

New Forest Notes - October 1999

Drag Hunting versus the Foxhounds ?

The unfortunate Verderers, who have plenty of problems related to their own sphere of Forest management, are once again being sucked into a hunting argument. This time there is perhaps rather more reason for their involvement because before them is an application for a new recreational use of the Forest - that of drag hunting. The Forestry Commission representing the Minister of Agriculture maintains, with rather curious logic, that "real" hunting is a wildlife management measure of which they are the sole arbiters. If it had been classified as a recreational pursuit, then the Verderers would have had to decide whether or not to permit it. There is the further claim that whether it is recreational or not, permission for it was given long before the New Forest Act of 1970 which lays down the circumstances in which the Verderers' consent must be obtained. Since permissions pre-date the Act, it is said, the Court is not involved. One way or the other, the Verderers have been perfectly happy to accept the Forestry Commission's interpretation of the law, not least because it happens to fit very well with their long established policy of neutrality on hunting. They have no such convenient escape from a decision on drag hunting - a sport where hounds and riders follow an artificial scent laid by man and in which nothing is killed unless one of the participants should be unlucky enough to break his neck.

Why this proposal should be any more controversial than, say, a fun run or adventure camp, may not be immediately apparent. In the New Forest there is controversy and suspicion behind every bush. The problem is this: the "real" hunt supporters see it as an attempt to undermine their position in the New Forest. If drag hunting can be shown to be successful and popular, it is argued, then the authorities are likely to turn round and refuse permission to hunt foxes because there is a "perfectly acceptable alternative". The proponents of drag hunting deny that there is any such hidden motive so far as they are concerned, and, since some of them are foxhunting or ex-buckhounds people, I have no reason to doubt their sincerity. Nevertheless, the suspicion remains and has been fuelled by the fact that the initial presentment came not from the drag hunters themselves, but from the Forestry Commission. Why, it is asked, should the Commission be involved if there is not some hidden political objective ? That seems to be a good question.

The Commission's presentment was not in fact for permission to authorise a drag hunt in the New Forest, but for the Verderers' consent for the holding of "trials" to test the feasibility of drag hunting here - a subtle but important distinction. Authoritative persons who tried it many years ago say that it did not work then and it will not work now. However, since they support "real" hunting, their impartiality has been questioned. The Commission claims that this merely reinforces the case for independent trials.

The Forestry Commission was not alone in its presentment supporting a drag hunting experiment. The master of the local drag hounds gave an exceptionally clear and well reasoned (if over long) exposition of his case. He stressed the many advantages, as he saw them, of drag hunting. For example, it is possible to avoid sensitive areas and to know in advance where the hunt will go, thus minimising conflict with other Forest users. He was supported, far less ably, by a representative of the Draghounds Association, who clearly had no idea how the Forest and its livestock is managed and who thus did his case little good. Reports the day before in the national press suggested that the Association and the local hounds were at loggerheads over policy, but their differences seemed to have been settled by the morning of the Court.

The Verderers will now receive presentments supporting and opposing the application at their October Court when, no doubt, there will be vigorous responses from both pro and anti-"real" hunting groups with the drag hunters themselves in something of a minority. My own view is that so much concentration on the supposed covert political objectives of the antagonists really misses the point. While others are busy grinding their own axes, the Verderers' duty is simply to sharpen the Forest chopper. The single crucial question seems to be, is there any justification for imposing yet another recreational pressure upon a Forest already battered and grossly over-used ? It has been suggested that drag hunting would merely replace the defunct Buckhounds, but the Buckhounds are now history and the Forest is still under dreadful pressure. The supporters of drag hunting will have to provide some convincing arguments if the fundamental presumption against more pressure is to be overturned.

Cycle Network Review

Two years ago the Verderers gave consent for the establishment of a very extensive network of cycle routes penetrating all parts of the Forest and sweeping aside the possibility of preserving even a few tranquil areas, undisturbed by active noisy recreation. It was one of the worst decisions they have made in recent times. It pushed the Forest back nearly thirty years, to something like the degree of disturbance experienced before the Car Free Zones were instituted. Of course they were under intense pressure from the Forestry Commission, whose recreation officers were anxious to promote a great recreational facility in the New Forest and from cyclists who saw the Forest as a vast resource to be exploited for their sport. Now the permission is up for review and there is a chance to correct some of the damage done in 1997.

