

NEW FOREST NOTES NOVEMBER 2015

The great Latchmore engineering exhibition

Last month I visited the Forestry Commission's impressive display at Hyde Church Hall, in which it gave some further details of what it proposes to do to Latchmore Brook and its tributary streams over the coming years. From its start as a fairly limited interference with the lower reaches of the brook, the project has now expanded north eastwards as far as Bramshaw Telegraph and south east to Fritham. Indeed, a major transport route for materials will be through the latter village on an already over-used and narrow lane, in addition to the huge import of gravel through the Avon Valley hamlets.

The meeting was, at least during the mid-evening time I was there, very well attended. I am sure that there will be some people living in the vicinity who think the proposals an excellent idea. They no doubt welcome the filling with gravel, clay and heather bales of large parts of a very beautiful stream, together with the expansion of bog (the politically correct term is "mire") onto the surrounding lawns and the disruption of the brook through the ancient woodland of Amberwood and Islands Thorns. It will, after all, enable Natural England to tick a box and classify the catchment as "favourable" for its very limited and obscure purposes. If such people were at the meeting, I can only say that (Forestry Commission officials and their agents excepted), I did not encounter them. Amongst those I spoke to there was an almost universal feeling of depression and dismay that this costly and disruptive scheme is to be imposed on the Forest, however great the damage and whatever the local people think.

The supposed justification for the engineering works – works which will run for the next four years – is that they are good for wildlife and its habitat and that the Forestry Commission is obliged by law to carry them out to rid the area of man-made alterations to drainage. As to the latter, this seems a very weak and inconsistent claim. For example, in Amberwood the proposals are to alter the present line of the brook which has been in existence since at least Napoleonic times. The wood was planted in the year of Waterloo and the present drainage pattern was established to nurture oak saplings which are now among the greatest trees of the Forest. On this basis the Forestry Commission might as well be obliged to fell all the trees, in addition to every other plantation in the Forest, because they were all made on "natural" habitat. Moreover, they should also eliminate every road, track, car park, camp site or other man-made intrusion. Natural England has admitted that camp sites, for example, make land "unfavourable" in their eyes, but nobody dreams of closing them. They make money for the Forestry Commission and are popular with visitors. Should we not also destroy the Roman kiln sites which lie close to Latchmore (they are an industrial intrusion, enriching the soils of former heathland) and what about the prehistoric water-heating sites on the stream course? Surely they too must be eliminated? This is all complete nonsense and I cannot believe that the law really requires such actions. The Commission has never quoted chapter and verse for such a duty. If they really are compelled to destroy traces of man's drainage activities stretching back over centuries, then it is certainly time the law was changed. Many local people believe the scheme

is a blind and dogmatic attempt to subject the Forest's interests to one objective - that of satisfying Natural England.

Now there are some small lengths of deep dangerous ditches within the vast 4,000 acres of the Latchmore catchment. If the filling of these is done to benefit wildlife and grazing stock, I am sure there would be few local people or others who would raise any objections. It is the absolute disregard for the natural beauty of the Forest, in pursuit of narrow scientific objectives, which opponents find so inexplicable and so distressing.

As to the future progress of this adventure, much will depend upon the planning process and since the National Park will be sitting in judgement on an application to which it is effectively a party, it is difficult to have much confidence in that process. On the other hand, there may still be members of the planning committee, and particularly those councillors whose electorate is directly affected, who are prepared to listen to local opinion. Even residents who are not particularly interested in the Forest may well have views on the vast flows of heavy lorries which threaten some of the Avon Valley villages, Fritham, and Brook or Godshill. Meanwhile, anyone who wants to remember Amberwood and the adjacent woods, with the beautiful stream through them that has been enjoyed for generations, has two more autumns in which to visit. It is planned that the machines will move in during 2018. Of course the watercourse will survive in a degraded and contaminated form, but the unspoilt natural beauty will be diminished. On the evidence of other schemes, gravel will choke the present incised stream, fencing posts and binder twine will poke out from the filling materials and we are also promised the delights of "debris dams" to ensure that water floods out and saturates the surroundings in places. As the floodplain is "re-wetted", many of the streamside trees may not survive the deliberately impeded drainage, leaving gaunt skeletons such as disfigure Driver's Nursery behind New Park, once said to have produced the finest timber in the Forest. It will unquestionably be the saddest day for the Forest's woods since the Forestry Commission launched its felling campaign against the ancient woods in 1968 to secure the great prize of mining blocks.

