

NEW FOREST NOTES NOVEMBER 2017

National Park Societies Conference

Each year the leading amenity societies of the various national parks hold a conference in one of their areas, hosted by the local group. This year it was the turn of the New Forest Association to organize the event, held in mid-October at Brockenhurst. In addition to the societies' representatives, there were delegates from several national bodies concerned with parks. Various important people from the Forest were invited to attend and address the gathering. They included representatives of the Forestry Commission, the park authority, tourism promoters and trade groups. The Verderers were not among them, but had been invited to send observers, so several members of the Court attended all or part of the three day event. Lectures were provided on aspects of forestry, the work of an agister and the history of the movement to protect the New Forest over the last one hundred and fifty years. Two field trips were arranged and delegates were allowed to choose which to attend. One was to a recent stream-filling project at Avon Water and the second was a visit to Hurst Spit and the marshes between Keyhaven and Lymington. Altogether, I think those attending the conference found it an informative and enjoyable (if rather exhausting) three days. Some delegates had come from as far away as the Yorkshire Dales and this involved a six hour journey, so it was not surprising that they were ready to drop by the 10.15pm close of the first day's programme.

Many years ago, long before the New Forest was made into a national park, I attended a similar event on Exmoor. The pattern followed each year seems to be more or less the same and the character of the people attending hardly alters at all. The delegates at Brockenhurst were a rather strange mixture of (mainly elderly) representatives of the societies and (mainly young) access activists from national groups, together with a few paid employees of the more wealthy societies. They were a cheerful and good natured bunch and the host society put on a good show and obtained excellent speakers for the most part. Delegates (or their societies) have to pay for their own places, but that does not cover the full cost. Because of the total absence of commercial sponsors, the New Forest Association will be left with a significant bill to meet.

Apart from providing an interesting excursion for delegates and the opportunity to discuss common problems, I am not exactly sure what this conference, or indeed any such gathering, is expected to achieve. I got the impression that many people there found the intense pressures on the New Forest difficult to understand, coming as they did from large and remote moorland areas in the North and West. Those with common land in their parks seemed envious of the efficient management system provided by the Verderers' Court, but none suffered from the distorted system of national subsidy payments which is a particularly difficult problem in the New Forest. All parks have their pressure points of public recreation, but the Forest is unique amongst them in being overwhelmed by such forces and, of course, three damp grey days in October did not give a very good picture of what we normally have to endure here.

For me, two of the local speakers were outstanding. Firstly, Dr. Graham Ferris (late chairman of the New Forest Commoners Defence Association) gave a brilliantly clear picture of how the Forest is farmed and the difficulties which public use and misuse of the area impose on the commoners. Then there was the address by the Deputy Surveyor, Bruce Rothnie, which I had expected would be a rather dull reiteration of Forestry Commission propaganda, but which was in fact a very useful analysis of the problems of public pressure and the tools available to the Commission to deal with it. Still, like many of the locals in the room, I was disappointed that having assessed the problems and the possible cures, there was no commitment to future remedial action.

Finally, I know from personal experience just how much effort goes into the planning and delivery of events such as this and the officers of the NFA must have worked very hard to ensure that everything ran smoothly. At least they will not have to face the challenge again for a decade or perhaps longer if the present enthusiasm for designating new parks continues.

Property access problems

Many hundreds, if not thousands of people, gain access to their houses or land over tracks or driveways across the Open Forest. Where these access routes are of recent origin, their owners pay large sums to the Forestry Commission for licences. The older routes (known traditionally as "Ancient Accesses") are often to fields and farms. They have existed without licence or payment from time immemorial. For them no payment is due, although I think the Forestry Commission finds this a bit irritating, but on the whole this system on the Crown Lands seems to work well enough. The Crown, however, is not the only owner of common land within the New Forest, since large tracts of heathland are now controlled by the National Trust, where again hundreds of farmers and householders cross the common in accessing their properties.