There are two principal areas of concern arising out of the present cycle network. Firstly, there is the almost saturation disturbance on and close to the routes as hundreds (sometimes thousands) of vehicles pour into the Forest at the weekends, loaded to bursting point with mountain bikes. I am sure that there are many individuals who come with cycles to enjoy the peace and quiet of the Forest - individuals who travel without shouting, speeding or

trespassing. They are in the minority. For most cyclists the Forest is no more than a sporting opportunity offering physical challenge with the inevitable noisy fellowship of other cyclists and the almost regulation fluorescent pink and yellow clothing. Their objectives are perfectly legitimate, but appallingly intrusive and inappropriate in the quiet depths of the New Forest. Anyone who doubts the existence of this cycling ethos need only observe the use of one of the more popular routes or glance at the exhortations of the cycle magazines.

It is not, of course, simply a question of the number of cyclists, but the areas into which they are encouraged to penetrate by the existing routes. Forestry Commission figures show nearly fifty thousand cycles on Beechen Lane near Lyndhurst in the year to July 1999. At the other end of the scale, nine hundred used Tom's Lane in Linwood in the eight months from December 1998 and it is this numerically lesser penetration of the quieter areas which is of the greatest concern. Perhaps worst of all is the nearly four thousand invading the Forest's only large classified "tranquil" area of Ashley Walk.

The second area of concern arises out of trespass off the cycle routes and the almost totally ineffective response of the Forestry Commission to the problem. The Commission has created and fostered a monster and now virtually washes its hands of responsibility for what it has done. The occasional "policing" day or mild remonstrance from a handful of rangers has and will achieve virtually nothing. It is like trying to bale out a large pond with a thimble. They have neither the staff nor (in the recreation department at least) the will to tackle the problem. The more remote the cycle route, the easier it is for bikers to speed off across the Forest with almost no prospect of detection and certainly no fear of the consequences of a most unlikely encounter with a keeper.

Like many who live or work in the Forest, I have a very clear picture of the trespass pattern in my own area, but a rather more hazy impression of the problem elsewhere. Accordingly, on a warm weekday in August I rode for twenty miles across the south of the Forest, largely away from the official routes, to assess the disturbance there. There was hardly a path with soft or sandy surface which did not display clear and recent signs of cycle trespass. I saw cyclists (if in small numbers) off the routes, but never a keeper or ranger throughout the twenty miles. It was perfectly clear that in the Lyndhurst, Beaulieu and Brockenhurst areas the problem is quite as out of control as it is from Bramshaw to Godshill and Burley.

Urban Seats

The slow but steady drip of urbanisation is a disease which has long afflicted the New Forest. Only one more signboard, tarmac drive, play area, or walking trail could not possibly damage the Forest, could it? That is the developer's favourite argument. In the early post-war years, the Verderers' Court had tended to be rather slack over such matters, but it is now adopting a rather firmer line. This is demonstrated by the Forestry Commission's application to the Court on 27th May in which they sought the Verderers' permission for a series of seats in

Bolderwood Grounds, North Oakley and Wilverley Inclosures, in accordance with the New Forest Acts. The Verderers, mindful of the steady erosion of the Forest's character, questioned both the legality and the desirability of the proposal. The legal issue arises because the Crown is forbidden to use the Inclosures for anything but the growing of trees (except in the case of recreational works approved by the Court). The urbanisation case is self-evident.

Following the Verderers' expression of their reservations, the Forestry Commission has abruptly changed tack. It has informed the Court that it proposes to install the seats without the Court's consent. It claims that it will not be in contravention of the 1877 Act's restriction to tree growing because it will not prejudice the purpose of tree growing if seats are placed between the trees. It evidently possesses a legal opinion of 1971 which it has quoted to the Court, but which it is not prepared to disclose in its entirety.

Not for the first time, I wonder where is the co-ordinating influence of the New Forest Committee in all this? If it was doing its job properly, it would use its influence to clamp down on such plans, but then it would not be reasonable to expect that council representatives, with their particular priorities, would put the character of the Forest before woodland trails and associated seats. The Forest, as so often, is the loser.