Forest itself. It will be remembered that the Park had ideas of developing New Park near Brockenhurst as a base – a site where building would certainly not have been allowed by anyone else. At the same time as being physically suitable, the Lymington Town Hall option will promote at least perceived closer links between Park and District planning policies. I know the actual headquarters of NFDC planning is elsewhere, but to many people one council office is much like another. In geographical, administrative and financial terms of course, the whole business of planning in the Forest remains an utter nonsense. We shall have the amazing situation in which one group of councillors operating from an ex-council office miles from the Forest will be administering planning within the Forest, while another group of councillors, occupying a current set of council offices in the centre of the Forest will continue to decide only on planning miles away outside the Forest. Those at Lymington will be handling planning applications at Redlynch, providing an interesting round trip of 40 miles for any officer who fancies a day out of the office. Meanwhile, we (the public) continue to pay for two sets of offices and two sets of staff where one formerly operated very satisfactorily. Altogether it is a system which would have brought joy to the heart of Sir Humphrey Appleby.

From the Forest management point of view, I think that the proposed Lymington location for the offices is very suitable. It will emphasize the clear distinction, somewhat muddled recently, between management of the commonable lands and the core business of the Park which is planning. The commonable lands (shorthand for what everyone thinks of as the New Forest) are run from Lyndhurst by the three bodies whose business that management is, namely, the Forestry Commission, the Verderers and Natural England. That is not to say that if the Park decided to exercise its compulsory purchase powers in the Forest, it could not intervene to a massive extent, but we are told that it will not use those powers. Beyond those powers, its role is largely limited to advice and the issuing of money through grants. The whole row over dog-free car parks represented a complete misunderstanding of Park powers (not least at South Efford House), because how the car parks are run is a matter for the Forestry Commission and Natural England – not for the Park. Both have decided to give priority to dog running over the wildlife and livestock protection which is enjoyed on common land elsewhere, and the Park (whether its intentions were good or bad) could have done nothing about it. Parks may draft plans until they are sick of doing so, but the statutory duty of actual managers is to have regard to national park purposes – not to national park plans.

I must say that when the National Park first arrived on the scene and settled at South Efford House, some had feared that those in Forest management would have been constantly on the road, back and forth from Lyndhurst, but practice has proved otherwise. Business takes me to the Queen's House complex in Lyndhurst (Verderers and Forestry Commission) perhaps twice a week on average, but in the first four years of the Park's existence, I have been to South Efford three times. The first was for a meeting not involving the Park which could better have been held at Queen's House; the second was representing a local charity in a grant application and the third was standing-in for an absent colleague in a Park meeting. At this rate of meetings, the Forest has nothing to fear from the "remoteness" of the Lymington Town Hall site, while any rare trip there will have the bonus of access to an excellent shopping centre.

All these factors confirm the satisfactory nature of the settlement now proposed, but I cannot help reflecting also on the lost opportunities. The Park has often failed to champion the protection of the Forest when given the opportunity to do so. One has only to think of the Lyndhurst Bypass, the railway threat, the appalling damage being caused by excess recreational pressure, the attempted expansion of camps, the attempt to introduce trading vans and more day-to-day questions like the enclosure of Kingston Great Common. Given its constitution, I suppose these failures of the Park were entirely predictable and inevitable. Instead, we are given green tourism initiatives (code for more tourism), information dissemination, encouragement for supposed disadvantaged minorities to visit, recommendations for trails and more access etc. Toothless the Park may be outside its planning and compulsory purchase powers, but influence counts for a lot. That influence could have been used to good effect, but when the last four years are considered as a whole it has usually been absent or worse. It is much better that the Park should settle quietly into its new town offices and concentrate its efforts where it has real power – in planning.

Harvest your own bracken

The bracken infestation of the Forest's common land continues to be a live subject of discussion and dominated much of the proceedings of October's Open Forest Advisory Committee. That is the committee which advises the Forestry Commission on matters of grazing maintenance, the removal of alien species and on drainage. As always with problems such as this, a shortage of money limits how much can be achieved. The Commission reported that its bracken composting programme continues to work well, with demand even outstripping supply at one period earlier in the year. Spraying, on the other hand, has been very limited this year, largely because of the weather. Some small areas have been cut and baled by contractors.

The Forestry Commission is willing to allow local commoners to cut and bale areas of bracken for bedding, much as was done in the 19th and early 20th Centuries. At a time of shortage and high prices for straw, this would seem to be an attractive offer, but so far there have been few takers. My own view is that bracken makes rather poor and not very absorbent bedding, but if the Forestry Commission is prepared to allow its cutting free of

charge it is still perhaps worth considering. The problem seems to be that commoners are, understandably, unwilling to risk expensive cutters and balers on land which is likely to include all sorts of obstructions. It is not much good getting five hundred bales of free bedding while at the same time collecting a thousand pound bill for repair to a baler which has tried to demolish a holly stump concealed in the fern. The latest idea to overcome this difficulty is that the Forestry Commission would carry out pioneer cutting of suitable areas using a swipe. That is a machine which smashes everything in its path and should, in theory, leave the land clear and suitable for conventional harvesting. Whether that will be sufficient to attract applicants remains to be seen. It is a strange fact that visitors delight in throwing logs around. They prefer dumping them in streams, but in the absence of a watercourse to fill, a random distribution is acceptable. No amount of preliminary swiping can eliminate the danger from such machine-breaking obstructions.

As to records of bracken spread, which I referred to in August, a lady from Lymington has since sent me a remarkable set of photographs which demonstrate the problem very well. In the 1960s she took family pictures on outings to the New Forest at Longslade. Not only were the photos carefully dated, but in most of them the old railway line is visible in the background allowing for an accurate fixing of the camera position and the direction in which it was pointing. The lady returned to the site this year and took repeat versions of the pictures. These clearly demonstrate how far the bracken has spread in the intervening years. Such a set of photographs is probably unique, but it does give powerful evidence of how bracken spread has occurred, at least in that part of the Forest.

A rabbit's victim

This year's drifts (pony round-ups) finish this week. It is remarkable how few accidents occur in such a vigorous operation, but the East Boldre drift did result in injury to the agister, Mike Lovell. His horse fell in a rabbit hole and he hit the ground very hard, breaking his collar bone in several places. Not surprisingly he will be off work for many weeks to come. This shows just how dangerous the Forest is becoming for riders due to the explosion of rabbit numbers.

Driving instructors versus the highway code

One of my Verderer colleagues recently attended an event designed to promote animal safety on the roads in the Forest. She was horrified to discover that two separate young drivers had been criticized by their instructors for slowing down when passing ponies grazing on the verges. Apparently they had both been told that they should keep to the prevailing speed of the traffic. Since much of the traffic in the Forest drives at a lunatic speed past grazing animals, this seems like a recipe for disaster. I enquired whether the criticism had not been for failing to give a hand signal for slowing down, but I am assured it was not. Moreover, it seems that this is very far from the first time that such advice has been reported. The highway code (paragraph 214) seems quite clear in its instructions to drivers to drive slowly past animals. "When passing animals, drive slowly. Give them plenty of room and be ready to stop. Do not scare animals by sounding your horn or revving your engine." One

supposes that the instructors would not have given the same advice if a toddler had been playing on the verge, yet ponies and cattle have no more appreciation of danger from traffic than does a two year-old child.

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