

NEW FOREST NOTES OCTOBER 2004

More broken Park promises ?

We have now been told the exact make-up of the forthcoming park authority, or in other words who will manage the Forest's planning and other matters in the future. There will be twenty two members and of these sixteen will be councillors of various grades. Six other people will be appointed to represent what is described as the "national interest". The councillors will, I am sure, be worthy people skilled in the provision of public services and amenities such as refuse collection, road building and sports field management. Since the running of huge tracts of beautiful and scientifically important woods and heaths is not the day-to-day business of local councils, it may well prove that very few of them know much about how the Forest works. Indeed, I asked one councillor who (exceptionally) does know about the Forest, for the names of any colleagues who might be similarly qualified. None could be called to mind and that rather confirmed my view of the matter.

So what of the remaining six people representing the national interest and appointed by the Secretary of State ? During the protracted discussions over the park, the Countryside Agency repeatedly said that the Forest community did not need to worry because it would be adequately represented from within this small minority group. Indeed, they (the Agency) would seek proper representation for the Forest through advice to ministers. That advice would ensure that the "Secretary of State should have regard to the New Forest's unique qualities by including the New Forest Verderers' interest and expertise in the members he/she appoints." A similar, if less precise, assurance was given in respect of commoners. I always had doubts as to how far two votes out of twenty two would actually ensure proper representation for the Forest, but I was told that this was very distrustful and that we could certainly rely on councillors and others to protect the special interests of commoners and the way of life of the Forest. The implication was that we should be very grateful for the two votes.

When the application forms for membership of the park committee were issued last month, I naturally expected to see the Countryside Agency's assurances reflected in the "job specification". There must surely, I thought, be some indication that the Secretary of State had gladly accepted the Countryside Agency's advice and that of the six appointed members, at least two would reflect the Verderers' and commoners' interests. Accordingly I supposed that the forms would particularly invite applications from commoners. Not a bit of it ! The job specification appeared to be a standard national park issue, making no reference to the promised advice. There was no invitation to commoners to apply, although others were vigorously encouraged to do so. In the National Park Update Newsletter for September, we are told that "women, members of ethnic minorities, young people and disabled people are particularly welcome". That is, I suppose, as determined a piece of political correctness as one is likely to encounter and it serves the Forest very ill. If a lady from Botswana, who has the misfortune to have lost a leg, is a leading authority on, say, tourist management or New

Forest Pony breeding, she should have a prime claim on park authority membership, irrespective of her sex, origin or physical disability. To allow these latter factors to influence her appointment if she does not possess the qualifications, seems to me to be quite wrong.

Leaving political correctness aside, the appointment process seems highly confused. There is a list of desirable experience which candidates should possess (mostly related to land and management), but elsewhere and repeatedly there is emphasis that no special skill or knowledge is required. The forms are imprecise as to what specific New Forest experience will benefit a candidate. However, it does appear that anyone with strong opinions is likely to be excluded. For example, candidates must not be focussed on a single issue, but must “see the bigger picture” . This, almost by definition, excludes the working commoner. He has enough trouble keeping his business afloat and keeping the Forest system ticking over, without indulging in the study of such obscure (and in park terms desirable) subjects as social inclusion, sustainable development and rural culture. He is of necessity a one subject specialist and none the worse for that. Unfortunately that is probably enough to ensure his exclusion, even if he has the two or three days a month to devote unpaid to the park committee. The whole tenor of the desirable and undesirable qualities lists is that the best candidate is one who has no very firm views on anything, is not prepared to fight for those aspects of the Forest he regards as important and is willing to put a far greater weight on economic growth, development and recreation than the statutory purposes of national parks (and their priorities) dictate.

