

New Forest Notes - November 1999

Preparing to oppose the National Park

On 29th September, the Deputy Prime Minister, Mr. John Prescott, announced "a hundredth birthday present from Labour to the nation" - the subjection of the New Forest to a national park management regime. That he should be in a position to give this generous present in the first place, necessarily implies that the previous owners must first of all be deprived of something. Those "owners" are, of course, the Forest community, its commoners, and all who value its tranquillity and traditional way of life, whether they live in Brockenhurst or Birmingham. In fact, his "gift" was not quite so clear cut as it initially seemed. What he did was to invite the Countryside Agency (new name for the Countryside Commission) to recommend designation of the Forest as a park. It was the sort of invitation which a government agency could hardly refuse: they did their duty and recommended. The long and, I hope, ultimately unsuccessful process of brow-beating the local community into submission now commences. It starts with the euphemistically titled "widespread informal consultation". Next, the Agency will prepare a draft order which is submitted to the Secretary of State. At that stage, objectors have a right to be heard by a public enquiry before the order is confirmed, varied or rejected. It is a costly and time-consuming process. Those with little faith in our democratic processes may say that the whole thing will be fixed in advance, that the inspector will be told what to find, and that we might as well not bother to present a case. I am not nearly so pessimistic. Before the Lyndhurst Bypass battles, the Forest was told that the building of bypasses was government policy, that this one would be built and that we should not waste our time and money. Years of delay and vigorous argument defeated that threat and may do the same for the national park.

The initial response to the park announcement, long feared, but in recent months regarded as inevitable, was somewhat disorganised. For a while there seemed to be a view that this was the end of the road instead the opening of the battle.

The New Forest Committee, which had for years proclaimed its opposition to a "real" national park, emphasising how much better for the Forest would be its own tailor-made plans, has begun changing course as fast as it can. The full-blown national park, chillingly predicted by the then chairman, Maldwin Drummond, (now Official Verderer) as likely to result in the re-constitution of the Verderers' Court, the loss of its powers, the sweeping aside of the District Council's planning powers and the replacement of the Forestry Commission as managers of the Open Forest, has suddenly become an attractive proposition. In the New Forest Committee, the "park of any sort and at any price" attitude seems to be becoming dominant.

Grass roots Forest opinion, on the other hand, remains as firmly opposed as ever. The Countryside Agency finds it convenient to ignore this fact in its statements and press releases, although I see that it now grudgingly acknowledges that the commoners want nothing to do with a national park. That policy was confirmed a couple of years ago at the annual general meeting of the

New Forest Commoners' Defence Association and is now to be put yet again to a special general meeting. This has been called-for by a group of commoners in the south east of the Forest led by Mr. Ralph Haywood and is likely to be held this month. It resulted from widespread disquiet when a newsletter report (not entirely accurate, as I am informed by the chairman) suggested that leaders of the Association might be going soft on the park.

As to the New Forest Association, whose members have repeatedly expressed their dislike of the proposals, it remains stupefied and incapable of coherent action because several of its officers are ardent supporters of turning the Forest into a park. Now that the battle has at last commenced, following years of shadow boxing and speculation, this is clearly a situation which could not be allowed to continue. Accordingly, Mr. John Broughton, a well known commoner and retired veterinary surgeon from Ringwood, (supported by the required thirty members) has demanded a special general meeting to confirm the Association's opposition to the park. The chairman has condemned Mr. Broughton's resolution as "very negative" and promised to resign if it is passed. I suppose that "negative" is a fair enough description if you support the Countryside Agency's dream, restated last week, that: "On designation of the New Forest as a national park, a national park authority would be set up and would take over the management of the Forest." Conversely, the resolution could scarcely be more positive if, like Mr. Broughton and his supporters, your objective is to protect the existing management institutions and to secure the Forest against council and party political control, public development, ever-growing public pressure and urbanisation. The New Forest Association is going to have to decide once and for all if the Forest and its traditional way of life is worth fighting for. Its general meeting is fixed for the 19th November at Brockenhurst College.