Free access to classic Forest maps

Old maps of the New Forest have always fascinated me and I know I am not alone in this. They range from colourful examples from the 17th century which are little more than diagrams, to the highly accurate productions of the Ordnance Survey over the last two centuries. Perhaps the most beautiful and detailed of the OS maps are the "Six Inch" full sheets dating from the late 1860s and early 1870s, so called because they are (for that time) at the immense scale of six inches to one mile or 1/10560. Originals are very rare and seldom come onto the market.

When the national park was set up some years ago there was talk of having these maps scanned and made freely available online so that everyone could have access to them. So far as I know the project never got off the ground, although the park evidently has digital copies as they frequently use them for illustrations. In the absence of a local free source of these maps, anyone who wanted a copy or extracts had to rely on a commercial website called "Old Maps". Initially that

company allowed fairly generous extracts to be printed, although they were low resolution and deliberately disfigured by commercial watermarks. Then, presumably because they found that this policy was interfering with sales of reproductions, which was their main business, the quality and area permitted to be printed was further reduced, making them virtually useless for research purposes. Your only option was to pay for a very expensive facsimile.

Last month I was directed to a new and surprisingly remote free source for first edition six inch maps of the New Forest – the National Library of Scotland’s website. The library, like Old Maps, sells reproductions, but it also makes available very high quality copies online and allows users to print as much as they can get on their computer screens entirely free of charge. While their main concern is understandably Scotland, the library is also copying English maps and making a fine job of it. If I have one criticism, it is that many of its maps do not include a scale bar (beyond that printed at the bottom of the map itself – which is not much use if you are working at the top edge) and that makes it difficult to print exactly to the correct scale. In those days there was no neat National Grid to give a guide to 1km squares.

The Library’s generosity is not limited to the Six Inch maps. In addition, they are scanning the early 25 inch sheets, starting from the south coast. The work has now progressed as far north as Salisbury in our area. The dates are a bit variable, but are mostly about 1909 in the Forest. They are thus not the first or probably even second edition. These immensely detailed maps allow you to see every tiny shed or extension to your house as it was over a century ago. They are not particularly easy to find on the website. You need to select “England and Wales OS” on the search panel and then “OS 25” 1841-1952”. Early 20th century two and a half inch and one inch maps are also available, but of course the scale of these is so small as to make them much less useful.

Anyone interested in making copies might do well to take advantage of this valuable opportunity, in case the library decides to introduce the same sort of restrictive policies as the Old Maps site.

An ancient cattle drift

I think I have been spending too much time at my computer recently, because another website which has attracted my attention is called “New Forest Gateway”. It calls itself a community resource and image library, but is remarkably coy as to who is behind it. Anyhow, there is a lot of interesting material on the site and amongst the numerous short films I found one of a Brockenhurst cattle drift dating from 1963. It is a British Pathe news film with a ridiculous commentary, but contains many faces from an almost forgotten past. Among those I remember are head agister Ron Ings, agister Cecil Adams and a remarkably young Raymond Stickland. Both my late parents appear and there is even a very junior version of me on my first Forest pony. The website is certainly worth a look on a wet November afternoon.

Verderers' election date

Anyone who failed to register to vote in this month's election is now too late and I am told that the register is miserably small. If the election is contested (we will know on 12th November), polling will take place on 27th November. It is customary for candidates to send out circulars in advance and the chairman of the Commoners' Defence Association tells me that the usual opportunity for candidates to meet the electorate, few as they are, will be arranged in due course. In past years that meeting has been held at the Lyndhurst Community Centre.

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