

NEW FOREST NOTES MARCH 2024

The ruinous car parks of the New Forest

On emerging through the locked barrier gate into Turf Hill car park near Redlynch, I was accosted by a very angry car parker who demanded that I “tell your employers that the state of the access road to the park is extremely dangerous and an absolute disgrace”. The lady was somewhat adrift in the identification of her target. I was not wearing a Forestry England jacket and my ancient car is difficult to confuse with that authority’s fleet of sleek vehicles, but the substance of her complaint was entirely valid. The state of the access track is perfectly dreadful and the potholes are so deep that they could tear the bottom out of any low car being driven incautiously across them. It is typical of many, if not most, car park access tracks across the Forest and these are routes which the public is specifically encouraged to use.

Ten miles away on the east side of the Forest is a similar situation at Busketts Lawn car park. Here the parking area is located ridiculously deep in the Forest, so that a park of 600 square metres is served by an access road of 2,100 square metres. Maintenance of the road must cost many times that of the park itself. At this site the legion of dog walkers has solved the problem caused by degeneration of the track to a miniature tank-training ground. They are parking in the splays of the access road adjacent to the highway and along the verges of Bartley Road. They have also re-colonized their old favourite site in Woodlands Road adjoining the livestock pound. Here they had only recently been ejected by Forestry England with an array of felled tree trunks and dragon’s teeth. On one half-term afternoon a couple of weeks ago, cars were lined up with two wheels on the grass and two on the tarmac. The road was effectively reduced to a single track.

Of course, conditions over recent months have not been conducive to good car-park maintenance. Continuous rain, hugely increased use resulting from covid and a tendency to exploit any smooth surfaced access as a race track have all combined to produce massive potholes. Some years ago, the Forestry Commission had the bright idea that car park surfacing, formerly of local binding gravel, might be more robust if crushed basalt was used, but this seems to have been very over-optimistic. Basalt is evidently just as capable of forming miniature mountain ranges as was hoggins.

This is yet another example of the failure of the authorities to redesign and, where necessary, to close or relocate recreational parks in the Forest. The subject has been under discussion, I think, for the best part of a decade, without any visible result whatever. I last wrote about it in October 2021 and there has certainly been no progress in the last two years. The so-called recreation management strategy remains thoroughly bogged down. Several years ago, the Forestry Commission produced to the Verderers a largely sensible plan for redesigning the fifty-year-old parking arrangements, but it sank without trace. It is said, with what justification I do not know, that Natural England is still blocking any progress. In the meantime, perhaps we should all use Boltons Bench car park in Lyndhurst

where a remarkable resurfacing was suddenly undertaken last month, but the re-emergence of potholes is already apparent.

Matthew Gerrelli

In my northern part of the New Forest, many of the old farming families have steadily declined in post-war years. Elderly members have retired, holdings have been split up and sold off and younger people have been forced or persuaded to move away by economic pressures or inducements. Perhaps here in the north there has never, over the last century, been the same close-knit sense of community as in the south. There, despite the pressures, there seems still to be a feeling of belonging, with the old families holding on to their traditional way of life. One such family, Gerrelli of Bull Hill, remains at the heart of New Forest agricultural life, but no family can resist the force of unexpected tragedy and perhaps this one has suffered more than its share of that. The most recent such event was the death in December, at the early age of 53, of Mathew Gerrelli. This shocked the Forest community.



I have worked for a long time with Tony Gerrelli, the long-serving elected verderer, and his son Jonathan (head agister for over twenty years), but I did not know Tony's son Matthew. I am therefore grateful to one of his retired work colleagues in the Forestry Commission for the following few memories.

