

NEW FOREST NOTES OCTOBER 2007

Precious wilderness or suburban park

This is the title of a short leaflet published by the Verderers and announced by the Official Verderer at the court on the 20th September. It is to be issued in the next few days and will be available to the public at the October court and from the Verderers' office. It will also be widely circulated within the Forest. Publications of any type by the Court are rare – the more so because the Verderers, like many Forest people, have a horror of the great wads of paper which the Forest spawns with great ease. Its appearance is therefore particularly significant.

The purpose of the leaflet is to explain exactly how the Verderers intend to protect the Forest and how the area has already been badly damaged. The Court's policies for preventing future unsuitable uses and development are its foundation. Anyone fed up with the jargon and political correctness of official plans will, I hope, find these few paragraphs a breath of fresh air. There is no balancing of interests and no aspirations of stakeholders are weighed up. No hard-to-reach minorities are sought out and there is hardly a whisper of sustainability !

The leaflet first of all explains who the Verderers are and then goes on to set out the case for protecting the Forest, stating plainly how it has been damaged by noise, litter and over-use. An example is given of how quickly and thoroughly creeping recreational development can destroy a pristine environment. The argument for simply giving-way to recreational demands is considered and dismissed. There is a statement of the Court's belief that damaging uses should be accommodated outside the Forest on private land and not in our vulnerable woods and heaths.

The various different demands on the Forest are then considered in plain English, in the same order as they are covered by the Verderers Policies of 2005. As an example, the leaflet says: "New urban clutter such as play equipment, sculptures, sales points, outdoor furniture etc has no place on the Forest. Similarly, formal trails, routes, and gravel surfaces can be very damaging to wilderness quality, although there may be a case for them on private land within or near the New Forest national park."

For those interested in the more formal and legalistic wording of the policies themselves, they are set out at the end of the leaflet.

The timing of the publication is not accidental. The national park is commencing its tortuous journey towards the preparation of its recreational policy, with a series of workshops and consultations stretching towards the horizon. In announcing the publication, the Official Verderer said: "We feel that it is of the utmost importance that those who are on the cusp of writing a new strategy for the future recreational use of the Forest are both aware of the existence of our own strategy, and why we think and act the way we do." The Verderers' policies were prepared, as the law requires, with careful regard to national park purposes as defined in the statutes and not necessarily as interpreted by some sections of the public. It

will be interesting to see the extent to which the park authority's ideas support or conflict with the Court's determination to protect the Forest.

More signs for the Forest

Any day now we will see the arrival of a new rash of signs around the Forest's margin. They will proclaim the existence of the New Forest or, more accurately, the limits of the national park's administrative area. So far as I can see they will serve no useful purpose at all, but of course they are excellent corporate advertising for the authority. I am not sure how many there will be in total, but nearly every road across the administrative boundary seems to have been provided-for. A very few will be on the common land of the Forest, but the Verderers refused to allow an extension of the provision to cover roads leading from the fenced A 31.

We already have large numbers of signs announcing the New Forest, erected by the Forestry Commission on the boundaries of its land - equally unnecessary to those now being added. I do not believe that visitors are really so stupid as not to know they are in the New Forest. Speed limit signs and signs warning of animals are an entirely different matter and are necessary. Where exactly this nonsense is going to end, I do not know. Does not the NFDC need to mark the boundary of its territory and, if them, then why not the extent of Southern Water's sewerage services? Not least, what about the Verderers? Surely they must be allowed a few tastefully designed plastic pony logos at each cattle grid. There has been a lot of talk of ridding the Forest of the clutter of unnecessary signs. This is a large step in the wrong direction.

As to the nature of the new signs, I think they are rather horrid and intrusive, but beauty is in the eye of the beholder. No doubt the park authority thinks them very pretty and as giving a finishing touch to the beauty of the Forest which nature so carelessly left incomplete.

Leaving aside the question of design, I do have to admit that the new signs will have considerable if unplanned practical benefits to both man and beast. They comprise thick planks bearing the park logo at the top and with a large vacant space beneath. Since they are of timber, they will provide an excellent space for pinning appeals about lost dogs, announcements of church jumble sales and notices of ladies' keep-fit classes. When not so occupied, they will be irresistible to spray paint vandals. As to the livestock, the benefit will be more physical. The top of the signboards have several unexplained protrusions (presumably considered decorative) at just about pony tail height. Old mares who are inclined to spend sunny mornings swaying gently as they scratch their hindquarters on an electricity stay or stump of holly branch, should find these purpose-made scratchers invaluable. Some interesting photo opportunities might even arise from this activity.

The changing character of Forest villages

The character of New Forest villages is changing at an alarming rate in some areas. It seems that there is little that the planning authority can do to prevent this except where there are conservation area designations. I do not particularly place the blame for this at the

door of the national park, because it is a long-running problem, even if it has got worse over the last few years. Two particularly sad examples have arisen near Hyde. In one permission is supposed to have been given to redevelop a fine cob building and, shortly after, it was flattened by its owner. The other comprises an ancient farmhouse adjoining the Forest which is to be cleared away, presumably to build a luxury home. These are just the latest in a pattern of change.

The reasons for this orgy of destruction are plain enough. A Londoner moving to the New Forest with perhaps two million pounds in his pocket from the sale of a good house near the capital, naturally expects the best for his money. He needs a fine site close to the Forest. As to the building, it must have four bedrooms, a games room, triple garage and swimming pool. For security it will need remote-controlled electric gates. All this is difficult to accommodate within an old cob cottage and its garden, so what is more reasonable than to flatten the lot and start again from scratch? If you throw enough money and architect power at the problem and accept appealing as just part of the process of getting planning permission, you should not have too much problem with rustic planning officers and policies. So the theory and often the practice goes.

I am told that the planning authority is to attempt a fight-back with an extension of conservation area designations. Perhaps that will eventually slow the rate of destruction. In the meantime, the park's archaeologist tells me that he is particularly concerned about the loss of cob buildings and is regularly recommending that formal records are made prior to destruction as a condition of planning permission. That is a useful step, but I know he is aware of its limitations. It is a bit like photographing curlews and recording their calls before they, like the cob cottages, finally vanish from the Forest scene.

Islands Thorns

The fate of the trackways in Islands Thorns once again hangs in the balance. This is a particularly fine oak wood north of Fritham and, in March 1998 the Forestry Commission wrecked the delicate network of clay tracks by extracting timber under the most adverse conditions. There followed promises of remedial work which never took place, years of battles and then, finally, a few culverts were reconstructed. The passage of nine years has meant that on the better ground the turf has re-established itself and a good part of the network is again useable by walkers and riders. Some of the worst clayholes still remain dangerous.

Now, as winter approaches and deteriorating ground conditions are inevitable, heavy felling is again taking place. There is every prospect that the Somme-like conditions of 1998 are about to reappear. The whole crazy cycle seems about to be repeated. The Commission knows perfectly well that this sort of wood should not be worked under adverse conditions, but it persists in repeating the errors of the past. Perhaps for once reason will prevail and extraction can be delayed until suitable ground conditions return. In the Inclosures design forum (which advised on the future management of the Forest's plantations) there was repeated emphasis on the need to avoid extraction damage. At the time the Forestry

Commission seemed to acknowledge the problem and the extreme distress which damage on this scale causes to Forest users. This will be the first major test of whether that acknowledgement meant anything, or if it will simply be business as usual.

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