

NEW FOREST NOTES JULY 2023

The plan for deforestation in the New Forest

One of the great curses of involvement in the New Forest life is the continual rain of one tedious and repetitive plan or report after another. Most are forgotten within months by everyone except their proud authors. I suppose all of us try to read at least the preliminary “executive summary” before abandoning the attempt and getting on with more practical day to day problems, but occasionally there emerges a really significant document which demands careful study from end to end. Such a plan is Forestry England’s scheme for deforestation within the New Forest. I discovered it last month, referred to in a footnote to yet another draft plan. I was rather horrified to find that this was something I had completely missed when it first appeared, although it was published well before the arrival of covid. It was only then that I looked at the publication date – 27th July 2018. On that date I was lying in hospital, barely conscious following a serious accident and I remained there or convalescing for most of the consultation period. I missed two Verderers’ Courts, but so far as I can see, no consideration of the plan is recorded in the relevant minutes. There is also no record in those minutes of the scheme being put to the Verderers, despite the fact that the Court shares regulation of most of the affected land.

With only 39 recorded public responses to the consultation, nearly everyone in the Forest (two parish councils being among the vigilant exceptions) also managed to overlook it. It was published, of course, during a sweltering heatwave and at the height of the summer holidays. The authors of this potentially controversial document must have thought that Christmas had arrived early.

What is so important about this plan and how has it already deeply affected the New Forest? Deforestation is an emotive term, suggesting the activities of a South American dictatorship rather than the objectives of a British government agency, yet deforestation is how Forestry England describes its own intentions within the plan. They cover well over a thousand acres of woodland clearance to be completed within the next five years. I would have expected a more euphemistic title like “Open Country Restoration Work” or “Ending Commercial Timber Production”. The plan lies behind the devastating work at Turf Hill and Millersford that I wrote about in April this year and huge clearances north of Park Hill on the outskirts of Lyndhurst. Dozens of other targets remain on the list, from one end of the Forest to the other.

The plan itself, together with a lot of related documents, amounts to over four hundred pages and it is still available on Forestry England’s website. Small portions of it, perhaps from a different hand, are clear, well written and informative. The bulk of it is extremely dense, jargon-filled and liberally sprinkled with unintelligible acronyms.

In very simple terms it says that nearly 1150 acres of coniferous trees will be eliminated within the Inclosures (plantations) of the Forest by 2028. The woodland will not be replanted here, although planting could take place somewhere else in the country. It lists all the various interests which FE thinks should be taken into consideration and it explains how it intends to deal with the resulting

constraints. The objective is to “restore” land which has been planted with trees over the last two centuries, a large part of which is actually fairly modern plantation. As to the public’s growing concern with carbon control, it says that any net loss resulting from the fellings will be small, insignificant and partly made good by planting elsewhere away from the Forest. The ecological benefits will be large. I have no reason to doubt the very complicated calculations which are quoted in support of these claims, but it is perhaps not a policy which is easy to sell to a public daily exhorted to plant more trees and told of the vital need to protect such woodland resources as we already have.

I personally have no quarrel with the idea of reducing the area of conifer-dominated plantations in the Forest and, Turf Hill excepted, the work so far seems to be tidy enough in strictly engineering terms. It does, however, fall far short, in several crucial respects, of the standards which FE itself says should apply to its operations. There have been some very obvious breaches of the law and of less stringent rules. There are repeated references in the plan to the legislative framework within which felling may take, yet these wholly omit those parts of the New Forest Act of 1877 which apply to the Statutory Inclosures. The Act’s requirements have been widely ignored during the course of works. The plan’s provisions stress the importance of retaining landscape features and if this had been followed, such breaches might have been avoided. Screening of roads and ugly development has been destroyed or is imminently threatened, notably at Markway with the planned removal of formerly carefully retained strips of trees, in an action which can only be described as the sort of vandalism not seen in the Forest for fifty years. The photograph shows the A35 road (left) and the



screen of trees (right) which was deliberately retained when most of the Inclosure was felled. Now FE threatens to strip this away, exposing the Forest beyond to the hideous visual intrusion of the road and the accompanying traffic noise.

At Matley Ridge, the ugly chimneys of the Waterside factories now dominate part of the horizon to the south east, when the retention of only a few trees would have been so valuable in preventing this, without prejudice to the plan’s objectives.

There are a number of specialist interests which the plan says must be properly protected, but where the actual practice on the ground has been very different. Like Maureen Lipman's famous television advertisement of the 1980s, the New Forest is dominated by "ologies". Everything from hydrology to ornithology rightly has its place in the prescriptions. My own particular interest (archaeology) has suffered dreadful damage in several of the areas so far treated, because FE has failed to take the proper precaution of commissioning competent and thorough surveys of the threatened areas before engineering work commences. It is sad if a rare bird is dislodged by felling operations or scarce plants are obliterated, but they at least have the opportunity to return or recolonize an area. The fragile evidence of former human land use – settlements, fields, industrial sites and so on – has survived largely undamaged for perhaps thousands of years, but is now being destroyed on a large scale through failure to take proper precautions. Such evidence cannot return – it is lost for all time. There is no shortcut to the required protection. These sites have to be searched for by experts, usually in difficult and uncomfortable winter conditions. A post-bulldozing survey in one inclosure near Lyndhurst shows that there were formerly eleven easily identifiable sites within the area cleared. Of these, 4 were totally destroyed, 2 severely damaged and one slightly damaged. In other words, two thirds of the archaeology was damaged or destroyed. The only site actually identified prior to the work was one that has appeared on Ordnance Survey maps for well over a century. This is a rate of destruction likely to be repeated in cleared areas across the New Forest if something is not done to remedy such an unbelievable situation.

A curious trend in land-use

When I first started to keep ponies and cattle, a long time ago now, there was always a shortage of land to rent and I was very lucky to secure the tenancy of ten acres of excellent pasture. It was swallowed up a few years later by the building of the M27 motorway. In those days one seldom saw any vacant land in the New Forest. Those bits not used as a base by commoners were eagerly snapped up by recreational horsekeepers. In the years since, the average price of land has increased from a few hundred pounds per acre to tens of thousands of pounds. One might have thought that because of this, every last scrap of land would now be used for agriculture or at least grazing of some sort. Remarkably, the exact opposite seems to be true in many places.

I have recently been looking at land-use in my own village of Hale and at the valley of Huckles Brook further south west. In both cases many little fields now lie unused. At Huckles Brook between Blunts Barn and Ogdens, a distance of little over a mile, there are at least seven such plots, ranging from tiny paddocks to quite large blocks of land, where all animal-related management seems to have ceased. A few seem simply to have been abandoned, while others have become what used to be called "leisure plots" or have been annexed to the gardens of large expensive houses. Any overt conversion to garden land may involve a change of use for planning purposes, so the ride-on mower has become the weapon of choice for the new owners in keeping the planners at bay.

At Hale the picture is very similar as on one mile of road through the village, there remains only one cattle farm, with its owner near to retirement. Five blocks of land are empty or devoted to

recreation in one form or another. One dairy farm which was thriving when I came to the village is degenerating into scrub woodland and so is another smallholding at the other end of the village.

How far the picture is repeated across the Forest I do not know. It is certainly worse in places. At Hamptworth, for example, large tracts of former fields lie abandoned, but things are probably better in the south. Altogether the outlook for the future of the Forest communities looks rather bleak at the moment as money pours in, enhancing costly residential property, while the traditional land uses dwindle away.

Anthony Pasmore