

New Forest Notes – September 1998

Return of the Camp Shop Dispute

It is a great pity that vital issues concerning the protection of the New Forest often raise little public interest, while those involving money never fail to do so. The re-emergence of the great camp shop row, affecting the incomes of local shopkeepers, camp site wardens and the Forestry Commission has been generating a lot of noise on television, in the press and now once again in the Verderers' Court. The story so far is that in 1997 the Verderers, after considering innumerable presentments on the subject, granted consent for the sale of a few minor "emergency" items from the camp wardens' offices. Other sales were prohibited and this has greatly annoyed the Commission and the camp wardens. In July the Deputy Surveyor asked the Verderers to allow further sales comprising gas cylinders, gas accessories and publications at most of the camps.

Both (commercial) sides of the dispute have evidently been trying to whip up support for their own cases, but while the local shopkeepers have done this quite openly, the "letters of complaint" reportedly encouraged by camp wardens have been the result of more covert campaigning. This is a shame. Open lobbying is a perfectly legitimate process, but behind-the-hand suggestions along the lines of "Why not write a letter of complaint to Queen's House?" are bound to raise suspicions.

The Deputy Surveyor's presentment to the Verderers is curiously worded implying (without any justification in my view) that the Countryside Act powers have in some improper way been overridden. The Countryside Act empowers the Forestry Commission to carry out certain commercial development (including shops) on its land and the New Forest Act of 1970 gives the Verderers a veto on that development in this Forest. The presentment also contains the unintelligible statement "There is nothing which adversely affects the practice of commoning on the New Forest from the specific exclusion of many items which could be sold." I take this to mean that the existence of camp site shops does not of itself damage New Forest farming (although that is not what it says) and I suppose that is an arguable point of view. Sales themselves and subsequent events certainly do affect farming. One need only consider the conflicts between campers and ponies over food and the dumping of litter which damages animals to understand this. It is a remarkable fact that one of the most common litter items before 1971 - the empty camping gas cylinder - is now a rarity on the Open Forest outside the camps. This is because camping was in that year confined to defined sites. To be fair, of course, the litter from camp shop purchases is no worse than that resulting from items bought in a Forest village.

I may be too eager to find hidden meanings, but it seems to me that the thrust behind the presentment is a questioning on the basis on which the Verderers make their decision and a

warning not to take into account irrelevant matters. If that is what the Deputy Surveyor has in mind, then I think he has a point. It is not the Verderers' business to favour one set of traders over another. I believe that the Court must disregard commercial considerations in arriving at its decision. The simple test should be : "Is trading on New Forest Camp sites (over and above the approved emergency items) in keeping with the beauty, peace, conservation values and traditional character of the Forest ?". If it is, or will enhance these qualities, then the Court should approve the presentment and allow increased commercial activity. If it is not, I can see no way in which the Verderers could justify a reversal of their original decision.

Leaving aside the basis on which the decision is reached, I must say I find it incredible that the average camper is incapable of bringing with him an adequate supply of gas cylinders and accessories. I usually take my holidays in fairly remote places and I expect to plan and pack accordingly. What I need when on holiday I buy in the nearest village. Is that really so dreadful an imposition for the New Forest camper ? As to the claim of endless unnecessary shopping trips from the camp sites, does the Forestry Commission really believe that more than the smallest fraction of campers would not drive out daily from their pitch - even given an on-site supermarket ? There are limits to the joys of wandering interminably around Hollands Wood. Finally, the threat in the Deputy Surveyor's presentment that many customers might not return to the New Forest camp sites (because they cannot buy gas on the site) is not likely to cut much ice with New Forest people who see the Forest as already grossly over-used. While welcoming those who come to enjoy the beauty of the Forest for itself, I suspect many of us would not be sorry to see a few less of the other campers who would, in any case, probably be much happier in a fully equipped seaside site.

Bombs

I have a tendency to annoy my local keeper (although he is very polite about it) by reporting bombs to which he is obliged to summon the Army. Until now, they (the bombs) have failed to impress the authorities and have usually ended up down a rabbit hole. My August offering, however, was a particularly evil looking rusted cylinder lying on a path near Amberwood Cottage and this time the Army also did not like the look of it and blew it up. I was not present at the time, but I am told the explosion was very unimpressive. Once before in these notes I have speculated on the quantity of waste munitions lying about the Forest and the problem does seem a very real one. It is tempting simply to turn a blind eye when something nasty emerges from the heather, but I always have in mind that the next finder may be a child in search of a toy to batter with stick or stone.

A few hundred yards from Amberwood Cottage and two weeks later, Forestry Commission staff or contractors were happily cultivating the heath with a large tractor and rotorvator - all part of the gorse regeneration programme. Nothing would induce me to operate such a machine within the old Ashley Range, let alone in or close to the area which specialised in the testing of anti-personnel devices. Since the Verderers warned the Commission of the

potential hazard, one must suppose that forest workers possess stout hearts and excellent life insurance.

I discussed the distribution of unexploded bombs with head keeper Martin Noble at the New Forest Show and he told me the horrid story of three gypsies digging for military scrap near Markway many years ago. The whole of that area had been a large military training zone. A part of the gypsies' haul exploded, killing one of them outright and blowing the leg off another, leaving the third to run to the main road for help. The moral of all this seems to be - never touch anything suspicious you find in the Forest, note its position carefully and take the risk of irritating your local keeper by reporting what you have found.

Dio

It is not very often that important Forest books emerge without everyone knowing that they are on the way. Experts like to forestall criticism by other experts by consulting on drafts ! The publication of "Dio - The Life of Dorothy Eyre and Jack Crosthwaite her Husband" is an exception to the rule. Despite its rather restrictive title, it is in fact a very detailed history of the Eyre family (owners of Bramshaw and dominant in the Forest for three generations) over a century from about 1860. It is written by Monica Giles, sister of the late Sir Oliver Crosthwaite-Eyre and grand-daughter of the legendary Briscoe Eyre. She now lives in Africa.

The book, of over 200 pages, gives a fascinating inside view of the family known to most of us only from their public works. It is beautifully written and is essential background to the local history of Bramshaw and to an understanding of Briscoe Eyre's influence on the Forest. It is also a strangely modest book, without title page, date, publisher or any account of how it came to be written. This is surprising from the daughter of one of the country's leading publishers, Eyre and Spottiswoode. My copy was obtained for me in Bramshaw, but I understand that the book is available from local specialist booksellers.

Special Verderers' Court

In August there is usually no meeting of the Verderers' Court, but last month a special Court was summoned to approve a final draft of the new bylaws before they are signed by the Minister of Agriculture and come into effect. Over the last two years one draft has succeeded another in an attempt to reflect at least the constructive criticisms of the public. It now seems that the process is nearing its end. An up to date set of bylaws with realistic levels of fines should benefit the whole law-abiding section of the Forest community. The latest amendments are technical only, but have to be advertised in the usual way before final approval is given.