

NEW FOREST NOTES AUGUST 2026

A two-mile engineering scheme - flagship project or shipwreck?

In a briefing note supplied by Forestry England to the Verderers last month, plans were set out for a radical project to modify Millersford Brook and its tributary streams across the north of the Forest. The cost was not disclosed, but I would expect it to be well in excess of a million pounds. Much of the stream will be filled in and diverted. Other portions will be partly filled up. The work is described as a “flagship catchment-scale restoration that will establish a strong precedent for future schemes”. It is likely to be carried out over several years. It is sold as being of public benefit, fostering wildlife and rare habitats and even being significant in fighting climate change. This is a subject filled with obscure jargon such as “hydrological processes”, “connectivity of streams and floodplains” and “bed-level raising”. I use simpler terms, but in respect of Millersford, “restoration” is certainly not one of them.

In ordinary language, the objective is to impede the flow around and along streams and to create bog-land across the streams’ surroundings in places, or at least to encourage flooding and wetting of the marginal lawns and paths. Pages of half-truths and much nonsense follow the opening statements of the briefing note. They are, no doubt, aimed at convincing those who neither know the district nor understand its history and present-day use. Millersford Bottom is not some sort of failed landscape degraded by past generations of fools, but a straightforward New Forest stream valley, managed by knowledgeable local people for a couple of centuries. There are certainly short stretches where the stream has cut down deeply resulting in some eroding banks and there are a few old silted-up side drains in the surroundings, but the picture of “extensive networks of drains continuing to remove water from surrounding mires” is complete nonsense. Lidar suggests little more than half a dozen such drains in the whole two miles. Standard 19th century drainage patterns on New Forest plantation land provided for one drain every 40 to 50 ft and *that* is unquestionably extensive drainage. More than half of Millersford Bottom is not even FE land and was never subjected to such works. These statements in the briefing note have clearly been written by ecological enthusiasts who may have only lately arrived here and perhaps have little understanding of our history.

So what is Millersford Brook, who owns it and what is its history? The stream can really be divided into two parts. The first, going upstream, runs from Godshill to near Woodgreen. It is on Crown land administered by FE. Here the stream is in a deep and largely ancient channel, fed intermittently by boggy oozes from the hillside to the north. On the south there are small grassy lawns interspersed with patches of bracken and traversed by a network of paths much used by livestock, local walkers and riders. After near record dry conditions, this length of stream today receives flow from numerous hillside springs and seepages. These sources are certainly more than sufficient to serve the local livestock and wildlife. The watercourse itself displays a clear steady flow of water, apparently belying the implied “reducing water availability in dry periods”. That appearance of plenty may be a little deceptive as it could rely in part on a generous, but covert, contribution from South West Water via large discharge pipes, probably from the nearby Woodgreen Water Treatment Works

or its associated pipelines. That water appears to be perfectly clean.



Millersford Bottom with the stream in the middle ground and Godshill Inclosure along the skyline to the north. Winter sunset January 2021

More than half a dozen well used watering points are present on the stream in addition to the springs above, so no pony has to go short. We know from physical evidence that the immediate surroundings have remained substantially unchanged for three thousand five hundred years at least. Interestingly, this was one of the sites chosen for the Duke of Connaught's military camps (probably for cavalry) during the manoeuvres of 1895. Except for a very few yards in this mile length, the bed of the stream is firm and stable. The banks are tree-lined and robust. There is virtually no artificial side-drainage to cause offence, let alone the alleged "extensive network", but in the first half of last century clearance and adjustment of the Brook did take place over about 600 yards. This occurred generations ago and in the fifty years I have lived close by, Millersford Brook has remained firm and unchanged within this first mile.

