

NEW FOREST NOTES SEPTEMBER 2005

Party politics in Forest management

It has not taken long for the influence of party politics to show itself within the new management of the Forest. In an interesting correspondence in the local press, councillor-park authority members are already debating, from party standpoints, such issues as planning and park constitution. I am sure it will be said that this is a very healthy sign and that it was high time that the Forest's management was subjected to a good dose of party influence. Surely, it will be claimed, it is ideal to have councillors slugging it out along party lines in the park authority, deciding where the next batch of recreation sites will be built or how to allocate money to Forest farming. My own, no doubt old fashioned, view is that local government of all sorts would be better off without party politics and that above all the management of the New Forest should be free of such taint. However, party influence is clearly now an established factor (if a chiefly a covert one) and I don't suppose it matters much to the Forest how the present debate is concluded.

What does matter very much lies in the future. Another attempt to construct the Lyndhurst bypass is already looming large in many minds – not least the minds of park officers, as witness a very curious and disturbing press statement they issued last week. Of course the park authority members could speak out as one man (woman), condemning any outer bypass plans and championing the protection of the Forest. I have yet to meet even the most ardent park supporter who seriously anticipates that. The last attempt to build the road was promoted by, I think, a Conservative controlled County Council. I have forgotten, if I ever heard, what the other parties thought about it. It will be interesting to see how the councillor-dominated park authority approaches the next attempt. In fact, I would expect a good deal of cross-party agreement in this particular instance. There may be some protest from within the handful of “independent” members of the park, but that should not be difficult to brush aside.

Unfortunately for the park, this is an issue which even its sweeping powers will be unable to resolve easily. It is not a highway authority and it cannot build the road even if it wants to. That remains a matter for the County Council. However, the park authority clearly believes that it can acquire the land for the bypass using compulsory powers, although its press statement says that it is “improbable that it would wish to do so”. That belief I find very curious because the park's compulsory acquisition powers relate only to land needed for park purposes – i.e., chiefly recreational development. In such acquisitions they can override the protective powers of the Verderers if they choose to do so. I do not claim to be an expert on park law, but it seems very wrong that compulsory powers designed for one purpose should be used to assist another local authority for purposes quite unrelated to park functions. It would be as logical for the park to acquire land for a health authority to build a hospital or for the district council to build houses. I immediately questioned the park officers on their interpretation of the law, but so far I have had no satisfactory explanation. The qualification that it is “improbable” that the park would wish to use its supposed powers reflects, I think, the

appreciation amongst officers that it would be a disaster for the authority's reputation if it starts off backing a damaging bypass project. That is not a view likely to appeal to the councillor members who will have firmly in view the next set of local government elections.

How far the park can facilitate (or impede) the construction through its park plans as opposed to compulsory acquisition, I am uncertain. Other parks' plans are rather coy on highway matters, but most of those plans relate to rural areas unlike our suburban Hampshire environment. In any case, I doubt if the park will have the final say on any planning aspect of the road. That, one way or another, will lie with the government of the day.

Even leaving aside the planning, land acquisition and road construction processes, the matter will not be resolved. No outer bypass can be built without primary legislation, if indeed the park is wrong in its claims to be able to acquire the land. It is at the legislative stage that the its influence – not its powers - is likely to prove decisive. If the government's new "guardians of the New Forest" back the building of the road, whether under open or concealed political instructions, the Forest will face a desperate challenge – far greater than that which it overcame in 1988.

Forest iron working

It is one of the mysteries of the New Forest that despite plentiful supplies of timber, a flourishing charcoal making industry and a variety of iron-bearing rocks being present, there has never been a confirmed discovery of iron smelting sites anywhere on the Crown lands. The Forest of Dean and The Weald were noted for their iron works, but not it seems the New Forest. At about the end of the 18th Century there was an important works at Sowley (off the Forest), reputedly supplied from iron ore washed out along the coast, but it was short-lived. At the other end of the Forest, around Redlynch, there was a flourishing iron industry at about the same period, but this concentrated on manufacture of goods using iron brought in from elsewhere in the country. No smelting is known to have been carried out.

