

NEW FOREST NOTES - SEPTEMBER 2000

The Future of Forest Recreation

Politicians are sometimes accused of issuing unpopular reports in the holiday season so that public opposition is minimised. It would probably be unfair to accuse the Forestry Commission of such tactics with its two recreation reports which appeared in August. Both are stated to be consultation drafts and they are the subject of a number of public meetings this month. The first paper - "Enjoying the Forest - Access and Recreation" - has some substantial elements embedded within the trendy recreational jargon. There is also some interesting speculation on how recreational use may appear by 2050, although the attractive parts of this vision are based upon road closures and a changed attitude to cars which would be politically impossible to achieve today, or perhaps at all. The other report - "Working Together- Community Plan" - contains no substance and seems to me to be words for their own sake from beginning to end. Both papers are peppered with extremely irritating and largely meaningless references to "sustainability", "visitor satisfaction", "the peoples' Forest" and so on.

"Enjoying the Forest" has, as one might expect, all its emphasis on the provision of facilities, rather than efforts to maintain and restore the character of the Forest. There is much talk of conservation, but it is largely talk. For example, there is recognition of the need to alter the pattern of vehicular access to the Forest by controlling car use and providing for "sustainable transport". The plan contains much on the provision of this sustainable transport (otherwise recreational facilities such as cycle routes), but is extremely vague about new controls. In other words, we are likely to get new cycle routes, new recreation facilities, and new car parks within the fringe areas, but we are very unlikely to achieve the politically unpopular closures and controls which could actually benefit the Forest. The plan therefore represents, as usual, a net loss to the Forest through recreation. I remember when the original Conservation Report was implemented in 1971 (that under which the car parks and car free zones were made) it was often extremely difficult to secure a proper emphasis on car control while the provision of car parks was over-lavish and often damaging. The Forestry Commission does, it is true, acknowledge the importance of wildlife conservation. That is important and valuable, but it is no more than the Commission is required by law to do. There is certainly little in this report for the naturalist to fear. That is quite a different matter from the restoration of a wild and relatively undisturbed landscape - a subject on which the report has little to offer. It envisages what is described as "the segmented Forest", which appears to mean a form of zoning in which some areas will be heavily used and some less so. There is, significantly, no proposal to reduce pressure on the so-called wilderness areas, but there is certainly a clear indication of more development in the remaining upper recreational tiers. "Visitor satisfaction" is evidently the actual (if not expressed) primary objective. There is nothing wrong with satisfying visitors, but to do it at the expense of the Forest is wrong. I have yet to meet a recreation manager who will frankly admit the obvious truth that intensified

public use of wild places inevitably degrades them and that if you want to protect such places it must be at the expense of the public's demands and not by forever trying to meet them.

One interesting recommendation about which the report is extremely coy is the closure of "at least one camp site which is having a detrimental effect on the Special Area of Conservation". That means Hollands Wood, I suppose, and the Commission has since admitted as much elsewhere. It seems that Long Beech and Denny may also be on the closure list. Such closures will be generally welcomed by Forest people, provided that the substituted sites (I cannot see the Commission settling for a net reduction in pitches) do not create as many problems as the originals. For example, New Park is being talked about for the relocation of one or more of these facilities. The existing relatively low-level use of New Park for camping has caused endless litter and excrement fouling problems in the Bolderford area and intensified pressure on the woods and heaths to the north is an unattractive prospect. Moreover, such a proposal would result in an almost continuous linear camp site when considered with Aldridge Hill. From the Commission's point of view, however, the Park would have one inestimable advantage - it would be free of the Verderers' control because the land is "Crown Freehold". They could thus develop shops, tarmac roads, entertainments and all the paraphernalia of a luxury seaside site with little more than the planners to regulate them.

Perhaps the less said about the other report ("Working Together"), the better. Its tone is condescending and its jargon (to my mind) irritating and politically correct. I cannot see that it contains very much that will be of lasting value to the Forest. I sometimes long for the crystal clear language and economy of words of the old Forestry Commission reports, such as the report of the New Forest Committee of 1947. That was largely the work of the Deputy Surveyor of the time and it a model for such documents, a model now unfortunately ignored.

