

New Forest Notes by Anthony Pasmore - Lymington Times

BECHSTEIN'S MINISTER

Last month I had the pleasure of attending the junior Environment Minister 's (Mr. Alan Meale's) visit to the New Forest to study the national park question. My attendance was somewhat surprising as I am usually kept well clear of such events on the grounds of being a person whose presence is unlikely to be conducive to the harmony of the occasion. I can hardly blame the pro-national parkers for that: it would be poor tactics to give the opposition any avoidable opportunity of arguing their case. In this instance they had no option as my invitation came direct from the minister.

The minister (for transport and the environment) missed his train and arrived late. He was then given a rather less than inspiring bus tour in which he saw the bungalows of Ashurst and the Marchwood Bypass in the rain - presumably to illustrate the proximity of urban development to the New Forest. He viewed a muddy corner of Dibden Inclosure through the drizzle and was entertained to a picnic lunch in a tent under the dripping beech trees of Denny camp site. No doubt the exotic red oaks and sycamores used as a backdrop to the press photographs will by now have appeared all over the place as the "primeval" trees of the New Forest.

On the coach trip, some of the more frivolous among us indulged in the traditional pursuit of guessing the minister's intentions from his demeanour. Opinions of his attitude ranged from "rather bored" to "prudently reticent". Anyhow, he listened politely as the New Forest Committee told him that only by giving them statutory powers could the Forest be saved and as the commoners representatives told him that by giving effective control to the council-dominated New Forest Committee he would ruin the Forest. He replied (repeatedly) that no decision had been made on the tailor made national park, but that one would be made in due course. I am sure he was far too astute not to have appreciated that, unless he continues to sit on the

fence, his decision is going to make one element of the Forest community very unhappy and resentful.

This conflict of views was brought into sharp focus by a press report from a Salisbury newspaper given to me a few days before the minister's visit and discussed during the coach trip. If only half of it is accurate, it demonstrates the total unfitness of the New Forest District Council to influence New Forest management - as they would effectively do under a tailor made national park.

The report states that councillors are to press ahead with a cycle route "running throughout the Forest" and linking with a national cycle network. A giant sculpture in stained glass, requiring a Lottery grant of £38,000 is to dominate the start of the cycle route at Brockenhurst and a further £10,000 (presumably from the council tax) is to be invested in the route which will "circle the Forest". The route, which will go through Burley, will bring "an influx of visitors to the whole Forest". What a prospect ! It is these councillors who will determine the future of the New Forest under a tailor made national park. They are fully entitled to their dream of a stained glass, cycling mad, tourist dominated bedlam, but it bears little relation to the Forest that most of us value. If the New Forest Committee had a shred of credibility as a conservation body, it would have spoken out strongly against such ambitions. The plain fact is that while it rails (rightly) against the Dibden Bay plans, it will always be reluctant to oppose council-promoted or supported development. That is why it is wholly unfit to receive statutory powers.

After this report had brought some in the back of the coach to a state of near apoplexy, discussions reverted to the minister and to those elements of Forest wildlife about which he ought to be told - including the Bechstein's bat which has been newly re-recorded in the Forest. A lady official of one of the statutory management organisations was describing the difficulties of making a positive identification of this rarity, including the counting of hairs in his ears. Somehow the two subjects (minister and bat) became confused in the noise of the coach and the prospect of English Nature counting the hairs in an Environment minister's ears reduced the back seats of the coach to fits of

unseemly laughter. It should be added that all this occurred before the excellent lunch provided by the New Forest Committee.

THE NEW OFFICIAL VERDERER

One of the great mysteries of New Forest life is the process by which the Official Verderer, chairman of the Court, is chosen. The New Forest Act of 1877 provides that he shall be appointed by "Her Majesty under Her sign manual and shall hold office during Her Majesty's pleasure". I would be rather surprised if the Queen has ever in fact heard of the Official Verderer, so the appointment presumably comes from somewhere in the establishment. It used to be said that Sir Dudley Forwood, himself a former Official Verderer, had a great deal of say in the matter and perhaps he still does. At least an outside appointment relieves the Verderers of the near impossible task of choosing one of their own number as chairman.

