

New Forest Notes – October 1992

National Park - dawn or sunset?

Last week the government finally published its proposals for the so called New Forest national park. Initial reaction has been varied, but the predominant feeling seems to be relief that this new layer of Forest bureaucracy is not to be endowed with executive powers, at least at present. Those who had hoped for a full national park structure for the New Forest have described the new committee as toothless and, to the relief of some established management agencies of the Forest, perhaps it will be. If it is to be toothless, it will certainly not be impecunious, as large central and local government funds will be showered upon the new body. One great fear of most Verderers and Commoners had been that the "national park" would hold the purse strings of any public funding of the Verderers Court. The committee would thus, especially the greatly increased local authority domination now proposed, have been able to weaken the Courts resistance to public development on the Forest. "If you block this road or school or recreational project, we will cut off your funding". The language would have been more decorous, but the intention would have been plain. However, that danger has been averted and the government has decreed that the funding of the Verderers should be through the Forestry Commission as the Court had requested.

If its powers are to be limited and thus at least tolerable to the New Forest community, the constitution of the new committee is a very different matter. The existing New Forest Committee has two members each from the Verderers, English Nature, the Countryside Commission and the forestry Commission. The local authorities appoint four full members. It has been a long standing grievance among the commoners that, although they are acknowledged by all parties as crucial to the forests survival, they are unrepresented on the New Forest Committee. There is no cheer for them in the governments plans. It is proposed that local authority representation should be doubled to eight, while the Verderers, English Nature and Countryside Commission are cut down to one. Three new ministerial appointees, plus the chairman and Forestry commission representatives, would take the total to a cumbersome seventeen. To my mind, it is quite ludicrous that Salisbury District Council, whose sole interest in the Forest is a few hamlets along the Wiltshire border, should be given equal weight to the Verderers who have been the guardians of the entire Forest for the past century.

If the powers of the committee are to be more limited than expected, there remain two areas of danger. Firstly, with lavish funding, the committee will have great influence. This could be used to good purpose as for example, in the negotiation of management agreements to prevent the inappropriate use of land in the Forest. This is one specific and potentially useful power which the government does propose. On the other hand, that influence could well be thrown against the Forest by local authority members seeking to promote development which

they regard as desirable. The crucial test for the new national park committee will arise if and when the county and district councils try again for an outer Lyndhurst by-pass across the area known as the Racecourse. If the committee resists such pressure it may earn the respect and support of the Forest: if it backs the developers it will be damned.

The second danger arises from the tourism , interpretation and information activities of the present New Forest Committee. I believe there is a genuine intention to do good by informing and educating. However, there seems to be little doubt that the flow of glossy literature and publicity, both actual and proposed, is in fact having the effect of drawing down upon the Forest more and more public pressure. With greater funds and, given the tourism aims of the District Council (which is to have the largest representation on the committee) the quasi-national park poses a real threat in this area.

It remains to be seen whether in the passage of the legislation through parliament, attempts will be made to add to the modest powers now proposed and thus to the dangers facing the Forest.

A31 Upgrading threat

In the near future, drilling rigs will appear on the heaths between Slufers and Picket Post as consultants to the Department of Transport commence an assessment of the geology within a half mile wide corridor centred on the A31 road. The Verderers gave consent for this work at their court on September 21st, although not without considerable reluctance and suspicion. The consent is without prejudice to any future decision on an application to widen or divert the road. Perhaps the deciding factor was a statement by the Forestry Commission that such drilling is an essential preliminary to sinking the road in a deep cutting assuming that the authorities can be persuaded to do this. Such sinking would do much to improve the quality of the surrounding Forest which is now dominated by the roar of traffic. However, the massive width of the exploratory corridor suggests that the Department may have other more sinister motives such as realignment. The Verderers were told that the boreholes will be used to monitor ground water levels over a period of months and the Court has required that they should be thoroughly restored thereafter.

The governments national park statement contains an unintelligible reference to the A32 improvement proposals. The most likely interpretation is that they are giving notice that the new road will be built irrespective of whether or not the Forest has national park status.

Countryside Commission Conference

The Countryside Commission has just hosted a conference of national park managers and others under the banner "New Forest '92". The Commission seems desperate to apply its brand to the Forest as part of the national park herd, whether or not the body actually

established here bears any relation to a standard park authority. Its latest information leaflet shows the Forest as an integral part of the parks network and will no doubt be instrumental in raising public pressure by a notch or two.

Delegates to the conference were addressed by Forest experts including Roger Brake and Roger Newland for the Forestry Commission, Colin Tubbs for English Nature and Maldwin Drummond For the New Forest Committee. However, the speaker who really seemed to captivate the audience was Richard Stride. In a witty and lucid account of the commoners way of life, he opened the door on a world usually closed to outsiders and undoubtedly did much to foster understanding of the small farmers of the Forest.

My greatest regret about the conference is that it received virtually no information, written or verbal, on the crucial role of the Verderers in protecting the Forest. Certainly the delegates were entertained by a pony drift (in the rain), but important as the day to day agricultural management may be, the Courts role as a bulwark against development is even more vital. Forest people know how much the Verderers have achieved in recent years, but the Court is slow in putting the message across to a wider public. A valuable opportunity has been missed.

Grazing in the Forest

Not content with its national park proposals alone, the government has also issued its response to the recommendations of the Illingworth Committee on the future of the New Forest Commoners. It is a rather low key and evasive document which succeeds in dodging many of the more important issues, with the one exception of the Verderers finances. Here it is stated clearly that the Forestry Commission should finance the Verderers, statutory powers for this having been taken in 1991. Whether there will be an amicable negotiation of adequate funding or an interminable wrangle over pennies for the next paper clip remains to be seen. Those who have been involved in earlier discussions suspect the latter, but the Illingworth Report may have created a new spirit in the financial corridors of the Forestry Commission.

One other important recommendation of the Illingworth Committee has been shelved and will disappoint those who believe that faster commuter traffic and ponies can never satisfactorily mix in the Forest. The Committee had recommended urgent consideration of fencing of the main Cadnam to Godshill and Dibden Purlieu to Portmore roads. The hope is now that the Palliative of the 40 m.p.h. speed limit will control the shocking accident totals on these roads. That, however, seems a remote prospect unless the police are willing to keep up a relentless war on commuters who care little for the Forest and the animals and who revert to high speeds as soon as enforcement pressure is reduced

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