

Presentment to Verderers' Court June 20th 2012

Official Verderer, members of the Verderers' Court, thank you for this opportunity to speak to you. My name is Margaret Bunyard. I am a resident of Ogdens, and a practising commoner. Until last year I worked for Wessex Archaeology, one of the three largest archaeological organisations in Britain.

I am concerned about the impact that the Forestry Commission's 'restoration' works are having on the cultural heritage of the Forest, and in particular the threat posed to the archaeology of Latchmore.

I believe that the project has two major flaws: first the concept of 'restoration', and second the lack of any proper assessment of the benefits and threats posed by the works.

The first point I should like to make is that it is not possible to restore the New Forest to a purely natural state. In fact there is little in the Forest that could strictly be said to be natural. Most of its visible characteristics are the results of human activity, modified by nature. Unfortunately most of the evidence for this early human activity is found in the valleys, which is where most of the Forestry Commission's engineering works are taking place.

Latchmore is particularly rich in archaeological sites, dating from the Bronze Age, 3 or 4,000 years ago, to the Second World War. As many as 15 of these are now at risk. Many are hard to see, and because they have not been properly recorded they are threatened by the contractors' bulldozers. We know how damaging this can be from the recent works at Ditchend, where a prehistoric boiling site was largely obliterated.

There is huge inconsistency over 'restoration' between partners in this project. The National Park Authority, quite rightly, employs an Archaeologist whose role is to safeguard the '*wealth of archaeological and historic features (that) have been preserved*'. At the very time the Forestry Commission is trying to turn the clock back to some unspecified time, the National Park's Archaeologist is recording and preserving sites from WWII which are a mere 60 years old.

At Latchmore the aim is 'to restore the stream to its natural meandering course'. But a study of Ordnance Survey maps, and others dating back 200 years, show little change in the course of the stream. Since then, of its own accord, and in the most natural way, the stream has widened its course, and is well established. If the land and the ecosystem have recovered (as indeed they have at Latchmore) it is generally accepted that the site should be left alone. In fact this recovery has made it an excellent habitat for a wide range of flora and fauna, including rare species.

It is also well-loved by visitors because it is beautiful, level and accessible. It is therefore not a place for experiments in extreme scientific theories, which might be undertaken in the more remote parts of the Forest.

The second point I would like to make is that there has been no proper assessment of the threats and benefits of the works at Latchmore. The Court is aware that, inexcusably, no specific environmental assessment has been done. This is also true for the cultural heritage,

and the consequences are just as devastating: once an archaeological site has been destroyed it cannot be recovered.

The archaeological report carried out for Latchmore was appallingly weak. Of the 15 known sites only one was correctly recorded, and 10 were missed altogether. One of these was the large World War II illuminated target, the best preserved structure of the Ashley Range. Another was the low level target which is exceptionally vulnerable because it is right beside the proposed materials route. A group of 120 pits and mounds outside Alderhill were wrongly recorded as bee gardens when they are in fact prehistoric earthworks, the second largest pit and mound complex so far recorded in the New Forest. This inadequate report gives no confidence at all that the numerous remains at Latchmore will even be recognised, let alone preserved.

The record for other sites is just as bad. At Latchmore, Ditchend, Roe and Fletchers Water a total of 43 archaeological sites are affected. But the Commission only managed to make a proper record of four, and failed altogether to include as many as 26 sites.

Archaeology is part of the planning process. None of us here would be able to so much as put up a conservatory without planning consent, which includes archaeological caveats. We would face enormous fines and possibly even a custodial sentence. And yet the Forestry Commission is embarking on a project which affects 2 km of the stream, without proper assessment of the threats to the ecology and cultural heritage of the area.

It is, in fact, in direct contravention of its own Archaeology and Cultural Heritage Objectives, which are:

'To record, preserve, manage and increase the understanding of the wealth of archaeological sites on the Crown Lands to help protect the ancient heritage of the New Forest.'

Not only that. It is surely in breach of the HLS Agreement which includes this requirement:

'To protect archaeological and historic features do not place anything likely to cause ground disturbance on or near the features. Do not locate new access routes on or near the features. Maintain vegetative cover over historic features where appropriate.'

It would seem then that even the grant awarding body could not approve the works at Latchmore as they stand. A proper environmental impact assessment must be done to see whether any possible benefits would outweigh the potentially disastrous effect of these works.

I urge the Verderers to withhold their support for the work at Latchmore until such an assessment has been made, and to prevent the destruction of this beautiful place.