



NEW FOREST NOTES

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Latchmore's ancient history in peril

Among the objections to the Forestry Commission's proposed engineering works at Latchmore Brook is one from the New Forest History and Archaeology Group. Along with other comments, it can be seen on the national park authority's website, <http://bit.ly/2bVCuRJ> and it makes very depressing reading. The planning application is supported by what is called an Environmental Impact Assessment and part of this is supposed to record the historic and archaeological landscapes affected by the intended work. This it attempts to do over 28 pages, at the end of which it concludes that there is really no problem and that the works can go ahead.

The assessment is as inaccurate and incomplete as so many of the archaeological reports prepared for the Forestry Commission over recent years. Of the 283 historic features supposed to exist near to the works, about 135 or 45% are wrongly recorded. In other words, they are shown in the wrong place, seriously misin-

terpreted, duplicated or are sites which do not exist in fact. Only 78 sites are correctly recorded, the balance being features of no consequence like gravel pits, or else are site records needing further research. It also seems likely that close to 100 sites have been omitted altogether, although this cannot be checked until the bracken disappears in the late winter. These are really distressing statistics in an assessment of a place such as the New Forest which is supposed to be valued for its historic environment.

One might have supposed that in preparing an assessment of this importance to the Forest, a careful field examination of each feature would have been regarded as essential, but it is clear that this has not been done in the majority of cases. Whole classes of earthworks which are key to the Forest's history have been overlooked, including the numerous charcoal pits in the area, the great silvicultural inclosures and widespread evidence of early agriculture — probably of Saxon or Mediaeval origin, although much is also prehistoric. Even the sites for which the Forest is best known — its Roman pottery industry — are very badly recorded or omitted.

No doubt official ranks will, as usual, close in support of the developer and, unless the application is called in by central government, the fate of this most historically important part of the Forest will be determined by the NPA as planning authority. One of the leading opponents of the Latchmore stream-filling, Professor John Shepherd, has pointed out that the NPA has a serious conflict of interests in being one of the 'partners' in the HLS scheme which would be financing the developer while at the same time sitting in judgement on the work it is itself to pay for! If there was sufficient justification for the Denny oil drilling application to be called in, the Latchmore development must surely have an even better claim to such consideration.

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