

NEW FOREST NOTES SEPTEMBER 2004

Helicopters in the Forest

At a time when British forces and presumably their helicopters are serving in Iraq, to say nothing of plucking stranded tourists from flood-torn Cornish villages, I suppose that few people would wish to deny the pilots adequate training facilities. The very fact that Britain turns over huge tracts of its national parks to such training is indicative of public goodwill towards the army, but there must be limits. During July I received an increasing number of complaints about the activities of military helicopters across the north of the Forest. One horseman said he felt as though the helicopter was "hunting" his rather prominent grey gelding, while the incessant noise from the direction of Pitts Wood (more than two miles away) has been clearly audible from where I live.

On 28th July I went to see for myself exactly what was happening and there is no doubt that the most appalling abuse is occurring. The area is being used by one or more very large military helicopters. I reached the Fordingbridge road at Black Gutter shortly after 10.00 am and by that time a machine was already operating over Ashley Walk. It was circling at great height in an area stretching roughly from Telegraph to Godshill. The method of operating seemed to be to "target" the reseeded area at Leaden Hall, coming in from the east and allowing the helicopter to fall rapidly, with its engine screaming, until it was very close to the ground and with its tail down. It then moved forwards very slowly, less than 20ft from the ground, for several hundred yards before climbing steeply and eventually turning hard to the north in preparation for the next circle. Because the engine was evidently being pushed hard in these manoeuvres, the noise was ear-splitting – far above that produced by normal level flight.

I watched this for some time before moving up to Leaden Hall. My mare is a grey and I was wearing a light shirt, so the pilot could see me clearly and moved over to "attack" Coopers Hill instead, turning just short of Amberwood each time before making the next circle. The process continued non-stop for an hour or so with the machine eventually heading off to the north east at 10.56 am. However, at 11.56 am a similar machine was heading south over Woodfalls and from the noise and high level circles I could see from home, the whole process was being repeated thereafter.

Not only is this extremely disruptive of the quiet of the Forest and an utterly inappropriate activity for an area of livestock farming and quiet recreation, but it is also very dangerous for riders. I am fortunate in having a horse which is not only highly visible, but also extremely tolerant of machines, but many others have horses which are terrified by helicopters. There have been fatalities among riders recently resulting from low flying activities and we are certainly heading the same way in the Forest if nothing is done. As I approached Leaden Hall there were two children on ponies less visible than mine and wearing dark clothing. The area is also heavily populated with livestock.

Some years ago a similar problem started to develop in the same area, including helicopters being flown under the 400 kv power line across Millersford. At that time the Forestry Commission arranged a meeting with the military at Queen's House and the problem was brought to a temporary end.

I wrote to the Forestry Commission giving details of these events (which occur regularly week after week). In reply the Deputy Surveyor assured me that he will take up the matter with the military and I am waiting to hear further from him. He pointed out that legally the pilots may use any area they please, except built-up areas, but that they try to spread the load by varying their targets. That would seem to be a perfectly reasonable arrangement in a district where there are no designated training areas, but here we have thousands of acres of Salisbury Plain under military control only a few minutes flying time from the helicopters' base. Turning the New Forest into a sort of Bedlam (designated national park or not) under such circumstances is wholly unjustified.

As a postscript to the above, I have received a very polite and conciliatory letter from an officer described as "Station Staff Officer, Headquarters Solent Station, Marchwood". The letter says, in effect, that there is nothing which can be done. The Deputy Surveyor had evidently forwarded my letter to him. However, the matter has also been passed to the "Directorate of Air Staff Complaints and Enquiries" in London and is no doubt destined to sink in the Whitehall mire.

Battle of the Wetlands

In the continuing war over whether or not the Environment Agency should be allowed to block up streams and rivers in the Forest in attempt to restore an earlier drainage pattern, the latest round has gone to the officials. On 9th August EA announced that DEFRA had approved its plans published in May and that work would commence shortly. The only minor modification is that the Agency was required to carry out monitoring and that if "deleterious impacts" to grazing animals result, suitable mitigation measures must be implemented.

