

NEW FOREST NOTES NOVEMBER 2019

Two reports to influence the future of the Forest

Last month the Verderers' Court (and I have no doubt many others in the area) received copies of two bulky reports which seek to influence the future management of the New Forest. The first of these, dealing also with other national parks and areas of outstanding natural beauty, was prepared for government and is called "Landscapes Review – Final Report". It comprises a sort of blue print for the future of parks and AONBs. I think it is now more commonly called the "Glover Report" after its principal author. After the fashion of such papers it is rather long and rambling (168 pages). I know I tend to be intolerant of such material, but I found this one particularly tiresome to read, yet it is not something simply to be set aside on that account. It could become the basis of legislation which would have fairly serious consequences for the New Forest.

The Glover Report is very wide-ranging in the subjects covered and they include wildlife, recreation, administration, landscape, housing, public transport and social disadvantage. There are all sorts of pious hopes and good intentions expressed within it, with which I suppose few reasonable people would disagree, but it is also essentially a consumers' report looking first and foremost to satisfy the demands which society makes upon areas such as the New Forest and without regard to the consequences of doing that. That is not to say that it openly advocates intensifying recreational pressure on the countryside, but such intensification would be exactly the result of many of its proposals. To that extent it is particularly threatening to the New Forest. There are indeed occasional references to the problems arising from recreational use, but they are very much treated as a side issue rather than the dominating fact of life they are for us. I know that Mr. Glover did visit the New Forest last year, but he seems not to have understood the desperate plight of an over-used tourist destination in an over-populated part of the country. Perhaps things are very different in his northern home.

The report places huge emphasis on encouraging into the countryside all sorts of groups which it considers ought to get out into the health-giving landscapes which are available. It says that these groups are under-represented among national park users throughout Britain. It refers to what it describes as "Visibly Minority Ethnic" groups, the elderly, socially disadvantaged people and so on, all of which it sees as requiring special support to access and enjoy rural facilities. Whether such under-representation is true in northern national parks I have no way of knowing, but it certainly seems fairly wide of the mark in the New Forest. Go to any of our honeypot sites at the weekend in summer and you will see people whose families must have originated in every corner of the globe. The elderly and disabled seem equally well represented and are liberally supplied with "trails", gravel surfaces and information, so why expend money and effort trying to round up yet more people who probably don't want to be in the Forest anyway? It is, after all, a cold, wet, dirty and threatening place in the view of many. Those who come here at the moment and who behave responsibly are very welcome, but Mr. Glover seems intent on exacerbating already intolerable pressures.

The report contains all the standard politically correct statements about public transport, social (and second) homes, and conservation, but there are few specific references to the New Forest. In one of these it criticises the dominance of Forestry Commission sign boards over national park signs. No doubt this will be very welcome in Lymington Town Hall, but for Forest people the Commission is an established and largely respected (if not loved) landowner and manager, whereas the park is simply a planning authority with no management role, but lots of ambitions in that direction. Any attempt to upset the present balance of power is scarcely likely to be welcomed.

Along the same lines are the proposals for enhanced powers, money and staff for national parks in general, with a large new force of friendly and helpful rangers to encourage visitors to enjoy themselves. That is about the last thing the New Forest needs when lack of proper enforcement of regulations is a constant source of conflict. It would be a very different matter if the proposal was for more keepers and more money to ensure that they had the powers and resources to control delinquent behaviour.

Finally there is an extraordinary section which deals with what the authors call "The Club" - people with their roots in the countryside, often through management or voluntary work and whose perceived privileges are perhaps resented or coveted by disadvantaged minorities seeking to access to the parks. The authors do acknowledge elsewhere the valuable contribution made by volunteers to the protection of the countryside, but the unfortunate references to The Club seem to me to be a slur on the many local groups and individuals who have a deep knowledge of a particular area and who give generously of their time and money for the benefit of such places as the New Forest. We are particularly rich in such groups and no amount of park rangers, glossy information signs and websites will ever contribute half as much to the community as they do.

All in all I think many local people may find the Glover report at best tedious and at worst a real threat to the special characteristics of the New Forest. For those who want to read it, it can be found on the Defra website, but I have been unable to discover the source of the paper copies sent to the Verderers. They contain no publisher's details, so perhaps the electronic version is the only one available.

