

NEW FOREST NOTES AUGUST 2022

A new recreation and camping complex for the Forest

Back in 1970 an expert committee made recommendations for the end of wild camping and car parking in the New Forest. The famous report it produced (Conservation of the New Forest), provided that car parks and camp sites were to be located in places which could best accommodate them and that other parts of the Forest were to be protected. The recommendations provided for no camp sites north of Fritham in an area which, even today, is still better protected than some more popular areas. Now a developer has ambitious plans to construct a multi-attraction recreation complex, opening directly onto the Forest between Bramshaw Telegraph and Woodfalls. An additional short access to his site is to be formed across the common and the development will, if approved, have a direct frontage to the Forest of over a third of a mile. It will extend over fifty acres and attractions will include a camp site, mountain bike track, picnic area, wild play, car parks, visitor centre, rural workshop and refreshment sales. It will, for the first time, give campers and other recreational users unrivalled access into the largest of the Forest's "tranquil areas" as originally defined by the New Forest Committee and subsequently confirmed by the National Park.

Presumably in an effort to persuade local people that this scheme is a thoroughly good idea, the developer suggests that the existing Turf Hill car park should be re-located within his complex, thus moving it about three hundred yards from its present site, although how this is supposed to be beneficial is not clear. The present users of the car park will presumably continue to walk on their favourite routes over the Forest rather than scramble for space amid the intense activities on the site.

Plans for the project were sent to the Verderers (who of course have no control over land not actually part of the common and even there no say over accesses) for consideration at last month's court. It seems that the plans are recommended by their promoters on the grounds that they will create an opportunity to drain pressures from the Forest, however obvious the evidence to the contrary may be. Certainly there is general agreement that counter-attractions should be built well outside the Forest, to deflect recreation demands coming from the conurbations of the south coast like Portsmouth, Southampton and Bournemouth. To establish a major new attraction opening directly into the Forest seems very far from this laudable objective. Indeed, one of the better provisions of the latest New Forest Partnership Plan states: "Partnerships need to be developed to identify and create new green spaces for recreation *away from the protected habitats of the New Forest*" – (my italics).

This will become another Forest camp site whose users will, quite understandably, expect to exploit the adjoining heathland for recreation. In that respect it will be no different from such enclosed camps as Holmsley and Set Thorns. Mountain bikers using the trail on the opposite side of the Forest boundary fence are unlikely to confine their activities within the complex, but will use the link provided to ride straight into the Forest – in an area where there are no legal cycle routes. Moreover, the developer's assertion that the site will link with the national cycle network and (presumably legal) public rights of way, seems unsubstantiated. Certainly he shows links out of the site to the north, but

these are onto public footpaths – not byways or bridleways – and on footpaths cycling is illegal ! In fact all users will access the attractions along the unfenced and major livestock-killing roads B 3078 and B 3080.

The prospectus for the works implies, but does not specifically state, that the plans have the backing of Forestry England, the RSPB and Natural England. Interestingly, while the developer claims to be “engaging” with the National Park there is no claim, actual or implied, that the Park supports the scheme. Perhaps the planners have sensed that approval here would lead immediately to a hundred other applications for comparable sites ringing the Forest on all sides, resulting in a devastating increase in pressure of recreational use throughout the district. Such pressure would undoubtedly support the Park’s duty to foster economic and social wellbeing, but it would have appalling consequences for its primary task of protecting the area.

The site, named Pound Bottom, was formerly a massive refuse tip and was the curse of this part of the Forest for decades as a rain of litter from the dump lorries disfigured the road verges across a wide area. Now, following completion of restoration and a couple of years of peace, it seems set to become an even more serious tormentor of the Forest and the local population for all time, unless the authorities decide otherwise.

Retiring Verderers and changing circumstances

The Verderers’ Court looks as though it is entering a period of change unprecedented during my time in the Forest. Last year saw the appointment of a new planning authority (National Park) verderer and a new elected member joined the team at the November election. This July Natural England’s representative left the Court, after many years of service. At the same time the Forestry England’s member retired and his replacement was announced by the Deputy Surveyor. The Verderers were also told by their chairman that he will not be seeking a further term when his present appointment finishes next April. This means that in a period of less than eighteen months half the membership of the Court will have changed and all at a time of considerable stresses in the Forest’s administration and with a relatively new Deputy Surveyor. There are conflicts over the camp sites, wholesale disregard of the byelaws designed to protect the Forest and looming financial difficulties. The latter arise from a significant fall in the marking fee income as the level of national subsidies begins steadily to decline. For years past, the marking fee income has been boosted as commoners increased their stock numbers on the Forest or manipulated the system by paying for animals not actually turned out. This enabled them to claim more subsidy via their “ghost cows”. In response (and perhaps inevitably) the Verderers became used to spending fairly freely while at the same time the marking fee rate remained static and the price of almost everything else rose. Now there seems every prospect that the Court’s income will be exceeded by expenditure for the foreseeable future unless savings can be made and income increased. The real world of economics is beginning to catch up with the Forest and the outlook is far from encouraging.

Mother's Garden



Map-recorded Forest placenames are an endless source of interest and speculation to both residents and visitors, but the origin of only very few names has been uncovered. At least once the Ordnance Survey has names in its records, they become fixed in both nature and as to location. By contrast, those handed down by word of mouth, perhaps for generations, are far more fluid and tend to drift a little as to location over time. I have been noting down such names for decades past and, as the indigenous population declines, the additions to the list become fewer all the time.

Last month I was asked by Natural England's Verderer where Mother's Garden is in the Forest. It is a name I had never heard of and it seemed a bit unlikely that it was a genuine old Forest name rather than someone's efforts at leg-pulling. However, my colleague Robert Stride knew better and in response to the same question he answered: "to the right of the road from Old House to Backley Reseeded as you come to the high ground beyond Soarley Beeches". The Stride family, of course, has generations of knowledge of both the topography and folklore, derived from working in the Forest.

Having established that the name was almost certainly genuine, I began to wonder what could possibly be its origin. A bleak and unproductive piece of heathland could certainly not have allowed any sort of cultivated garden and there had not been any houses at this remote spot after Roman times. Then I recalled that thirteen years ago an eagle-eyed field archaeologist from Romsey, Chris Read, had discovered a small rectangular earthwork enclosure in the valley immediately adjoining the placename. He suggested, rightly as it now seems, that this was a bee garden. Such small enclosures were used to protect beehives placed in the Forest during the summer to exploit the heather blossom. Many of them are known to date from the 17th century. The close proximity of the placename and the earthwork almost certainly solves the problem, although whose mother had

protected her hives in this way remains a mystery. It joins other unexplained and curious names nearby such as Frankie's Slaughterhouse, Mouse's Cupboard and Stinking Edge Wood.

There are two types of such gardens in the New Forest, one of which (the Holmsley Ridge type) is rectangular or circular with internal ditch. The other (Ibsley Common type) is rectangular and has external ditches. Mother's Garden is of the Ibsley type and the photograph shows a classic example near Whitefield Plantation, cleared of bracken and photographed twenty years ago.

Anthony Pasmore