

NEW FOREST NOTES OCTOBER 2005

The contrasting fortunes of two forests

The New Forest and Exmoor have quite a lot in common, as well as some very marked contrasts. Both are royal forests, or rather a large part of Exmoor was until inclosure in 1818. Both comprise a mixture of moorland, woods and fields and both now have the dubious advantage of being designated national parks. Until last month I had not paid an extended visit to Exmoor for some years and that absence only served to emphasise just how serious the decline of the New Forest has become through over-use, choked roads, litter-fouled verges and car parks, and almost universal noise pollution. On the other hand, many of the management practices of the Forestry Commission and Verderers here are clearly superior to those evident on the Moor.

I spent four days riding a circuit of Exmoor and a further two days walking and visiting villages. One remarkable contrast was immediately apparent. During the entire four days riding, wholly upon designated bridle paths and lanes which cyclists are legally entitled to use, I saw not one single mountain bike in use. On one lane a truck containing a dozen or so bikes was parked, but that was all. Imagine the number which could have been counted during a similar period following cycle routes and bridleways in the New Forest. I had spent the previous week working in the Forest near Markway, far from cycle routes, yet even there a party of marauding bikers charging across the heath could be seen every few hours.

Exmoor's roads are relatively deserted, although there had been a marked increase in traffic and a corresponding deterioration in drivers' behaviour since my last ride in 1995. The Moor has few formal day visitor parks. They are generally small and often poorly maintained, allowing cars to spill out over the adjacent grass. Indeed, by our standards the protection against vehicular damage is very lax with few ditches or dragons' teeth and many opportunities for car penetration off the road and down tracks. Of course on Exmoor the natural defences of rocks, steep slopes, bog and coarse vegetation are infinitely better than in the New Forest. The Devon and Somerset councils evidently see little need to improve roadside visibility by cutting back bushes. Litter there, compared to our disgusting road margins and car parks, is a relatively slight problem – not necessarily the result of regular cleaning, but probably of much lower use.

Although the Exmoor vegetation and climate are rather different from the New Forest, making comparisons difficult, grazing levels on the moorland there seem much less than on our heaths. A great abundance of molinia grass is widespread. Such growth, together with the blanket bog on the hilltops has no doubt done much to discourage random recreational access. However, only a week before my visit, huge swathes of the Moor had been compulsorily opened up to the right to roam, with potentially far-reaching consequences for the tranquillity of some areas. There, of course (unlike in the New Forest), strict dog controls protect wildlife and livestock. Farmers are not slow in erecting notices proclaiming that dogs

worrying livestock may be shot. One can hardly see such threats being tolerated in the New Forest.

On Exmoor there is no general right of access for horse riders (such as exists in the New Forest) and riding is thus confined in theory to bridleways. In fact this limitation seems little enforced on the fairly small areas of common land. For any rider used to the easy and generally well-maintained hunting gates with their horse-friendly catches in the New Forest, Exmoor is a nightmare. There the gates are secured with badly-positioned and often dropped hooks (sometimes multiple hooks), set low down and very difficult to close when mounted. The Forestry Commission's style of management and maintenance is thus, for horsemen, infinitely preferable to that of the park authority on the Moor.

Perhaps the most striking contrast of all between the New Forest and Exmoor is the tranquillity of the latter. Intrusion of traffic noise there is very rare indeed. In huge areas of the Moor the only sounds are of crows, buzzards, sheep and running water. In the Forest, noise from the badly screened and sound-proofed three main roads dominates three quarters of the area. Civil aircraft add to the bedlam in the south while military helicopters rule the north. There is certainly some fighter aircraft and helicopter activity on Exmoor as well, but it is sporadic and less overwhelming than in the Forest.

Exmoor is a tough environment for residents, livestock and visitors, with high rainfall, steep topography, bog, low cloud and tortuous communications. Perhaps it is these characteristics rather than superior management which have so far saved it from the decay which is so apparent and widespread in our gentler New Forest landscape.

John Lavender

It is some years since John Lavender left the New Forest to live in north Dorset, but there are still many people here who will be saddened by news of his recent death.

