

### **The battle of Latchmore Brook**

Residents in the north and west of the Forest show no sign of being intimidated by continuing pressure from the Forestry Commission to "restore" Latchmore Brook. Indeed, the organization and speed with which they have garnered support is impressive. On 22nd February I attended the inaugural meeting of the Friends of Latchmore at the Hyde Memorial Hall — which was filled to overflowing. I understand that 108 people signed the attendance book.

For those who have not been following this saga, the Forestry Commission seeks to fill in parts of Latchmore Brook and to dig out a new channel nearby on a line which it says the stream once followed. In order to achieve this, large numbers of trees have been felled and more are to follow them. Immense quantities of clay and gravel will be imported for the filling operation. This will involve large numbers of heavy lorry movements along tiny Forest lanes and past people's homes. The residents believe that there will be considerable disruption of wildlife, interference with downstream water supplies, increased risks of flooding and a general spoiling of a very beautiful valley. The objective of all this work is that, at a cost of a quarter of a million pounds, a box can be ticked to indicate in Natural England's records that Latchmore is no longer technically in unfavourable condition — a shocking state supposed to exist because generations ago some minor drainage work was carried out to improve grazing. The residents (clearly

blinded by ignorance in the Forestry Commission's view) can see nothing "unfavourable" in the present condition of the valley and they believe that the intended disruption is too high a price for the obscure scientific gain which it is supposed might be achieved.

The campaigners are not going to find this an easy battle because of the immense financial resources ranged against them. On the other hand, I think the Forestry Commission would be well advised not to underestimate the strength of feeling in that part of the Forest. Actually, I don't think they do underestimate it. No less a person than the Deputy Surveyor turned up at the Hyde meeting and it is a good many years since I have seen so exalted an official at this type of gathering. Pacifying the natives is normally left to his staff.

The intended Latchmore operations are another aspect of HLS expenditure in the New Forest, controlled now by a governing board comprising the Deputy Surveyor, the chief executive of the national park and the Official Verderer. Before jumping down on the (to my mind) wrong side of the fence, the Park's chief officer had expressed fears that going ahead with Latchmore in the face of fierce public opposition would affect the good reputation of HLS. Her authority has good reason to be cautious of such actions. The fiasco of attempts to regulate private horse keeping through park planning controls is still fresh in everybody's minds in the New Forest. You don't tangle with an articulate, knowledgeable and extremely unhappy body of local opinion unless you are very sure of being able to crush it.

At the Hyde meeting, the chairman very wisely asked for a show of hands as to how much of the audience was dissatisfied with the explanations given to it by the Forestry Commission as to the nature of and necessity for its intended works. The overwhelming majority expressed dissatisfaction. Now an informal committee has been set up to see how the opposition can be taken forward.