There has been much debate within the Forest as to whether it is now worth even putting up candidates, in the light of the government’s apparent disregard of earlier assurances. It has been argued that it would be better to ignore the park committee and instead try influencing its actions by pressure from outside. The park may be able to override the existing protection of the Forest, but if it chooses to do so it will still have a hard fight on its hands and it may be best to concentrate ones forces within the existing institutions, rather than wasting more time in a fruitless effort to secure representation. I can see some sense in this argument, but on the whole I do not think it is the right course to pursue. The Forest should at least make the effort to secure members, however vain that effort may prove. If and when a major clash comes, I would not want the park to be able to say: “What did you expect ? You didn’t even bother to seek representation, so is it any wonder that we are backing this or that development project against your interests ?” The Forest should make a genuine and determined effort to live in harmony with the park. If that fails it must be equally resolute in its determination to fight.

Battlefield at Highland Water

The Somme is one river on which the Environment Agency does not, so far as I know, have designs, but in late August it made a very good stab at re-creating the conditions of that terrible battlefield on the banks of Highland Water at Ocknell Sling. I have not seen damage of that severity since Rushpole Wood in 1969. Work on the river restoration started under the worst imaginable conditions and in days the area was reduced to a filthy porridge of

undulating clay. Through this the tracked diggers and dumpers of the Agency's contractors wallowed like huge primitive yellow sea monsters. I am told by the Forestry Commission's ecologist that 3,500 tons of fill were ferried into the Open Forest in the saturated closing days of August.

When I inspected the site in the first week of September, it had been dry for four days and a desperate attempt to clean up was underway. One driver told me that working conditions the previous week had been, in his words, "a nightmare". Another said that the contractors, acutely aware of the damage they were doing, had sought to pull out, but were instructed to keep working. What induced the Environment Agency to commence work under such conditions and then to continue once the extent of the damage became clear, I cannot imagine. I have been unable to get any straight replies to these questions from the officers concerned. Work should never have been started in what was a mini-monsoon, but once started it should have been stopped at once when the inevitability of damage became apparent.

In the weeks since early September there has been much shovelling of clay and I have not the slightest doubt that if enough time, money and effort is thrown at the problem, a reasonable degree of restoration will be achieved. That is no excuse for what happened.

Through all of this it is easy to lose sight of the restoration work itself. Here the evidence is more encouraging. The stream bed is good and hard, presenting no danger to stock. Whether the compacted gravel fill will withstand the winter floods remains to be seen, but there are reasonable grounds to hope that it will. The Agency is now working downstream within Highland Water Inclosure under more favourable conditions and doing far less damage. There filling of the river bed is progressing in conjunction with the diversion of the flow into old meanders. In the long term, and assuming no catastrophic breakdown, there is a reasonable prospect of an acceptable or even attractive result, but I would hesitate to start counting chickens.

Acorns

This is a terrible year for acorns. In most parts of the Forest, nearly every tree is loaded with the most abundant crop for decades. The death toll among ponies and cattle could be high, although fortunately there has also been a large growth of grass which may help to dilute the poison. I am told by the head agister that it is not only acorns which must be feared this year. Two cows have already died by gorging themselves on fallen crab apples.

Longslade cycle bridges

Last year a government-sponsored cycling promoter – Sustrans – tried to force through the construction of cycle bridges at Longslade by applying for planning permission without any reference to the Verderers or the Forestry Commission. Now, it seems, a deal has been done with the Commission who have themselves taken up the planning issue and "informed" the Verderers of their intention to build. This is code for "we think we can do it whether you like it or not". The Commission declines to disclose who is financing the project, and that in itself is peculiar. Why should development on public land in the New Forest be a

matter of secrecy ? In fact it does not take much guessing. Having blotted their copybook with the Court last time, Sustrans would now like to push things through quietly. The problem of course is not the bridges themselves, but pressure for opening up further sections of the Forest to a major through route if and when the bridges are restored.

Irrespective of the merits of the development, I think the Commission is optimistic in its assumption that it can get away with ignoring the Verderers. There is no bridge there at present (the originals were demolished when the railway closed). The bridges are plainly for, and financed by, cycle interests and are a new recreational facility, fully within the scope of the New Forest Acts' requirement that the Verderers' consent must be obtained. The Verderers will receive public comment at the next Court before reaching a decision.

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