

## **NEW FOREST NOTES OCTOBER 2006**

### **Park's Corporate Plan for the New Forest**

Last month the National park issued its “corporate plan”, setting out how it will run the New Forest for the next year or so. The title of the document suggests that we are now living in “New Forest Inc”, but I suppose we had better get used to it as we are to have one of these every year – and that is on top of a “national park plan” which is in preparation. For anyone who wants to read it, the corporate plan is rather difficult to find on the Park’s website. Although it is announced in the news section, there is, as at the 19<sup>th</sup> September, no link to the document itself. It is buried in the list on the publications page. Here you will be treated to sixty four pages of text, coloured photographs and appendices. The Park has evidently inherited the virus which infected its predecessor the New Forest Committee. The symptoms are that one should never say in a thousand words what can be spread over twenty thousand and a lot of pictures. That aside, it is the content of the report and not its bulk that matters. Ninety percent of the plan is really fairly harmless and inconsequential. In page after page there are promises to review, assess, identify, evaluate, inform, consult and develop. Since conventional wisdom is that time spent in reconnaissance is seldom wasted, I suppose we must welcome all of this. You can’t do much harm while evaluating. On the other hand, there are several excellent proposals such as that for making a design standards manual. Actually the New Forest District Council had just such a document and very good it was, if little publicised. Then, also, the Park will prepare a scheme for removing eyesores and clutter. This is welcome and long overdue, not least because the worst offenders are the local authorities, Forestry Commission and public utilities. Best of all, the Park will attack noise and visual intrusion from the main roads across the Forest. If it achieves anything in that direction it will have earned its keep for a year or so and one might be inclined to forgive a lot of unnecessary paper.

The problem with such good intentions is that words are cheap and all the promises of commitment to the Forest (we are told that the authority is “passionate” about the New Forest) will be worth nothing unless the Park faces up to the really big threats. Will it protect the Forest against an outer Lyndhurst bypass ? Will it prevent the threatened camp site developments ? Most important of all, will it face up to the steady degradation of the Forest by excessive recreation ? On the first two questions the plan is, not unexpectedly, silent. On the last there is not the slightest indication that the Park even acknowledges the existence of the problem, let alone is planning how it might be dealt with. Clearly that is too politically sensitive a subject. Worse still, in the recreation section the proposals seem designed to exacerbate existing problems. Not only has it failed to apply the brakes, but it actually seems intent on intensifying pressure. We are told there will be “new improved opportunities for walking, cycling and horse riding”. Why ? What is wrong with an unstructured ramble across the Forest without gravel paths, seats, signs, interpretation panels, picnic tables etc ? I am sure few horse riders can see any possible way in which the Park can “improve” the Forest

for riding, while there is already an immense network of cycle routes (including miles of bridleways, byways and unclassified roads). We are told that there will be new circular routes. There will be routes connecting settlements to existing networks and to access land. There will be cross-Forest walking routes and there will be local cycle routes within and linking in to the National Park. All this is profoundly depressing and exactly as predicted during the run-up to the Park's imposition on the Forest. A great natural, wild and undeveloped landscape is not enough. We must have routes and trails everywhere, conducting more and more people into the depths with their inevitable litter, disturbance and dog fouling. It is a creeping, insidious form of development, more damaging than any commercial building project. The simple fact is that the New Forest cannot go on and on absorbing recreational growth. It has been severely damaged already, yet few in authority seem prepared to acknowledge this fundamental truth. There is lots of talk about the danger that the Forest "could be damaged" by overuse, but little that it has already been so damaged. That would be politically unacceptable. One is left with the sad impression that the Park must be seen to deliver significant recreational expansion and at an early date, to satisfy its creators.

### **Evidence of camping in the Bronze Age and later**

As usual this year, I spent a few days attending the Hampshire Field Club's archaeological excavation in the New Forest. This time it was in woodland near Brockenhurst. The work was concentrated on a series of earthworks ranging in date from the 13<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> Centuries and some useful results were obtained, but what really captured people's imagination was quite unrelated to these relatively modern features. The site had been occupied many centuries earlier, in the Bronze Age, and the beautiful flint tools then abandoned and revealed by the excavation, seemed as fresh and bright as the day on which they were made. Any significant area of ground disturbance in the New Forest is likely to reveal one or two flakes from flint tool making, but the quality and amount of material from the Brockenhurst trenches was unusual. At first sight, the use of flint in a supposedly metal-dominated era may seem contradictory, but bronze was an expensive and high-tech material in its early days and most people no doubt continued to use flint. We have had railways for two centuries, but horses are still ridden. Electricity is universal, but most of us have an emergency candle or two in the cupboard. So it was with the survival of flint tools.

