

NEW FOREST NOTES NOVEMBER 2020

Hatchet Pond

Like almost every aspect of the Forest's beauty, cleanliness and tranquillity, Hatchet Pond has suffered from intense over-use and abuse by the public since the outbreak of the virus. In September, Forestry England put forward, for preliminary consideration by the Verderers, plans for a complete re-arrangement of the visitor facilities there. These plans must ultimately be the subject of a formal presentment to the Court and an application for planning permission. I do not for one moment doubt the authorities' good intentions, but the plans seem to me to be far from uncontroversial and likely to lead to as many new problems as they solve. At the same time, they fail to tackle some fundamental difficulties in the present arrangements.

Firstly, there is the problem of the lavatory block serving this, one of the most intensively used recreational sites in the New Forest. Forestry England intends to remove it. Such facilities are certainly ugly intrusions into any area of the Forest, but there are a few places - and this is one - where they are the lesser of two evils. The plan says that "alternative public toilets exist at Beaulieu". As a statement of geography that is undeniable, but that is not the point. Use of the Beaulieu facilities would involve a round trip by road of about two and a half miles through busy traffic, rather than the present 50m walk to the Hatchet Pond block. It recently took me nearly fifteen minutes to get from Beaulieu to Hatchet Pond as a herd of cows, interspersed with donkeys, ambled slowly up the hill in the face of heavy oncoming traffic from the west. The promoting authority officers may be great students of pond life, but they clearly know little of human nature if they believe the Beaulieu facilities are an adequate substitute. Little Johnny will be told to take himself off into the bushes around the pond or along the residential roads to the north and south rather than expect to be driven into Beaulieu.

Next, the car park will be moved up to the top of the slope nearer to Furzey Lane. This is, I suppose, not a great problem so far as the Forest is concerned, although I imagine local people could have other views. The old car park site will be "restored", the idea being to move pressure further away from the pond. Water, however, is an irresistible attraction to visitors and the old car park site would continue to be heavily used for picnics and games, even if cars are parked a few yards away.

A final and very obvious flaw is the retention of the ice cream van. This is a prime magnet for visitors and perhaps even more alluring than the pond itself. Most oddly, this facility is not mentioned at all in the FE plan, yet it is a main driver in the pressures on the area. I am told that on some days during the pandemic recreation explosion, queues of verge-parked cars stretched most of the way from Hatchet to Stockley. Perhaps the omission may be explained by the fact that the income from ice cream licensees is huge and FE is reluctant to forego it. Here, perhaps, there are good grounds for the argument that "alternative ice cream sales are available in adjoining villages". It is a much more convincing line than "you can drive two and a half miles to visit the toilets". It might also benefit local shops in Beaulieu and Brockenhurst.

Forestry England also promises the removal of non-native fish from the pond, more or “improved” signs to persuade the public to behave themselves, increased ranger patrols and a largely illusory compensation of at least 454 square metres net gain of “restored” car park over and above the area to be newly developed as parking. Put in those terms it looks attractive, but in English that is about one tenth of an acre or the size of two small urban garden plots. Moreover, ecologists may resist proper topsoiling of the area being returned, so that will remain as gravel, stamped flat by picnic parties and ball games on the edge of the pond, even if the cars are displaced uphill. Not many donkeys will get fat on that, but at least the buns and other unsuitable items will continue to flow.

Apart from being a Mecca for visitors, Hatchet Pond has a curious history. It seems to have been formed largely from amalgamated and flooded gravel pits, together with a few marl pits at the north end. It did not exist in 1787 when the famous Richardson, King and Driver’s survey of the Forest was made, but it is shown on the Budgen drawings for the first edition of the Ordnance Survey One Inch map (c.1798). Presumably near the latter date the mill was constructed. Around the south western parts of the pond there is a series of unexplained earthworks which are unique in the Forest. They may have had some water collection or management function.

Hatchet Pond is probably only a shadow of its former self. In 2013 it was approximately 150m shorter than in 1867 and it is likely that the present outfall was designed to reduce pressure on the dam by lowering water levels. The picture shows the less well-known western end of the pond far away from the popular attractions.



