

NEW FOREST NOTES SEPTEMBER 2001

National Park Consultation

The end of this month (28th September) sees the closing of the Countryside Agency's public consultation on subjecting the New Forest to a national park administration. It comes two years after Mr.Prescott, at his party's annual conference, promised to give the New Forest park to the nation as "Labour's hundredth birthday present". He then went on to invite the Countryside Agency to consider making a recommendation to him that a New Forest national park should be established. Not surprisingly, the conclusion of the Agency's deliberations was that there should be such a park. The two year period since this unpromising start has been filled with talk and smokescreens designed to conceal the simple truths which, to many people in the Forest, were apparent from the start. Contrary to the suggestions of park enthusiasts, no hidden benefits have been revealed and nothing has emerged to lessen the fear of Forest people as to the effects of making the Forest into a park. The facts remain as frightening as they appeared from the beginning. For a start, control of the Forest park would be in the hands of councillors who would constitute 75% of the park committee. The Forest community might have two or three votes at the most out of a total of perhaps twenty or thirty. A vast and wholly unnecessary bureaucracy would have been created. Worst of all, the protective powers of the Verderers' Court would be swept aside allowing the park and the Forestry Commission to develop the Forest for recreation by use of compulsory powers. The Verderers could do nothing to stop it. Finally, I don't think even the enthusiasts now deny that public perception of "England's newest and most accessible national park" would intensify the already intolerable pressures upon the Forest.

There has been a lot of talk about "special arrangements for the New Forest", implying that the standard national park administration could be modified to fit the particular circumstances of the Forest. Such talk is wholly misleading. The park administration is set in stone by statute. The Countryside Agency seeks to impose on the Forest a set of rules which may work well enough in an otherwise unprotected and relatively remote rural area such as Exmoor. In such places there remain many countryside oriented councillors and councils sympathetic to the needs of farming. In the suburban context of the New Forest, council control would spell disaster. The so-called "special arrangements" comprise no more than government guidance notes, advisory groups, consultation and so on, all of which could be changed or abolished overnight.

I shall, like any responsible citizen, write a response to the consultation, but since the Countryside Agency has totally ignored the concerns of the Forest over the last two years (it has little option within the restraints of the law and the dictates of the government), I don't imagine that any views now submitted will have much effect. The Agency is simply going through the motions in order to rubber stamp a political decision which was imposed on it from the start.

The closing of the consultation period is merely one more step in the statutory process. The real battle to preserve the Forest lies ahead when a scheme for imposing the park is published – probably early next year. At that stage a public enquiry will be triggered, assuming that any local authority objects or that the minister deems such an enquiry advisable. Since it is clear that some authorities will object and since the minister could scarcely ride rough-shod over the views of the local farming community, the holding of an enquiry is virtually certain. It is at that stage that the participation of everyone concerned to protect the Forest will become crucial. It might be argued that the whole enquiry will be rigged from the start and that it is a waste of time even commencing the battle. Perhaps I am naive in having any faith in the process, but I remember similar claims in the past such as “You will never stop the felling of the Forest’s old hardwood plantations because it is government policy” or “You will never stop the building of the outer Lyndhurst bypass because the County Council is too powerful and the government wants roads”. At best the enquiry could save the New Forest and at worst it would delay its further degradation for two or three years.

Long sleep of a Lyndhurst resident

Lyndhurst possesses a delightful cemetery on the north eastern margin of the village abutting directly on the open heath. It was opened in the late 19th Century after the churchyard became full and it is a fitting resting place for any lover of the Forest. Its most famous inmate is probably J.R.Wise who died in 1890 and who was the author of a notable historical and topographical book on the Forest. Mr.Wise was, among many other things, an antiquarian who specialised in barrow-digging – mostly in the Bratley area. Although probably ahead of his time, some of the techniques he used would fill modern archaeologists with horror.