Matthew joined the Forestry Commission on leaving school. He was one of a group of local young men recruited by Roger Newland (later operations manager, who retired in 1993), because, I am told, he thought such men would have respect for the Forest and that this would be reflected in

their work. That indeed proved to be the case. Matthew quickly became a qualified and extremely efficient tractor driver. My informant remembers that when sent to clear fallen trees blocking trackways in the ancient woodlands, the job would be done very neatly and Matthew would always ensure that any wheel ruts created were levelled-off before he left the site. Today, by contrast, the trees are roughly cut up and bulldozed into untidy heaps “because the beetles and fungi need lots of extra food”!

In addition to his main employment, Matthew continued the family tradition of exercising common rights in the Forest. Along with his partner, Karen, he was a respected pony breeder and also kept cattle and pigs. He acquired a little holding in his native village and obtained planning permission for a “commoner’s house”. Such planning permissions have been controversial on occasions, with allegations that the system has been abused, but they are also almost the only method by which genuine applicants can acquire a base from which to continue farming the Forest. Today little places with a house and a few acres seldom change hands for much less than a million pounds – far beyond the reach of most small commoners.

Aside from all of this, my informant’s chief memory of Matthew is of someone who was always cheerful and quick-witted and seldom without a smile on his face. That is not a bad way for anyone to be remembered and it no doubt accounts for the very large attendance at his funeral in Boldre church in January. I am grateful to Hattie Cameron for the photo of Matthew in the ring of the Beaulieu Road pony sale yard.

Paying for parking on Hyde Common

Hampshire County Council’s proposals for the introduction of charges at its two car parks on Hyde Common were put to the Verderers at the February Court. The plan is for charges to be made at Abbott’s Well and Hyde School car parks. The price will be £1 in winter and between £3 and £7, depending on the length of stay, in the summer months. Less than one hour will be free, so that school drop-off and collection would obviously not attract a charge.

I have seldom seen such unanimity in the court on anything. All members opposed the idea, the Official Verderer (a county councillor) not being present for the discussions. I think it is important to stress that the opposition was not to the principle of charging for car parking in the New Forest – that was hardly discussed. It was rather to the absolute impracticality of this scheme. Hyde Common presents unlimited opportunities for verge parking and parking in the surrounding lanes, so nobody need every use the meters. If such evasion could somehow be prevented by regulation or physical works, there would simply be what Deputy Surveyor Donn Small used to call the “shunting effect” of ill-planned recreational controls. Parkers would just move to the already overused facilities at Gorley Hill, Latchmore and Moyles Court.

As to the wider question of principle, I think the county council and Forestry England probably have a much better case. A comprehensive car-parking charge scheme across the Forest seems far from unreasonable, especially if coupled with a local residents’ annual permit for a fixed fee. Still, such

a scheme is very far off because it presupposes proper regulation of verge parking and then adequate enforcement, neither of which seems remotely under consideration at present.

Making the Forest pay for visitors' enjoyment

Members of the public who attended the February Verderers' Court meeting will have heard an interesting and detailed address from the Deputy Surveyor in which he explained how short Forestry England is of money and how important he thinks it is to make the Forest pay for maintenance of the recreational facilities (car parks, trails etc) which the public demands. In other words, he sees the fees from trading vans on the Forest as being a growing source of such income. Unexpectedly, his presentment did not include the anticipated application for the Verderers' consent to the renewal and expansion of trading licences. Subsequent discussion revealed that this omission was the result of an administrative error. A formal application for the licences will accordingly appear on the Verderers' website and anyone wishing to support or oppose it should attend the next court (20th March).

One regular attendant at the court, Mr. Brian Tarnoff, was quick to make known his views on the Deputy Surveyor's presentment. He said that the proposals should be smothered at once. If the New Forest is to be used as a public playground for visitors, the government should finance the maintenance necessary to meet visitors' demands. Money should not be extracted locally through inappropriate sales damaging to the special qualities of the Forest. Mr. Tarnoff spoke in a personal capacity instead of in his usual role as a spokesman for one of the Forest societies. Of course, such societies had had no advance opportunity to see the Deputy Surveyor's views so considered responses will have to wait for March.

Anthony Pasmore