Forest sign boards

The vexed question of signs in the Forest has been occupying much of the Verderers' time recently. I have never seen the Forest so littered with notices of all sorts and the more they breed, the less impact they have on those they are intended to influence. The autumn rains lash down on lingering "high fire risk" signs. There are "no overnight parking" signs, "no "BBQs", "keep to the tracks" (for the benefit of birds which have long since finished nesting), and of course the usual inane "warning hot ashes" beside forestry bonfires and "don't climb on the log stacks". The public is exhorted to beware of approaching livestock and to control their dogs. Like the recreation itself, the rash of signs is out of control and some of the temporary plastic ones end up in the bushes and ditches where they have joined the latest addition to the visitors' detritus – disposable masks.

It is not this transitory rubbish which is the subject of discussion at present, but rather the fixed and semi-permanent signs within the Forest and on its margins. These fall into three categories. Firstly, there are the wooden boards advertising the New Forest National Park which are located on the road verges where the planning authority's administrative area commences. In many cases, as you drive down a road lined with bungalows, you cross an invisible line, on which the board is placed and thereafter there are simply more bungalows. It is all rather meaningless. Then, on the real boundary of the New Forest (otherwise called the perambulation), you pass from suburbia to the open heaths and woodland populated by ponies and cattle. Here there is a Forestry Commission "ladder board" announcing the change of land ownership, management and land-use. You are actually in the New Forest. Finally, each of the many car parks has a similar ladder board giving the car park's name and the name of the landowner. Sometimes there is a clear instruction rung such as "No Forest cycling from this car park".

Presumably on the dubious assumption that change is always desirable, irrespective of its nature and cost, there is now a desire (incorporated in a paper provided for the Court) to re-design at least the perambulation and car park notices. Such a desire ought to be expressed through a policy of keeping signs and their size to the absolute minimum, but instead we are now told that they must "convey a sense of place". As you streak past the perambulation sign at 40 mph on the B 3080, you are expected to read and absorb the message "A very special place" accompanied by a National Park logo. Never mind if you miss it, because you will find a repeat sign as you enter your chosen car park.

I have been on the Verderers' Court for quite a few years and I have seldom encountered such utter nonsense. Even the least well-informed visitor knows that the Forest is a special place. That is why he has driven from Portsmouth with a car full of children and dogs all anxious to run free, picnic and play games. He will not leave less litter, refrain from trespassing on his mountain bike, or stop the dogs chasing ponies because he is repeatedly told it is a special place or because he is given the opportunity to admire the artistry of a Park logo. We are told that this exhorting rung of the ladder board can be used to convey all sorts of encouraging messages – we are given two pages of possible themes. They include such delightful ideas as "symbiotic relationships", "ever-changing and

evolving place” and “a harmonious celebration of commoning”. At least we are assured that these words are not actually intended for inclusion on the sense of place boards!

What is really behind all of this? The driving force seems to be the determination of the National Park to impose its stamp on more of the Forest. This is something it has failed to achieve over the last fourteen years because the Forest has resisted it. Now, not content with its own local authority signs on the outer boundary of the Park, it seeks to brand other sign boards which are not its concern. The Crown Lands owner is represented by Forestry England and that body is exclusively responsible for the management of the Forest, regulated in some measure by the Verderers. It is proper that FE’s name should appear on its own signs, but nothing else should be permitted beyond perhaps a few regulatory messages relating matters such as fire risk, byelaw infringements and livestock protection. The last of these is particularly relevant on perambulation boards to warn of stock on the roads.

Air crashes

Nick Saunders’s article on the Battle of Britain (23rd October), coincided almost exactly with the discovery of the site of one German bomber crash in Ashley Walk which had long escaped detection. The great authority on this subject is Richard Reeves. Last month I came across a chance reference to a patch of burnt ground on the Forest near to one of the buildings of the Armaments Research Department, Millersford. The writer was one of the scientists working nearby on fragmentation. Equipped with this new information Richard quickly located the site, still virtually bare of vegetation after exactly eighty years. The bomber had been shot down after successfully attacking Middle Wallop aerodrome on 14th October 1940. Three German airmen died and one was captured. It now seems poignant that their memorial should be no more than a patch of contaminated ground on an anonymous heather-covered hillside far across Europe from home, but I don’t suppose such sentimental thoughts would have found favour with any of the bomb-victim local sightseers at the time.

Anthony Pasmore