



NEW FOREST NOTES

— DECEMBER —

Latchmore

I have just returned from yet another site visit to the Forestry Commission's most controversial stream filling and diversion project to date. On this occasion the Commission was endeavouring to sell its plans to a distinctly sceptical audience of mostly local residents. There cannot have been many fewer than 100 people present and of these perhaps

15 or so were commission and Natural England staff, along with their supporters, all briefed to argue the case for the promoters. The remainder were locals, commoners and so on with the majority very unhappy with what is intended. Natural England, it appears, has classified the valley as being in "unfavourable condition" because in the distant past drains were dug, with some success, to improve the grazing. It is thus necessary, in the eyes of authority to correct this situation by filling the present stream and constructing another. For this, many trees have been felled and more are proscribed. Flooding patterns and water retention of the stream margins will be manipulated. Thousands of tons of clay and gravel will be imported to achieve these objectives. It is small wonder that lovers of this corner of the Forest are unhappy.

Inevitably with such meetings, the big themes are very difficult to keep in focus. Arguments become concentrated on whether or not bird X will be harmed by the works, how many additional (or fewer) blades of grass will be grown, how many more trees will be felled and how much damage will be done to the archaeology. What really mattered, but was hardly expressed, is whether the scientific benefit of disrupting Latchmore, however short or long that disruption may be, outweighs the unhappiness which will be caused to local people in seeing their favourite bit of the New Forest, in their eyes, violated. To my mind the answer is simple; they should leave Latchmore alone and concentrate their time and money on filling ugly trenches elsewhere in the Forest, where there is likely to be little objection. Latchmore, illustrated and written about by Heywood Sumner, is one of the Forest's gems. It has remained free of mechanical disruption for half a century, whatever drainage may have been undertaken before that. The so called "drain", a term much used by the Forestry Commission's advocates, is in reality a beautiful meandering stream, crossing lawns dotted with knarled thorns and beautifully shaped oaks. To anyone but a hydrologist it has all the characteristics of an entirely natural watercourse.

My feeling is that if the local residents stand their ground they have a fair chance of success in protecting their valley, but the pockets of Natural England are deep (the scheme will cost a quarter of a million pounds) and its tentacles long. Their grip on this project will not easily be released.

Anthony Pasmore

(Anthony Pasmore, who has written extensively on the New Forest, is an elected verderer, farmer and a retired chartered surveyor)