These thoughts are prompted by the fact that the present Official Verderer, Mr. John Burry, is due to retire early next year and, with only three courts to go, the Verderers have still not been informed as to his replacement. Rumours have for many months asserted that Maldwin Drummond will move seamlessly from being chairman of the New Forest Committee to take over the Court in order to smooth the path of the tailor made national park. On several occasions I have asked him if this is correct and have received in reply a courteous smile and an assurance that he has no idea !

From a practical point of view, the Verderers do need the appointment to be made well in advance of the changeover date. There is a good deal of complicated business with which the new chairman must familiarise himself. I recall Mr. Burry attending his first Court Committee just before Lord Manners retired. In that meeting the national park debate raged and it shows every sign of doing so still as he attends his last meeting.

HEATHER BALES IN THE BISHOP'S DYKE

The latest Forest row ("bee in a honey pot" as one commoner well described it at a recent meeting) concerns the Bishop's Dyke or Bishop of Winchester's Purlieu in the south east part of the Forest. This comprises an extensive tract (400 acres) of mostly boggy land enclosed by a large earthwork, but quite open to Forest stock. Legend says that the Bishop of Winchester was granted by the king as much land as he could crawl round in a day and that the sinuous course of the earthwork records the erratic path of the Bishop's struggles. A more prosaic explanation is a grant of Edward I in 1284. The Purlieu remained in the possession of the Bishops of Winchester for many centuries and was eventually sold by the Ecclesiastical Commissioners to the Forestry Commission in 1942. Private rights over the Dyke survived into this century, and the Cadland Estate used to have various sporting privileges within the Purlieu. Whether they have been finally relinquished I do not know.

In the 1960s the Forestry Commission set about draining the area north of the railway, putting in a huge trench from Woodfidley Passage to Denny Lawn. The commoners were delighted: the conservationists horrified. Thereafter a few lesser drainage projects were undertaken within the Dyke, until the nature conservation value of such areas became the dominant consideration of management.

The legacy of these drainage operations included, south of the railway and at the south western end of the long sleeper bridge from Lovely Hill, an erosion step within the bog, gradually progressing northwards and also threatening the stability of the bridge. This bridge, or rather series of bridges linked by a causeway, is certainly the longest of its type in the Forest and is a vital connection for the movement of animals and riders. For twenty or thirty years after 1949, public money was poured into drainage projects such as that above Woodfidley. Today European money is being lavished on blocking them up again ! "Life Project" money is available for restoring bogs damaged by drainage work throughout the Forest. If the commoners have not exactly welcomed the idea, it has certainly not received the storm of protest which might have been inevitable a few years ago. English Nature has greatly softened its opposition to scrub clearance, burning and bracken eradication

and the commoners have presumably decided that it would be impudent to press for the more extreme drainage operations. Some exceptionally dry summers have also brought home to everyone the crucial role of the bogs as a food source under drought conditions.

In an attempt to stabilise the bog and to prevent collapse of the passage the Forestry Commission, in consultation with English Nature, imported huge quantities of heather bales which were then laid within the eroded area and are now held down by oak pegs. The idea is to break the force of the water which is eating away the peat and to allow a natural re-establishment of the bog vegetation. The work aroused fury.

The commoners object not so much to the objective of the work as the way in which it was done and to the fact that it greatly exceeded the project agreed by all parties at a site meeting. Moreover, the apparent hard surface created by the bale terrace was likely to lure ponies and cattle into a trap, with their legs caught between the bales. The strings of the upper layer have now been cut in an effort to reduce this danger. Looking at the work on the ground today, the result seems fairly inoffensive, although clearly much more needs to be done if the objective of eliminating all further erosion of the passage is to be achieved. Early indications of the recovery of the bog itself are showing themselves. However, there is still a theoretical risk to stock and English Nature and the Forestry Commission will have to overcome this to everyone's satisfaction if heather bale treatment is to be extended to other sites in the Forest.