

New Forest Notes – October 1995

Lyndhurst Bypass - the last chance?

At their Court on the 18th September the Verderers were told that their arch opponent in the matter of the Lyndhurst Bypass (Hampshire County Council) has finally conceded that it will not be able to push through an outer bypass for Lyndhurst in the face of overwhelming objections from those concerned with the protection of the Forest. The notorious Route 5A has accordingly been abandoned seven years after it was thrown out by Parliament. This acknowledgement by the County comes more than nine months after its ally, the New Forest District Council, reached the same conclusion in its draft local plan. Give or take a little shouting, it should mark the end of the most serious development threat to the Forest in post war years, but where does this leave Lyndhurst and its bypass prospects? If history teaches us anything it is a lesson here.

Back in the 1970s, the County Council proposed a bypass scheme so monstrous that, by today's standards, it is almost unbelievable. That Plan was fought through a public enquiry and defeated. At the time, the Forest was so frightened by what was proposed, that many in its management would happily have accepted Route 5A. The County Council retired hurt from that assault on the Forest and did not try again for more than a decade when it sought to override the jurisdiction of the Verderers by a Parliamentary Bill. During the intervening period, the value of the Forest came to be more generally understood, so that what might have been tolerated in 1975 was fought and defeated at Westminster. Then (1988), the Forest was reluctantly prepared to concede an inner route which would still have been very damaging but, as in, 1975, better than what the County was seeking to impose. Now, after a further seven years of growing environmental awareness, it looks as though the door which was then left ajar could be about to close.

The problem with an inner route, leaving aside its effects on the Forest, is that residents in the Southampton Road area at the east end of the village dislike it and their feelings have dominated the collective view of Lyndhurst. "Its not a proper bypass" and "better no bypass at all" have become familiar slogans. However, from talking to people in the village, it is perfectly clear that some residents do want a bypass, "proper" or no, but have been reluctant to break ranks with the vociferous opponents of an inner route at least while they felt there was a sporting chance of pushing the road deep into the Forest. An inner route taken right through to Bank would remove traffic from almost every residential road except on the eastern fringe and at Clay Hill. Lyndhurst would be transformed into a relatively tranquil holiday and residential town, almost unimaginable in today's traffic chaos. The price, would be inconvenience to a minority section of the community, damage to the Forest and the loss of some fine parkland.

Victorian Forest Diaries

Lyndhurst is also the focus for a fascinating glimpse of Forest life more than a century ago. I have, recently had the opportunity of seeing that lost World through the eyes of three very different Victorian women, two of them Lyndhurst residents who kept diaries at various periods in the forty years following 1858. The first was Marie Stevenson of Foxlease whose diary covers a ten year period from 1882, She was married in the following year to John Hibbert and thereafter the Forest references in her diary are confined to frequent visits to her parents home. Life at foxlease was one of

luxury and Marie records the social life of Lyndhurst's aristocracy the balls, dinners, skating parties, trouble with servants and constant visits to and by neighbours and friends. Money, however, could not buy health and Marie was frequently ill, particularly during pregnancy, and one child died at the age of eight months.

The second diarist was my own great-grandmother, Alice Lucas, who was married to the curate in charge of Lyndhurst. That Lyndhurst should have been a curacy under Minstead seems strange in that the former village was a fashionable and growing Victorian community, while Minstead remained a sleepy backwater. No doubt this anomaly had its origins in ecclesiastical history. Alice, although moving in the same social circles as Marie Stevenson (she was a daughter of Admiral Sir Charles Burrard who lived at Holmfield) certainly did not enjoy a life of ease. She was kept busy, visiting the sick and poor, playing the harmonium in the old church, teaching Sunday School and evening classes, taking singing lessons and studying Latin and German. She also ran something enigmatically described in the diary as "The Boot Club" at the school. This is never explained, but I suppose it was to assist poor children in the acquisition of footwear. The diary covers only the years 1858 to 1861 and like Marie's would be quite unintelligible without the aid of Mrs. Bowden-Smith's invaluable history of the great Lyndhurst houses and the families who occupied them in the second half of the nineteenth century. Mrs. Bowden-Smith lived at Vernalls Farm (predecessor of the present one) and wrote her history in 1906 when she was 86 years old. So far as I know, this exceptional manuscript has never been published, although several people in the Forest possess copies.

Perhaps the most intriguing of the three dairies is that of Barbara Bennett. Her diary commences within a few days of the close of Alice's and comprises sporadic entries throughout 1861 and 1862. The Benett family seem to be entirely forgotten in the Forest. William Benett (Barbara's father) was a successful London barrister and, in 1861, he took a lease of Fritham House (then called Fritham Cottage) as a holiday home. The family were to occupy it for thirty years. Barbara had been little more than school age at the time of her diary. She explored the Forest on her pony, fell into bogs, railed against the tedious sermons of the vicar of Bramshaw and the loutish behaviour of the Fritham boys for whom she provided a Sunday School in the kitchen of her parents' home. Visiting the homes of fellow members of the local gentry seems to have been as important to Barbara as to the other diarists, but life in the northern wilderness of the Forest was a good deal less formal than in the structured society of Lyndhurst. The diary, gives the impression of a cheerful carefree child thoroughly enjoying life.

Barbara Benett's life has vanished without trace beyond her fragmentary diary, but for her sister Sarah things were very different. From privileged New Forest obscurity, she went to Burslem in the Potteries and became prominent in the Women's Trade Union League. She founded and ran co-operative stores, became deeply involved in politics, went on hunger strike and to prison on three occasions for her work in the suffragette movement. Her descendant, Zoe Munby is trying to discover what caused this sudden change of lifestyle and also details of the forgotten Fritham Co-operative Sarah founded during her time in the village. I would be pleased to pass on any information which may survive in the Forest. I also wonder how many similar diaries may lie neglected in the cupboards of local people. Perhaps because they are bound volumes, they are less liable to destruction as

"worthless papers" after a family death. They bring the past to life far more vividly than almost any other local history source.

Cycle Litigation

The long running dispute over mountain bikes between the Forest societies and the Forestry Commission, seems little nearer a solution after almost two years. The Commission has conceded that it needs (and has not obtained) the consent of the Verderers for waymarked cycle routes and cycle hire, but the real problem - the network of non-waymarked routes - remains unresolved. It is this network, introduced and publicised without the approval of the Court, which has so much degraded the quiet parts of the Forest. The New Forest Association took counsel's opinion earlier this year and was advised that the Forestry Commission must obtain the consent of the Verderers for the routes and the accompanying maps. This view is shared by several knowledgeable local lawyers to whom I have spoken. I have found none who support the Commissions case.

The Verderers have always made it clear tat a permanent ban on cycling is not envisaged. The provision of one or two long distance routes, based on country lanes, and with some cross Forest links, is probably acceptable to all Forest interests.. So far however, it has not proved possible to reach agreement with the Commission. Because of this, I fear the Forest is closer to being forced into litigation than at any other time since the great hardwood controversy of the 1960s. The difference this time, however, is that the New Forest Association and the Commoners Defence Association have both built up substantial fighting funds and with the help of the Verderers, would be in a position to mount a legal challenge to put right the damage which has been done to Forest. All hopes of avoiding conflict are now pinned on a further conference of Forest bodies with the Deputy Surveyor in the first week of November. If this fails, the prospects for an amicable settlement of the problem look remote.