John was one of those very rare people with a deep understanding of how the New Forest works, ranging from some obscure piece of 19th Century legislation to the plant communities of the bogs or the remnants of Bronze Age occupation still surviving on the heaths. He was for many years the curator of the Red House Museum in Christchurch which, in those days, provided for the Forest in a small way the services now given by the New Forest Museum in Lyndhurst. He lived at Bransgore and was thoroughly familiar with all parts of the Forest.

In 1970 he was one of the joint authors of a landscape survey of the Forest's Inclosures, the fieldwork for which was undertaken by a huge team of volunteers. That led, after a bitter battle, to a complete reversal of forestry policy here and ensured the survival of the remaining deciduous woods. A few years later I worked with him on a landscape assessment of Scots Pine in the Forest (the "Lavender Report"), while in the 1960s he was much concerned with recording the heathland at Rockford which was later destroyed by gravel digging.

In the early 1970s, John was appointed amenity Verderer and served on the Court for several years. I don't think it was a post he found particularly comfortable or which showed his skills to their best advantage. Controversial and unpopular decisions were often necessary to protect the Forest and these did not always fit easily with his gentle scientific approach to most issues.

After retiring from the Court, John Lavender continued to serve on the Open Forest Committee where he gained considerable respect among the commoners because he was not of the breed of conservationist which automatically opposes all maintenance and improvement of the grazing. I think he last attended the committee three or four years ago. For me, an enduring memory of John is of him hanging from a tree in Roe Wood in order to secure a well-located photograph of an archaeological excavation in progress below him.

Who will run the Forest's camps ?

Into the delicate Roundhill and Hollands Wood ballet of developer versus conservationist, the Forestry Commission has introduced a new and unexpected dancer – the Camping and Caravanning Club. Leaving aside various traders who benefit from camp site promotion, the Forestry Commission (in the shape of its Forest Holidays sub-division) has been a rather lonely advocate of its development plans. Ranged against it have been the commoners, the amenity and wildlife societies, archaeologists and many residents. Now, in a move which it is hard to see as unconnected, Forest Holidays has announced the setting up of a joint-venture company with the Camping and Caravanning Club, to manage its Great Britain empire. Of course that goes a great deal wider than the New Forest, but I am told that we still represent the jewel in the crown of the Commission's recreation business, providing the best of the income and the most popular sites from the resources of the New Forest. If their plans run smoothly, the new company should be up and running inside six months – probably well in time for the battle of planning questions on the development proposals.

The new group is described as a "stand alone company", separate from both the Commission and the Club. Precisely what that means, I am uncertain. Both Commission and Club will presumably benefit from the income and both will seek to exert influence over the planning decision – just as Forest Holidays is doing at present. By bringing to bear the power of a major recreational user group in support of its flagship development plans, the Forestry Commission will acquire a powerful new weapon in its battle with the conservation and amenity lobbies.

The signboard epidemic

At the September Verderers' Court, the New Forest Commoners Defence Association complained of the growing rash of unauthorised signs which litters the Forest's verges. Fairs, car boot sales, business premises, opulent houses and recreational facilities are all advertised illegally in media ranging from dog-eared pieces of card to costly nameplates. There is a widespread disregard of both byelaw and planning regulation. The logical way of dealing with this problem would be for the keepers to throw the boards into the back of their landrovers and hold a weekly bonfire at their Burley yard. Within months the problem would

virtually disappear as offenders got tired of wasting their time and money. Those who persisted despite this blitz could be prosecuted under the byelaws. Instead of this, the Commission has chosen a soft approach, negotiating with the fly-posters, hoping to persuade them to behave better in future, and generally allowing matters to deteriorate. Apparently those miscreants who spend a lot of money on their illegal boards are inclined to become aggressive when challenged !

Of course the Forestry Commission is not the only or even the worst recalcitrant in the battle against the fly-posters. The County Council controls the verges of the fenced main roads (although even there the Commission's byelaws apply), but the council seems unconcerned by the problem, or at least unwilling to do anything about it. To the layman it seems a straightforward matter: if you illegally erect signs in the Forest, you must expect them to be pulled down and disposed of. No doubt there is some obscure human rights provision which dictates otherwise. I fear the Commoners Defence is unlikely to receive much comfort in response to its timely presentment.

Anthony Pasmore