I suppose it is just about possible to monitor and identify deleterious impacts on grazing, but taking that monitoring one step further removed and assessing the effects on grazing animals themselves seems a complete nonsense. Suppose one or two ponies in the area are found to be a little thinner after than before the works. Is that because of the EA operations, or simply because the winter was harder, the summer drier or some horse disease more prevalent than before? This seems to be a rather worthless sop to the objectors and one which I doubt will give much satisfaction. Interestingly enough, EA has ignored the wording of the directive and (sensibly in my view) interpreted it as requiring monitoring of grazing and not animals.

Quite by chance last month I received an enquiry from a scientist carrying out research into one of the Forest's bogs not affected by EA's work. He wanted some historical information, again unconnected to stream filling, but offered the observation that, ". . . I rather agree with your hinting that the Forest might not be the optimum place to be fiddling about with something that is essentially an experiment. You might be interested to know that,

at least in Britain, very few beneficial effects of river restoration have been demonstrated so far". We can now only wait and see the results, but with the exceptionally wet ground conditions now (23rd August) prevailing, things are likely to get off to a very sticky start.

Misinformation on the camp sites

In August's "Notes" I commented on the proposals by the Forestry Commission to redesign and partially relocate its camping pitches in the Brockenhurst area. In a letter to the A & T published on 21st August, from the Team Manager of English Nature's Hampshire and Isle of Wight Area, I am accused of misleading people over her organization's attitude to the Commission's plans, although she pointedly fails to say what that attitude is, claiming that it is not yet formulated. Her charge is a serious one and I think it is worth considering exactly who is misleading whom.

When the Verderers were addressed on the subject of the camp proposals by the Forestry Commission and its planning consultants, one of my colleagues who is particularly interested in the conservation value of Hollands Wood, pressed them hard as to English Nature's attitude to the proposed works. The Court was left in absolutely no doubt that English Nature has no conservation objections and that, of course, is exactly what I recorded.

I do not for one moment suggest that the Forestry Commission has deliberately tried to mislead the Verderers' Court. I am sure that some innocent confusion between the two government agencies must be the explanation, but the result is nonetheless a serious matter. The Verderers are, by statute and European law, obliged to have regard to wildlife considerations in making their decisions. If a potential developer of the stature of the Forestry Commission tells them that English Nature has "no objections", it is not unreasonable for the Court to rely on such a statement.

I must say that I have some sympathy for the Forestry Commission in this matter as it has been dragging on for a year now and that is more than enough time for English Nature arrive at and make a clear public statement of its views on the principles involved. English Nature is not always as prompt, decisive or politically courageous in its dealings with the Forest as many of us might like. Very rarely indeed do they actually communicate directly with the Verderers, leaving aside occasional informal chats with the Official Verderer to which other members of the Court are not privy.

In the end (and after due regard to its statutory obligations), I am sure the Court will make up its mind, in the light of public consultation, on the basis of what is good for the Forest and that alone.

Researching the Forest's past

Every year about this time I escape from the usual round of committees and slightly less trying site meetings to enjoy a week of hard archaeological labour with the Hampshire Field Club, deep in the Forest and beyond the reach of telephones and email. This year the society has been investigating an earthwork enclosure in a beautiful woodland setting near Rhinefield. It is remarkable how even within three hundred yards of the Ornamental Drive it is still possible to find little pockets of semi-tranquillity. Apart from one marauding group of

mountain bikers and family party pushing an all-terrain pram, I don't suppose we saw a dozen people in the week. Of course there was still the roar of the A35, shouting from a nearby cycle route, motor cycles on the Drive, and jets going to Bournemouth, but that is just the New Forest of the 21st Century.

The site comprises an earthwork enclosure of about 1.3 acres on a low sandy ridge. As is quite usual in New Forest archaeology, a week's work was rewarded only with a few tiny scraps of black pottery, but that was sufficient to give an indication of the probable date of the site – which was the objective of the excavation. More research needs to be done on the finds, but at the moment it looks as though this little field or animal enclosure was occupied in the Iron Age. Until now there was very little evidence in the Brockenhurst area of occupation during that period.

Since the above was published in the Lymington Times the excavation has been completed. Further finds have now shown conclusively that the site is of Mediaeval date (c.13th Century) and not Iron Age as at first supposed.