

New Forest: past, present & future

Dense forest at Rhinefield Walk

The New Forest National Park is up and running as England's first national park for 50 years. **Roly Smith** looks at the issues facing the new park, and samples a walk in this unique area. Photos by **Colin Varndell**.

CAROLINE STRIDE, a fourth generation commoner in the New Forest, has mixed views about the designation of the area as England's latest National Park. As we chatted in the garden of her idyllically-situated Forestry Commission tenanted cottage at Bolderwood, in the heart of what her landlords call the 'Ancient and Ornamental' part of the Forest, she asked the question which many local people have posed: "Did we do such a bad job?"

The Crown, together with other landowners and the commoners (local residents who occupy properties to which are attached common rights) have managed the New Forest and made it what we see today since before the days of William the Conqueror - that is for over 1,000 years. Commoners such as Caroline are entitled to the six common rights of pasture (grazing); mast (turning out of pigs in the 'pannage' season in autumn); estover (gathering of wood

for fuel); turbarry (gathering turf for fuel); marl (a soil used in the past as a fertiliser); and the pasture of sheep. Of these, only the rights of pasture, mast and estover are really important today.

"Many people have a romantic ideal about what it means to be a commoner, but it is hard work," says Caroline. "When we moved to our cottage there was no electricity and we got our water from a well in the garden. It took 168 pumps to get a tank full for a bath: I'll never forget it because I counted it so many times."

Caroline is cautiously optimistic about the new national park. "The area needs protecting and we need the funding that a national park brings. There are major issues like traffic, which hopefully the National Park will be able to sort out. I am disappointed that we seem to have needed yet another level of bureaucracy to do these things, but if they work alongside us and the Forest is always put first, I hope it will work out. The

problem is, as a nation and in most walks of life, we have got so far from the land as to not truly understand it."

Tony Climpson is Tourism Destination Manager for New Forest District Council, and has always been a strong proponent of the national park. "The council has been in the forefront of the promotion of sustainable tourism. We try to combine visitors, the tourism industry, the community and the environment in a state of equilibrium," he said. "I believe that, as Caroline says, if we always put the Forest first, there can only be benefits."

BOUNDARY ISSUES

John Thackray, former chairman of New Forest Ramblers and a spokesman on Forest matters, said: "While we are delighted the national park is here at long last, we remain extremely disappointed about the decisions which have been taken over its boundaries. The Government inspector



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recommended a completely different boundary from that proposed by the Countryside Agency and supported by most Forest bodies, including the Commoners. This means it covers over 38 square miles less than the area proposed by the Countryside Agency, and about seven square miles less than the previously protected AONB and New Forest Heritage Area."

Important areas have been excluded from the national park, such as both sides of the Avon valley in the west and extensive areas of land next to Southampton Water, as well as land north of the A326 in the north east and between the Forest and the developed coastal areas in the south.

With an estimated 18 million visits a year, the 220-square-mile park is one of the smallest. John sees development as the major threat facing the new national park, which is sandwiched between major centres of population. "Planning strategies propose a massive expansion of housing in the Forest's hinterland, all of which will mean more cars, commuters, dogs and people in the Forest."

These pressures were vividly brought home after a flight John made over the Forest while researching the proposed boundaries in 1998. "We could see the vast extent of post-War development which has surrounded and encroached on the Forest. It confirmed that the situation was even more precarious than we had previously envisaged. The Forest is a magnificent area for walking, for wildlife, and for people just wanting to experience the quiet enjoyment of the countryside which designation as a national park should provide. It must be protected."

Even in the months leading up to the creation of the new park, the nearby Dibden Bay area was under threat from development of a huge container port along almost 2kms of shoreline. The Ramblers successfully campaigned against the plans, arguing that they would have a devastating impact.

The New Forest has always been a very special, even unique, place. The measure of its success as a national park will be if those special qualities are retained and enhanced by sensitive and imaginative management.

NATIONAL PARK IN THE MAKING

The New Forest didn't make John Dower's priority list for potential national park status in his seminal 1949 report: he considered its management was being 'adequately dealt with' by the Forestry Commission. But pressure for a national park grew in the 1990s, led by groups such as the Council for National Parks and the Ramblers.

The Labour Party then promised to establish a national park and confirmation of the area's designation came on 1 March 2005. The New Forest National Park Authority consists of 22 members of which 16 are appointed by local authorities, including parish councils, and six by the Secretary of State. It gained its full powers on 1 April this year.

The New Forest NPA has all the powers of other national parks, acting as the local planning and access authority. There are few public footpaths, although the right to roam on foot or horseback has existed from time immemorial on nearly all the Crown land and the adjacent National Trust commons.



Ober Heath is a large expanse of rare lowland habitat near the centre of the Forest

The walk: down in the forest

A three-mile walk from Puttles Bridge, on the Rhinefield Road west of Brockenhurst, gives a fine taste of the varied wildlife habitats of the Forest, and a good test of the special qualities of England's newest national park. Our guide was Forestry Commission (FC) recreation ranger Sally Wood. Sally gained her forestry spurs working in the Mount Baker Forest Preserve in Washington State, USA.

We set off in lovely sunshine walking east through ancient trees under Aldridge Hill up Ober Water, with Whitefield Moor across the river to our right. At a footbridge crossing the stream, we passed through hollies, beeches and pines to emerge from the trees at Aldridgehill Cottage, home to the local gamekeeper whose main job these days is looking after the Forest's herds of red and fallow deer.

Ober Heath stretched out invitingly in front of us now, a heather-clad expanse of lowland heath which is so rare a habitat in southern England today. It is home to a range of threatened species, including Britain's only poisonous snake, the adder; the red-eyed Dartford warbler; and the secretive, night-hunting nightjar, locally known as the 'eve churr' from its spine-chilling, churring call.

As we walked north on a grassy ride it wasn't long before we spotted about 20 red deer hinds basking in the sunshine and resembling a herd of antelope on the African savannah. Sally said they were emerging from the winter in calf and well away from the stags prior to them giving birth in May or June.

Passing by the pond at Fletchers Green we entered the aptly-named Fletchers Thorns, a thicket of hawthorn encroaching on Poundhill Heath. Another herd of red deer hinds immediately spotted us and watched us nervously as they grazed. We'd already seen about half of the total population of red deer in the Forest on our walk.

We walked through stately silver birches to reach Queen's Meadow where a sizeable herd of fallow deer, still in their dark winter coats, were grazing in the far corner. These deer are not native to Britain and they may have been introduced by William the Conqueror in his Nova Foresta, which he established in 1079.

Our walk followed Highland Water, a stream so richly coloured by minerals as to look like the finest Scotch whisky, as it wound past the site of the medieval Queen Bower Hunting Lodge hidden

NEW FOREST FACTS AND FIGURES

- Population: **34,400**
- Total area: **220 sq mls/571 sq km or 57,086 ha**
- Proportion of the national park that is an area of national or international importance for nature conservation: **56%**
- Amount of money the New Forest receives from the Government each year: **£3.5million**
- Scheduled ancient monuments: **61**
- Listed buildings: **634**
- Conservation areas: **18**

away in the trees. Eventually we reached Bolderford Bridge, a popular summer picnic spot for visitors.

Out on the heath again we crossed the heathery expanse of Fletchers Green and back towards Aldridgehill Cottage, re-tracing our steps alongside Ober Water and back to Puttles Bridge.

**THE
NEW FOREST**

For further details on the New Forest, including accommodation and what to see and do visit www.thenewforest.co.uk/walk or for a free brochure ☎ **01590 689000**