So far as I can discover, the New Forest Pony Breeding and Cattle Society has not formally considered the latest proposals, but has an established policy of opposition to the park. Most of the lesser Forest groups are likely to fall in behind the three giants in making their decisions. That really leaves only the Verderers, the key management element of the Forest whose authority will be most directly affected by a park, and who have a stated policy of opposition to any new body with statutory powers over the New Forest. However, stating a policy is one thing and carrying it out is quite another. Split, as ever, between those who seek to represent local opposition on one side and pro-parkers (chiefly present and past connections of the Countryside Commission) on the other, the Verderers are in danger of vacillating until it is too late to take any effective action. That, of course, does not mean that individual Verderers will not be doing all they can to frustrate the now clear-cut threat to the Forest. The only action of the Court so far is to invite public presentments on the subject of the national park at its January 2000 meeting.

It is interesting to see the Countryside Agency's assessment of all this. Despite pretending that organised opposition (CDA excepted) does not exist, it anticipates that it will take at least two or three years and the expenditure of more than half a million pounds to bring the New Forest to heel and impose a national park authority upon it. To judge from the widespread annoyance and frustration

that clearly expressed wishes of the Forest have been ignored so far, I suspect these estimates of time and cost are likely to prove rather on the low side.

Bombing the New Forest Museum

I suppose even the most sober citizen has the occasional fantasy about planting a bomb on the premises of some tormentor. The Inland Revenue and the Council Tax office no doubt figure largely in such day-dreams. For me, the offices of the Countryside Agency have lately begun to seem a particularly attractive target. It was therefore rather disappointing that when my chance came actually to plant a bomb, and a very large one, it was on friendly territory in the shape of the New Forest Museum in Lyndhurst. The "planting" also was not exactly furtive, but comprised a great deal of heaving and lifting as museum staff and an obliging passing tourist helped me to drag the 500lb armour-piercing monster through the front door at midday. This "bombing" was in preparation for the Museum's Remembrance Exhibition "The New Forest at War" which opens on 7th November and finishes on 21st November (open daily from 10am to 5pm).

The bomb, which will certainly be the heaviest if not the most enthralling exhibit, is quite devoid of explosive and perfectly harmless. It was recovered from the Ashley Walk Bombing Range in the north of the New Forest after lying beside Latchmore Brook for over fifty years. It was almost certainly dropped on the Illuminated Target, used for practising night bombing. This target comprises a chalk circle surrounded by a series of lights in concrete shields which were powered by a generator on Hampton Ridge about half a mile away. It is unlikely that the bomb ever contained much explosive, since a direct hit on the target with a fully live device would have resulted in a very expensive repair bill.

Foreman Durnford and the Monkey Puzzle tree

Last month there arrived on my doormat a large yellow envelope bearing a Tasmanian postmark on the front and an advertising sticker on the back announcing "Zed Malunat - reliable builder". Inside was a copy of a large black and white photograph of a couple in Edwardian dress standing beside a young monkey puzzle tree. In the background is a twin-gabled tile-hung house. There was also a most interesting letter from the reliable builder himself and his wife Ilma. They are endeavouring to trace their family history which has its roots in or around the New Forest. The photograph is of Ilma's grandparents, Earle and Annie (nee Strange) Durnford who were believed to be connected with the Schultze Gunpowder Company which operated at Eyeworth from 1869 to about 1920. Earle's daughter had married John Frederick Hulton Wrightson from Charford Manor at Fritham Church in 1905 and the Malunats had had no difficulty in tracing that branch of the Family. The Durnfords, however, presented more of a problem.

By means of a certain amount of peering over fences, I was able to confirm that the house in the photograph was indeed at Eyeworth - the Gatehouse, formerly the "official" residence of the Schultze factory foreman. Earle Durnford was therefore in all probability the foreman about 1900.

Nothing else is known of him. His history, like the monkey puzzle tree, has vanished over the last century. If anyone can throw light on the Durnford family, particularly their association with Eyeworth, I should be delighted to hear from them and to pass on the information to Mr & Mrs Malunat.