On the other side of the village, hidden in the Forest, is a far older and long-forgotten burial ground, indicated now only by some low undulations on a sandy ridge and by an obsolete placename. This burial ground was damaged hundreds of years ago when a massive bank and ditch was constructed across it, probably to assist in the management of deer. Later on there was small scale quarrying of sand which in turn destroyed part of the bank and an unknown number of burials. Finally, and most destructive of all, the area became infested with rabbits which burrowed through the graves, breaking up the fragile clay pots in which the cremations were interred and destroying the structure of the burial mounds.

Last week, a team of archaeologists from the Hampshire Field Club attempted to salvage some scraps of information from the wreckage. One interment had defied the best efforts of the rabbits and its massive urn, although broken into many pieces, remained in situ. I watched as it slowly emerged into the August sunlight after between three and four thousand years of darkness, deep beneath the Forest floor. This must surely have been the grave of one of the earliest settled residents of the Lyndhurst area – a Bronze Age man or woman of consequence who perhaps hunted the New Forest two thousand years before it received that name, or grazed cattle where Lyndhurst was eventually to become established.

The meticulous care with which the urn was excavated contrasted markedly with Mr. Wise's team of pickaxe-wielding workmen, but I could not help feeling a pang of regret that this long sleep had finally been broken. However, it was clearly only a matter of time before the urn and its contents would have yielded to the rabbit onslaught and there is now every chance that the vessel, carefully restored, will eventually return to Lyndhurst to grace the displays of the New Forest Museum.

Blocking a loophole in the Forest's protection

One of the things which makes the New Forest's protection unique and, incidentally, superior to that of any national park, is the power of the Verderers to block undesirable development. They can stop the construction of damaging roads, unsuitable recreational facilities such as badly sited car parks or camps and they can prohibit the erection of pylons and phone masts. They can also protect the Forest against small scale urban clutter like picnic tables, seats, notice boards and so on. The fact that the Verderers have sometimes in the past failed to exercise these powers with sufficient vigour is not the fault of the powers themselves. The Forest would by now have been an unspeakable jungle of recreational sites, roads and sports fields if it had not been for the Court.

There is, unfortunately, one area in which the Verderers are powerless to give protection and this relates to the formation of access drives into private land. That, until now, has been a matter exclusively in the hands of the Minister of Agriculture (now DEFRA) as owner of the Forest. There are some complicated historical reasons for this loophole which do not now matter very much. The Forestry Commission does not need the Verderers' consent to grant a licence for such a drive and it does not often see fit even to consult the Court.

Last month, the Hampshire Wildlife Trust wrote to the Verderers drawing attention to a Brockenhurst case in which planning consent for such an access across the Forest had not been granted and the refusal had been upheld on appeal. The potential damage to the ecology of the Forest was the principal ground on which the appeal was rejected.

This is an important decision because it means that the Forestry Commission can no longer disregard the effects of its access licences (licences for which the Commission receives large sums) upon the Forest. Moreover, if the Commission and a prospective licensee wish to have a reasonable chance of success in the planning process, they may find it better to have the support of the Verderers from the outset, rather than their opposition at the appeal stage. Earlier this year the Verderers received a presentment complaining of a new access at Malwood which had been constructed without the Court's knowledge. That was an instance in which the Verderers would almost certainly have supported the applicant had they been asked, but they were not best pleased to find that the Commission had gone ahead without even mentioning the proposal.

Drifts

The annual pony drifts (round ups) are now taking place throughout the Forest. They are an essential management tool allowing for a check on the health of stock, the collection of

marking fees and the branding of foals. They are also potentially dangerous to careless bystanders and it was with a good deal of displeasure that commoners discovered that one drift (16th September) had been included in the Forestry Commission's guided "educational" rambles in the Forest. The language of the advertisement was also a bit sickening: "Experience the thrills of a pony drift first-hand as mounted Agisters and commoners roundup the New Forest ponies. This is a fantastic opportunity to gain insight into the living history of the New Forest."! The ramble is now cancelled and the Verderers are to consider future policy at the September Court.

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