The remaining mile (upstream) is of a different character, passing through present and former woodland, as it has done for over two centuries. The proposed works represent FE's first major adventure outside its own land in the New Forest, in that almost all of the affected area was donated to the National Trust in 1947 by Clinton and Janet Chance (Hale residents). The latter was a prominent writer and campaigner for feminist causes. Both died a few years later and the Trust

proceeded to lease the woodlands to the Forestry Commission for conifer growing. The Commission cleared and ploughed much of Millersford plantation, wrecking important archaeology as it went, such as prehistoric burial mounds, but certainly not installing the alleged extensive networks of artificial drainage. Some of the earlier history survived this onslaught, with the original boundary banks, subdivisions and rides probably dating from the time of inclosure of the woods at about the end of the 18th century. Saved too, was the ornamental woodland near Millersford Copse planted by the Goff family (then owners of the estate) in the 1870s. The Plantation was, I think, used as a sort of pleasure grounds for occupiers of Hale Park, although some conifer planting also took place. I am grateful to the Hale historian, Georgina Babey's writings for much of the detail in this paragraph.

Over half the Brook length here is entirely stable, but erosion has allowed the stream to cut deeply into the ground in places over some of the rest. The process is not particularly dangerous or unattractive. When FE abandoned the fences, my cattle used to spend much of their lives in Millersford Plantation and they survived without so much as a scratch. Unlike the lower sections of the Brook, none of the woodland area is subject to common rights, although FE chooses to let animals in. It might be returned to commercial forestry at any time, subject to any conservation restraints. It is not, according to the "Magic" government website, public access land (except for Mays Firs), although it is freely used by the public.

We need to examine what FE's intended work will comprise, assuming that it obtains the necessary permissions. At the Godshill end of the Brook there will be very large earth movements as the stream is filled up and diverted over most of its length. The entire project is said to involve the import of sixteen thousand tons of gravel to be dumped into the stream, in addition to clay that can be scraped up from the surroundings. Access routes are not finalised, but much material will come in from the Deadman Hill car park, dragged across the adjoining heath for half a mile. Bridges will be removed and replaced by fords. Many hundreds of trees will be felled, completely altering the character of the valley. At the north east end, most of these are birch and willow, but south of the (indispensable but doomed) Millersford Hunting Bridge they are largely picturesque, naturally regenerated, oak and Scots pine. How impassable the southern margin of the Brook will become is difficult to estimate at this stage. Bog already dominates the north bank along which it is impossible to ride and extremely difficult to walk.

Within the Millersford woodlands the approach will be similar, but here will involve the destruction of much of the old estate banks including those built along the former Forest boundary. The banks, key to an understanding and appreciation of the area's history, have existed for centuries and nearby bogs have survived perfectly well and could continue to do so. In these woods felling will be even more drastic than lower downstream as both the old and newly created lines of the stream are cleared of trees to allow access for large machinery. On evidence from other "restored" sites across the Forest, even more trees will be killed if their root systems are flooded by water diverted though the presently well drained woodland.



The tree line on the old Forest boundary bank at Mays Firs to be largely felled to allow for destruction of the earthwork

Finally, in perhaps the most bizarre aspect of the work, two hundred and sixty yards of bank along the old Forest boundary will be destroyed together with innumerable mature oaks and Scots pine which grow on and around it. This area is known as Mays Firs and it too belongs to the National Trust. There is no stream here – just a sporadic “winterbourne” carrying off storm water in wet periods. Presumably this destruction allows another box to be ticked. Mays Firs is not included in the lease to FE. We are promised a fresh round of disruption as the Trust's land to the north, which has never received (or been liable to) artificial drainage is to be subjected to more damage, as yet unspecified.

There will now be some delay until FE decides that it has sufficiently subdued opposition and that a planning permission can be safely secured. So far as I can see, no record of the historical sites likely to be affected has been reflected in the design of the scheme, although we are told that one is being “refined”, following a promise that it would be delivered some weeks ago. This is one example of putting the cart before the horse. No geological assessment has been made of the solid strata exposures that are to be buried, and there seems no consideration of the effects of introducing alien (to this valley) filling material. Such imports will leave the valley permanently contaminated by human artifacts and geological material that do not belong here. Not less important than any of these is the failure to take account of the interests of those who know and love the valley for its peacefulness, natural beauty and accessibility for quiet recreation. The promise of future similar schemes is deeply

disturbing and nobody from Beaulieu to Bramshaw Telegraph should assume that their piece of the Forest is still safe.

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