Natural Capital and Public Goods

The second of the two reports circulated in October is published by the New Forest national park authority and is called "Understanding the New Forest's Natural Capital and how its management provides public goods to the nation". It is an altogether much shorter (47 pages) and more polished document than the Glover Report. It is printed on good quality paper and liberally illustrated with beautiful pictures of the Forest. It says that it was produced by a body called the "Forest Farming Group", but enquiries are to be addressed to a park officer and the office was no doubt also the source of the professional design and production.

As to the actual content of the report, I fear that it rather falls short of the initial good impression created by appearances, but first of all we need to cut through its dreadful jargon and see

what it is trying to achieve. Natural Capital is supposed to be the actual physical elements of the Forest and, surprisingly, all sorts of entirely un-natural things like commoners' housing, volunteer labour and livestock handling equipment. These un-natural things are said to be "human resources" and thus a sub-division of natural capital. From all these various "assets" the public is said to derive benefits, which the jargon calls "public goods". For example, the public goods derived from the Forest's plantations (Inclosures) are said to be that they benefit commoning and cultural heritage (it does not explain how), they contribute to natural beauty, thriving plants and animals, public access, education, control of flooding, "habitable climate", and healthy soils. Their actual purpose – growing timber – seems not to qualify as a "public good". On the other hand, public goods claimed to arise from visitor infrastructure are, more straightforwardly, recreation and education. That has almost nothing to do with naturalness but, that aside, we have probably had quite enough jargon.

The report is essentially an inventory of the natural capital together with the public benefits it is said to provide. Underlying all of this is a bid for money in a post-Brexit world, which may be summarised as follows: "We have all these assets and are using them to benefit the public. Please keep open the tap which has flooded the Forest with money in recent years allowing the employment of many more people in management who in turn deliver all sorts of good things for visitors and residents to enjoy". Here I need to declare an interest in that the Verderers' Court has been a principal beneficiary of the largesse provided through central government over recent years. As an institution the Court is now quite as addicted to the produce of this magic money tree as any other element of the Forest community.

It is when we get to the detail of the report that it becomes particularly questionable. It paints a picture of a happy, thriving, clean and well managed Forest, with perhaps the odd blemish here and there. It is a picture which, as we all know, is far from the truth, as the Forest suffers appalling stresses from public pressure, loutish behaviour, slaughtered animals on the roads, housing shortages for local people, choking traffic problems and now even development pressures. All these problems seem to me to be arguments *in favour* of public finance, but the report hides them as though its preferred picture of the Forest must not be defiled.

There are some very strange statements in the plan, particularly in relation to livestock numbers. We are told that the number of ponies kept in the Forest is "relatively stable". In fact the number has risen by 20% over the last decade. That is hardly relative stability. Cattle are said to have "increased in the last decade following very low numbers in the early 2000s" after foot and mouth. This is very far from the whole truth. There were just under 3000 cattle before the disease in 2000 and, after an undoubted momentary blip the following year, figures have climbed relentlessly to give a completely unsustainable increase of over 140% on pre-foot and mouth levels, although this includes some cattle merely collecting subsidy and not actually turned out – the so-called "ghost cows".

Next there are some remarkable errors in the very decorative maps which the report contains. A map which purports to show common land within the Forest omits much of the Adjacent Commons,

including Hyde, Gorley Hill, Ibsley, Rockford, Hightown and Kingston Great Commons – an immense total of over 1,800 acres. The same map includes a mystery land category in the form of unclassified pink blobs, but which I deduce to be landscaped parkland. The map showing “land cover” includes a category for “potential back-up pasture”. That is the land off the Forest capable of being used to support grazing on the Forest. Large areas of such land seem to be omitted, including much around Beaulieu which has long been a cradle of New Forest commoning. I know that even the best publications cannot escape the odd misprint – a comma here or a capital letter there – (I have been responsible for enough of them myself), but this report has clearly not been produced or at least checked by anyone who really understands the Forest in that such errors have escaped notice.

Actually I don't suppose that any of this (including the very existence of the report) matters too much. The farming and ecological lobbies are so powerful that I expect money will continue to flood unabated into the Forest in future. Whether this is regarded as a good thing probably depends on whether one is in receipt of the funds or not.

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