The National Trust is actually a newcomer to common land ownership in the New Forest. Its earliest significant landholdings date from the inter-war period when the Bramshaw Commons were given to it by the Eyre family. After the Second World War, land at Hale was given to the Trust and in very recent years it has purchased most of the Avon Valley Commons (within the perambulation of the Forest) and Half Moon Common near Cadnam. All these areas of heathland were formerly part of the great estates which once bounded the Crown Lands on all sides, and in particular part of the Somerley Estate which was sold in July of 1919. When this sale took place, innumerable new freeholders were created, most of whom reached their newly-acquired homes and land over the common, via rights of access which were granted by deed or by implication. For more than eighty years these rights were peacefully enjoyed with no challenge made and no payment collected. I was therefore astonished when, during October, a poster (apparently an official National Trust publication) appeared on my village notice board stating that, "If you access your property over National Trust land you will require a licence". This is absolutely untrue. Like any owner of common land, the Trust may grant or withhold permission for new property accesses and may lay down the terms on which a licence is granted, but it has no right whatever to interfere with long established and licence-free routes which pre-date Trust ownership.

In my own village, the Hale Estate was sold up in 1920 , with dozens of fields and houses having access rights over the common known as The Purlieu. That common eventually came into the possession of the Chance family and was given to the Trust in 1947. The new common owners did not then, and do not now, have the right to interfere with those who had to cross the common to reach their gates, or indeed who needed to repair their drives from time to time. It is sad that a once responsible body which did much to protect the Forest in the past, should now be making such wrong and misleading claims.

A new book on the Forest

In recent years we have seen a flood of books on the New Forest, ranging from well researched and written specialist volumes (by such local experts as the late David Stagg, Peter Roberts and Richard Reeves), to complete rubbish aimed at exploiting a gullible visitor market. The latter publications range from tourist guides made up of material recycled (often inaccurately) from other writers, to picture books of cuddly foals and piglets. Only very rarely does the Forest see a genuine classic covering everything from geology to local politics. In the 19th century there was John Wise's "The New Forest – Its History and Scenery" (1862) and in our own time Colin Tubbs's posthumously published second edition of "The New Forest" (2001). In between these two classics there were lesser , but still useful books, such as "The New Forest – a Symposium" (1960) contributed-to by a variety of local experts.

Since it is only sixteen years since Colin Tubbs's book appeared (and that is still available in some local shops) I was surprised to hear that we are about to have a new comprehensive account of the Forest written by Hadrian Cook – "New Forest- the forging of a landscape", to be published shortly by Oxbow Books. Until now, all the best writing on the Forest has been by people with long experience of living and working here, or in other words by household names in the district. I have to admit that until last month I had never heard of Mr.Cook, although I am now told that he is a respected researcher and a particular authority on water meadows. It will be interesting to see if his Forest book lives up to the standards promised by the publishers, but I can't help feeling that a second New Forest classic within half a generation would be rather unusual.

Night-time violation of the Forest

At the October Court a presentment was made complaining to the Verderers about a forthcoming event to be run from Foxlease Girl Guides centre in Lyndhurst, although apparently not by the Guides themselves . It is under the auspices of a perhaps appropriately named company "Maverick Race" and is to be a race through the Forest in the dark armed with head torches. It is difficult to imagine how anyone could devise a more disruptive event and the Forestry Commission told the Court that it knew nothing about s it until after the event had been advertised. However, rather than clamping down on it immediately (as it should have done), the Commission has adopted a weak-kneed attitude of allowing it to go ahead "on this occasion only" with measures to mitigate the

damage. No wonder the Forest is in so great a mess. It is as good as saying to any commercial group that chooses to use the Forest without permission that it may operate with impunity.

Participants are told by the organizers that they will “come across wild boar and fallow deer underneath the mighty oak and beech canopies” as they run through 17km of peaceful woodland south of Lyndhurst in the dark. There seems no end to the abuse of the Forest that the authorities are prepared to tolerate and I am also surprised that the Guides should permit their premises to be hired as a base for such an event.

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