

New Forest Notes – June 1990

New Committees for old problems

The New Forest breeds committees quite as efficiently as it does ponies. Whenever there is a decision to be deterred, a pressure group's influence to be countered or a battle to be fought, a new committee emerges. In pursuit of this tradition, June looks like being the month of the committee. Firstly there is the new government appointed committee of Mr. Illingworth and his colleagues. Barron (Department of the Environment) and Mr. Perry (Ministry of Agriculture). Its task (likely to take a year) is to assess the problems of the New Forest commoners and to make recommendations. Now the commoners and almost everyone else in the Forest had thought that, following the New Forest Review, the problems were well known and the solutions patently clear, but the government thinks otherwise: hence the deliberations of Mr. Illingworth's committee. After initial disgust at yet more delay, most groups in the Forest now seem happy to assist with the enquiry. The Committee has the merits of being small and expert. The chairman is the Forestry Commission's chief land agent and was at one time employed in this area, while the MAFF representative has extensive local experience. It is interesting and no doubt intentional that no New Forest organisations are represented.

On quite a different scale and of a very different character is the committee-to-end-all-committees, "The New Forest Heritage Area Committee" which will meet for the time on June 29th. Its title is cumbersome and its powers a mystery even to many of those engaged in the day to running of the Forest. Its members comprise eminent and influential representatives of all the statutory bodies involved in the area's management - Hampshire County Council, New Forest District Council, Forestry Commission, Nature Conservancy Council, Countryside Commission and Verderers. The first five of these bodies will contribute a total of between £50,000 and £70,000 of public money annually to the running of the committee and its staff, while the Verderers, being too poor will contribute nothing. What will this committee do? It is designed to coordinate and harmonize the management policies of the constituent bodies in so far as they affect the Forest and to encourage good works for the benefit of the Forest. In other words it has no powers whatever, but very considerable influence. The use of that influence is a matter of vital concern to all of us. The forces of development (local authority builders of roads, leisure facilities, schools, car parks etc), and those of conservation, are equally balanced with the Forestry Commission and Countryside Commission having a foot in both camps. I doubt if the committee members would for one moment acknowledge the existence of such a stark division of interests. It takes a Shell Oil Enquiry, a Lyndhurst Bypass or a Stoney Cross Junction to reveal the underlying objectives of those controlling the Forest.

So in deciding on the exercise of its influence, the committee, is likely to face some problems. It could come down firmly against damaging public development projects and support really determined opposition to further despoliation of the New Forest. At the other extreme it might sanction, a free-for-all in public development. Neither course is very likely. It is perhaps not unduly cynical to foresee uncomfortable compromises in which the committee's influence is used to dilute the more vigorous forces of Forest protection while restraining the worst excesses of the highway engineers.

How long the constituent authorities will remain content with their advisory role remains to be seen. At some stage a return on the investment off public funds may be required in more concrete term than those of a contented pony or a beautiful stretch of heathland. If that time comes and the committee seeks statutory powers, the Forest will have to look to its defences.

Wartime Memories

Local historians are taking a growing interest in the military use of our countryside during in two World Wars and this interest is being encouraged by the Hampshire Field Club. A day conference on Hampshire in the Second World War was held in April and at a recent general meeting of its New Forest Section, members were given a fascinating account of Beaulieu Airfield before, during and after the two wars. The speaker, Mr. Robert Coles, has published a book on the subject which is a model for future research of its kind.

The Forest's wartime contribution in terms of land was not limited to the three airfields at Beaulieu, Holmsley and Fritham. These are now well known and popular tourist attractions, but there are also many more remote and shadowy installations which have left smaller but equally durable impressions on the landscape. Perhaps the most interesting is the Ashley Bombing Range which occupied over five thousand acres stretching from Godshill to near Fritham. It was established in November, 1939 with bombing commencing in the summer of the following year — exactly fifty years, ago. Most of the above-ground structures were cleared away after the War leaving only the numerous craters, a small observation hut and a strange mound above Pitts Wood known to this day by local people as the "Submarine Pens". It is reputed to have contained a reconstruction of submarine docks on the coast of France which was then bombed in an attempt to destroy it. Both in war and peace it proved extremely durable and at the end of hostilities the soil was stripped from the adjacent Forest and bulldozed over the structure. Vegetation eventually recolonised the site and the Submarine Pens are now an unobtrusive gorse-covered view point.

Equally interesting and on the same range was Ashley Lodge. The Forestry Commission has just been given copies of some unique photographs of this most remote of all the Forest lodges, showing the house itself, outbuildings, and livestock in the early years of this century. A sad sequel is two photos of the wrecked shell of the house after the War. The lodge was evidently a remarkable building of more massive proportions than the other

Keepers' lodges of the same period. Heywood Sumner, the well-known Forest historian, says that it was built in 1770 on the site of an earlier medieval house. Today all that remains is a grass-covered mound in a Forest glade. The house, outbuildings and fields are all gone.

A final element of the range which perplexes those visitors who come on it by chance is the vast circle of concrete at Leaden Hall. This, I am told by Mr. Henry Wills, another authority on the subject, is the second wall target — a base upon which structures were erected for practice attack by aircraft.

There is an urgent need for further recording of such vanishing wartime sites and, more especially, for preserving local memories and photographs before that also becomes impossible. The Hampshire Field Club would welcome news of anyone who can help.

Drought

Despite the recent welcome rain, the effects of our now regular summer drought are apparent throughout the Forest with the smaller ponds and streams drying up. It is therefore understandable that there should be public anxiety about drinking water supplies for the ponies and cattle. In fact any worries on this score are unnecessary. Most of the streams are fed from springs or seepage lines on the slopes of the gravel-capped hills. Although the streams themselves quickly disappear in drought conditions, the sources remain remarkably constant. In the great drought of 1976, a survey of water supplies in the north of the Forest was carried out at a time the well known ponds at Janesmoor, Longcross and Ocknell were all dry and when no water flowed in Latchmore Brook or most of Dockens Water. Most of the springs then held out well and all the Forest animals have, within their "runs" or territories one or more reliable drinking places.

Under dry conditions the bogs also come into their own as a valuable food source with relatively lush vegetation available to the Forest stock long after enclosed fields are burnt and parched. It remains to be seen how well the stock will pick up condition during the summer months. The mild winter enabled most animals to reach the spring with better than average reserves of flesh, but there was a severe falling-off in some mares during April and May. At least we should be spared a further flu outbreak this summer, with most of the ponies having natural immunity after last year's severe outbreak.

Anthony Pasmore