Parish councils to represent the Commoners ?

Dr. Julian Lewis MP has performed a considerable service to the Forest in exposing the idiocy of the Countryside Agency's latest suggestion that the New Forest Commoners might be represented on a national park authority by parish councillor nominees. The Agency is stuck with the legal requirement that three quarters of a park authority membership must be councillors. Of the remaining quarter appointed by the Secretary of State, most will represent national concerns. At the very best, Forest interests must occupy an insignificant minority position, always outvoted and easily ignored. Wriggle as they may, the Agency cannot avoid this inescapable fact. Part of that wriggling has been the suggestion that the Forest can be properly accommodated within the system through parish councils nominating commoner members to the park authority ! That, as Dr. Lewis says, "is precisely the sort of nonsense we expected". Even in the highly unlikely event of the commoners successfully promoting their own candidate for a parish council vacancy, the chances of his election (as a commoners' spokesman) are infinitesimal. Even if this first hurdle could be overcome, why should the parish choose to nominate someone whose primary interest is the protection of the Forest

and the commoners - not the positioning of the next seat on the village green or the maintenance of the sports field ? Finally, how on earth is a commoner, who overcomes all these difficulties, expected to do his day job, his farming, his not inconsiderable duties as a parish councillor and on top of all this serve on the park authority ? An analysis of the electoral register in one of the Forest's most rural parishes suggests well under 10% of the population with any direct connection to agriculture and considerably less (within that 10%) with any knowledge of common rights. Forest parish councillors are, quire properly and democratically, elected to represent the residential (often suburban) interests of the majority of their electors.

The nonsense goes even deeper than this. The Countryside Agency chooses to ignore the fact that common rights are real property - attached to the land and purchased with it. The rights belong to the commoners just as much as his back garden belongs to a Southampton resident. In the 19th Century, various eminent land agents and valuers assessed the worth of the rights as a proportion of the whole value of the Forest. It was suggested that a fair division was 75% to the Commoners and 25% to the Crown (public). For practical (not legal) purposes, the Commoners thus "owned" three quarters of the Forest. This is a concept unfamiliar to modern ears. When I was explaining it to a group of London students a few years ago, one of them jumped up and announced that "All private property is theft"! If one shares this student's view of the matter, then the sooner a national park authority is established effectively to disenfranchise the commoners, the better. That would be the outcome, if not the deliberate objective, of the Countryside Agency's ambitions. One or two votes on a park authority of perhaps twenty five councillor members would be absolutely meaningless and certainly of no more consequence than a flea on a dog's back - an irritation easily silenced by a good scratch.

Yernagates Nap

Some Forest placenames have a disconcerting habit of moving about over time. This most unusual name of all is one of those which has migrated. For the past century, the Ordnance Survey maps have shown a small deciduous wood south of Little Linford Inclosure as Yernagates Nap, although it is not a name I have heard used very much.

During August, the New Forest Section of the Hampshire Field Club commenced an excavation of a roughly circular earthwork enclosure on a little hill just inside Little Linford and immediately adjoining the keeper's cottage. At the time of writing, work on the site continues, but it seems likely that this is one of those earthworks which will keep its secrets. No finds which could date this enigmatic feature have yet been made. The best guess as to its origin is that it was some form of prehistoric cattle pound (about one acre in extent) . A Bronze Age date is a possibility. However, the field archaeologist who made the original discovery, Chris Read from Romsey, has been checking the modern maps against Richardson, King and Driver's superb New Forest survey of 1787. This reveals that the name Yernagates Nap was originally applied to the hill on which the earthwork lies. In 1846, the area was fenced in and planted with oak, some of which remains. The hill was buried by the plantation and the name

became displaced and attached to the isolated wood to the south. Whether such relocation for a century or more gives the new site a prescriptive entitlement to the name is an interesting question of Forest politics and local history which has yet to be resolved.

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