Less attractive relics were also present on the site. During the week, the excavating team scoured the surrounding woodland for plastic bottles, cans and broken glass. By the end a large heap had been accumulated. Then, on arrival one morning when the Forest was tinder dry, they encountered a party of illegal campers. Flames from their fire were leaping feet into the air. A call to the keeper revealed that it was his day off. By the time the relief keeper arrived several hours later, the offenders had flown, leaving an open pit containing smouldering embers, pieces of wire and half-burnt bamboo sticks – not obviously related to weapons training. Still, I suppose this was modest by New Forest standards as there was no broken glass, excrement or evidence of drug-taking.

### **Acorns**

This autumn there is a really dreadful acorn crop. My definition of “dreadful” is no doubt very different from that of a forester seeking to secure natural regeneration. I mean that the quantity of acorns is so great that there is a serious danger of acorn poisoning to ponies and cattle. For those unused to the habits of these animals, I should say that livestock quickly becomes addicted to acorns and, when enough have been eaten, the animals die. Unfortunately it is not simply the quantity of acorns on the trees (and that is huge), but its coincidence with an almost total lack of autumn grass growth because of the drought. At the time of writing, after only one day’s good rain, the fields are bare and the feed on the Forest is very limited. In such dry conditions the Forest animals rely heavily on the bogs and many of these are showing distinct signs of drying around their edges. There the molinia grass is as heavily grazed as I have ever seen it. Most of the ponies and cattle have picked up condition well over the summer, despite the drought, yet there is a small number of mares still in poor order and with no hope of being able to get through the winter without removal. It is sad that those mares dying of acorns are often the fattest and best.

There has been much public interest in the start of the pannage season (commenced 23<sup>rd</sup> September). The radio told us that New Forest landowners (the commoners will like that title !) were being encouraged to turn out hundreds of pigs to eat the acorns. Of course you cannot turn pig farming on and off like a tap and in any case I really question how great an effect even several hundred pigs could have across the entire Forest. If, say, a pig eats the entire product of three or four heavily-laden large oaks in a season and there are a thousand oaks in one wood, across the Forest as a whole the effect is no more than that of trying to bale out the sea. One farmer I know has been desperately spreading dung under his oak trees to repel the livestock, but that is not an option available on the Forest. Moreover, most paddock owners do not possess a dung spreader. I am told that Jayes Fluid applied by knapsack sprayer is equally effective, but of unknown consequences for the grass and wildlife. All in all, it looks like being an uncomfortable autumn for the Forest.

### **Road widening by stealth**

One matter on which nearly everyone connected with the Forest agrees is that road-widening on the common lands is unacceptable. Wider, smoother, straighter roads mean more speed and more ponies and cattle sent to a miserable death in a roadside ditch. The 40mph speed limit has become a joke amongst commuters, confident that however fast they drive there is little chance of detection and prosecution.

All of this leaves the highway authority with a dilemma. Cars forcing past each other at speed on narrow roads erode the verges and this leads to dangerous potholes. Because it may not “officially” widen the road, the County Council carries out what it calls “haunching”. The verge and road edge are excavated and new wider foundations are laid. The topsoil of the verge is then pulled back to the original line, only to be eroded away by wheels within weeks. The wider foundations are thus exposed and become part of the carriageway and so the stealth widening is completed. Speed increases, the new verges are overrun and the

whole cycle commences again. A classic example of this may be seen on the Bramshaw Telegraph to Redlynch road.

The latest road to be designated for verge treatment is that from Picket Post to Burley – one of the worst livestock killers in the Forest. Here the County Council has proposed some haunching and some low sharp kerb over short stretches. The Verderers have asked for less haunching and more of the experimental kerb in the hope that it may prevent stealth widening. No-one thinks this solution ideal (any form of kerbing, however inconspicuous, is regrettable), but it may just prove the least of a number of evils.

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