

NEW FOREST NOTES OCTOBER 2018

The Forest through different eyes

For the first time in sixty years I spent more than a week away from the New Forest this summer and my absence was not due to some exotic tropical holiday. Indeed, it was no holiday at all, but the result of an accident. Five weeks confined firstly in Southampton General Hospital and later in Salisbury District Hospital is hardly likely to be regarded by anyone as a pleasant experience, however good the medical care. I hated every minute of it. At the end of June I was in good health and spirits but then I returned in August shuffling along with the aid of a walking frame and with my eyesight badly impaired. Since then I have been experiencing the Forest in an entirely new way, initially confining my activities to smooth gravel paths and struggling from one formal seat to another. I have, almost literally, been seeing the Forest through different eyes.

The Verderers have longstanding policies designed to keep the Forest as free as possible of urban clutter such as additional recreation routes, seats and signs. Suddenly becoming a consumer of these facilities was an unexpected challenge requiring me to review my attitude to them. I thought about this a good deal as I rested on council-provided seats and a scattering of memorial benches on National Trust land, but I remain convinced that the Court's policy is correct. The provision of such facilities is already very large and certainly enough to serve the elderly and disabled throughout the Forest. I don't know how many seats there are in total on Crown land, let alone the Adjacent Commons, but the number must run into many hundreds. In my own parish there are at least eight such benches on the common land. Just next door in Woodgreen the number is as great and there the parish council is spending hundreds of pounds on replacements. The picture is much the same across the Forest, although with the more rural villages generally having less provision and the urban centres such as Lyndhurst rather more. The tourist honeypots of the Forestry Commission for day visitors are similarly well provided.

While I would not want to see a net reduction in this provision of facilities for the disabled, there is only one New Forest, described by the Verderers as a "precious wilderness", and I certainly would not want to it to be further urbanised in an attempt to make it more user friendly.

Before I leave this subject I should include a word of thanks to the many people who have helped me or who have sent messages of encouragement over the last three months. For all the changing character of Forest villages, they still contain an immense wealth of community spirit and I have been amazed at the support I have received – sometimes from people I have rarely spoken to in the past. I am now able to walk several miles (if a little unsteadily), but will have to wait some months more to see what can be done about my eyesight. I hope to return to my duties on the Verderers, Court this month.

Cow problems

Although I know nothing of the inside story of the so-called “cow attacks” over the last few months, the reports of horrific injuries to several unfortunate individuals must be a matter of grave concern to all Forest users and managers. I think the term “attacks” (implying aggression) is wrong, as the recent incidents seem to arise from cows defending their young against perceived threats from dogs.

I don't believe the problem per head of stock or per dog is likely to be much worse than it ever was, but we are in a situation of near record numbers of cattle combined with (probably) record recreational use and certainly record numbers of dogs being exercised on the common. The Forest is under ever-increasing and intolerable pressures from all sides. I appreciate that that some of the recent injuries have arisen where dogs are on leads and properly managed, but a cow is unlikely to take a chance when it has once encountered attacks by loose dogs. A dog, whether on a lead or not, is seen as a predator and she believes the calf needs defending.

Until and unless we can get back to a more sustainable use of the Forest it is difficult to see how the present problems can be eliminated or even reduced. It always seems ridiculous to me that the New Forest is not offered the same protection as other land to which the public has a right of access under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act. That requires all dogs to be on a short lead in the bird nesting season and at any time when in the vicinity of livestock. If afforded this protection, which parliament clearly regarded as reasonable elsewhere, the cattle might in time become less liable to take defensive action at the first sign of a threat.

So far as I can see the Forestry Commission has been stalling on this subject since 2004 when it issued a statement which is still at the top of Google's list of results for the CROW Act and the control of dogs in the New Forest. This includes the following: “It is our current understanding that the CROW Act could apply so it is likely that the Crown Lands will become access land.” and “The CROW Act has provision for dogs to be kept on leads during the ground nesting bird season and in the vicinity of livestock. It is up to the landowner (the FC in this situation) to decide whether it wishes to apply that part of the act.” The Commission faces a heavy responsibility if it does not take this common sense decision to limit risk to Forest users – both livestock and people.

Housing dispute

The north of the Forest seems to have become a rather argumentative place since I lost touch with events three months ago. Not only has there been the row over pylons and whether they should be removed and the cables put underground, but there is a raging controversy over the provision of affordable housing at Hale and in the surrounding area. Everyone seems to agree in principle with the provision of housing in the Forest villages to meet a clearly defined and proved need amongst people with local connections. It is the definition of need and the choice of building site locations which is causing the trouble. The *desire* for subsidised housing in beautiful rural areas is not at all the same

thing as the *need* for it. New housing estates are mushrooming around the northern borders of the Forest from Ringwood to Downton, all within a few minutes' drive of the villages inside the perambulation, so the supply of homes is plentiful and the prices (by Forest standards) relatively modest. Of course that does not mean that the prices are actually affordable for many.

The case for demanding accommodation on otherwise strongly protected sites within the Forest is difficult to establish, but certainly exists in rare cases. For example, particular rural jobs may require on-the-spot accommodation or the need to care for elderly relatives may call for housing close by. Need, however, is not the main problem. The actual location of new housing arouses very strong feelings and it is easy to understand why. The householder who purchases a quiet country house surrounded by highly protected (in planning terms) fields or woods is unlikely to be too pleased to find that supposed protection set aside to allow the building of two or three subsidised houses against his garden boundary. In addition, if the proposed development adjoins the common land of the Forest, there needs to be considered the increase in road traffic, intensified pressure of recreational use, disturbance and so on, to say nothing of the need to provide services across the Forest.

I am convinced that if the developers can find sites which are not in direct conflict with the interests of adjoining owners, a small provision of housing should be possible in some villages once a clear need has been established. Schemes which wreck the tranquillity, view and quite possibly the value of existing houses or which have the potential to damage the Forest, will inevitably meet with strong opposition.

East Boldre village shop

I am fortunate enough to live in a village served by a thriving and privately owned shop, while a couple of miles to the south is a community run store equally valued by local people. I can therefore sympathise with East Boldre residents who are faced with the possible closure of their village shop. Unfortunately the solution they have suggested involves the relocation of the business to a site on the crown common land of the New Forest adjoining an old World War 1 aerodrome building which has for many years been used as a village hall. Some single storey extensions to the hall might be removed and replaced with a shop building. The suggested plans show a structure with a curving roof unlike the generally prevailing architectural style of the village or, indeed, of the Forest as a whole. However, it does not matter too much whether one regards this as an innovative modern design which will brighten up a drab piece of heathland, or alternatively as an up-market version of a Nissen hut which would blight the view across Beaulieu Heath. The problem lies with the legality of the proposal.

Like all public bodies, the Forestry Commission can do only those things which it is authorized by statute to do. Leasing bits of the common land of the Forest for village shops is not one of these things. The Commission may provide shops on its own tourist sites, but then only with the approval of the Verderers' Court. The proposed works at East Boldre do not fall within this exception. Some commercial operations are already undertaken on the camp sites, but mostly small-scale sales of camping essentials provided from the wardens' offices. Very strict rules govern the type of goods to be sold. When this process commenced many years ago it was bitterly opposed by local shopkeepers and that was the reason for the very limited range of goods which may be sold there.

Unless the Forestry Commission can discover some obscure powers which would allow it to dispose of this portion of Forest and unless it can then convince the Verderers that such a disposal is desirable for the grazing and landscape of the Forest, I doubt if the present proposal will progress very far.

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