Forty years ago a bloomery (primitive iron furnace) was discovered at Plaitford, but without any dating evidence. This, together with 19th Century discoveries of reputed iron slag near Fritham is rather slender evidence on which to found claims for the existence of a local industry.

Now it looks as though the first hard evidence of local production may be emerging, although the details are still sketchy. The New Forest Museum has recently received information from a retired forestry worker which certainly points in this direction. About thirty years ago he was instructed to dig a ditch in a wood near Burley. In the course of this operation he uncovered hearths, charcoal and what appeared to be iron slag. That is as far as the information goes at present. A search of the area has located the ditch, but with no sign of the discoveries reported. The intervening years have covered the spoil heaps with moss and other vegetation and the ditch itself is similarly obscured. The chief hope now is that the Museum's informant may be able to give more precise directions.

What makes this report particularly likely to be significant is that the site is not far from the big deposits of Burley Rock which lie around the south of that village. This material

is an iron-cemented gravel which was extensively used for building stone (some can be seen in the walls of the Queen's House at Lyndhurst), but which might also have contained enough iron for smelting.

If the reports prove correct, this could be one of the most important discoveries in the New Forest for a good many years.

The 2005 drift season

By the time these notes appear, the 2005 drift (round up) season will be into its third week. My local drift, at Turf Hill, is traditionally the first to be held and this year conformed to the new policy of very early starts on those days (chiefly weekends) when conflict with public recreation is likely to be a particular problem. By starting to drive the ponies shortly after 8.00am, the mounted work has a good chance of being complete before mid-morning when the Forest starts to fill up with trippers. Thereafter the sorting, branding, dosing and tail marking can take place without interference. Despite the loss of a weekend lie-in, the new system seems well supported by both riders and helpers on foot.

It has become very fashionable in recent years to predict the imminent collapse of common right farming in the Forest. It is said there will be no "young ones" to take over from older commoners, no houses for them to live in if they do appear, no land for them to use as bases and in any case the density of visitors will make Forest farming impossible. While housing and land scarcity are certainly real problems, I am inclined to think that the scare stories have been overdone. Increasingly the drifts are well attended and the proportion of "young" commoners seems to rise each year. Perhaps that is just an impression on my part along the lines of policemen appearing younger as age increases.

What is certainly beyond dispute is that there is a much greater sense of optimism in the Forest now that pony prices have picked up and subsidy money is flowing freely. A few years ago the talk at the drifts was all of giving up and how worthless the stock had become. It is very different today, even if no-one is yet making a fortune.

Beyond the camp site boundary

Like most Forest residents, I almost instinctively avoid the big camp sites and their surroundings in the holiday season. If the New Forest is about anything, it should be about peace and quiet and unspoilt natural beauty. These are the last qualities to be found in such places and in August, but it was still a shock to see just how bad things have become in the area surrounding one big camp – Holmsley. Last month, in connection with some Life III work, I had to visit the interesting strip of woodland which bounds the camp on the north side and which goes under the curious names of Black Slop, Pigsty Bushes and Bells Hat. The area is a thorough mess. I was in the company of a Forestry Commission officer who maintained a discreet silence in response to my fuming against what we found.

Severely worn paths lead down to the stream from the camp. The stream banks, especially around crossing places, are stamped flat and devoid of vegetation. Litter, while not dense, was widespread. Even in the short time we were there, uncontrolled mountain biking (mostly children's bikes) was apparent. Logs which the Forestry Commission had recently

cut, had been flung about everywhere, with an almost incredible number of them thrown into the stream. Someone had tried to set fire to an electricity pole. Finally, netting had been placed over the roof of the sewage pumping station, apparently in a futile attempt to stop the campers from attacking the tiles.

None of this is really surprising. If you introduce intensive recreation into a very fragile environment like the New Forest, you can expect little else. The sad thing is that the Forestry Commission deliberately ignores and often publicly denies this sort of damage when planning its camps. Even worse, English Nature turns a politically correct blind eye to it. If the Commission succeeds in its ambitions for Roundhill, the surrounding woods and valleys will be reduced to exactly the same state as those surrounding Holmsley.

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