PART 5. BOUNDARY SECTIONS 13-15 (The Avon Valley)

INTRODUCTION

5.1 The objections in these boundary sections can most conveniently be reported under the following sub-areas:

Proposals to retract the boundary

- retraction to the present western boundary of the NFHA;
- the exclusion of Ringwood and nearby land;
- the exclusion of land at Breamore;
- the exclusion of land at St Catherines Hill/Town Common/Blackwater Hill.

Proposals to extend the boundary

- land west to the Moors River;
- land to the west of the Avon between Town Common and Fordingbridge;
  - sub-area between Town Common and Ashley;
  - sub-area at Ashley, east of the A338;
  - sub-area between Ringwood and Fordingbridge;
- land in and around Fordingbridge;
- land between Fordingbridge and Downton;
- land east of Burton;
- Christchurch Harbour and Hengistbury Head

PROPOSALS FOR RETRACTION OF THE BOUNDARY

1. Retraction to the present western boundary of the Heritage Area

Introduction

5.1 A number of objectors suggest that the National Park should extend no further west than the present boundary of the NFHA. Organisations with this view are a consortium of Dorset Local Authorities – Dorset County Council (189), Christchurch Borough Council (202) and
East Dorset District Council (83); a consortium of quarrying organisations – New Milton Sand and Ballast (186), RMC Aggregates (220) & Tarmac Southern (351); and the Hinton and Avon Tyrrell Estates (118 and 162), originally submitted in the names of Meyrick Estate Management and Mr Manners.

5.2 A further objector – J Woolley (104) – suggests a line slightly further west than the NFHA, following the line of the B3347 between Burton and Ringwood, skirting the town, and then generally following the line of the perambulation northwards.

5.3 In addition, the Christchurch and District Sports Club (370) shares the Dorset Authorities’ opposition to the inclusion of any land in the Borough of Christchurch. In the Club’s view establishment of the NFNP could reduce future opportunities for outdoor physical recreation available to Borough residents if suitable land around the edge of the town cannot be developed to meet shortfalls in recreational space because priority has to be given to landscape protection.

The case for the Dorset Authorities

5.4 The evidence for the Dorset Authorities concentrates on the Lower Avon Valley south of Ringwood (boundary section 13) because this equates with their main objective which is to exclude all areas of Dorset from the Park. The Lower Avon Valley is regarded as a separate Landscape Character Area (CD127) so a boundary including land in the valley to the north of Ringwood could be logical. There is no reason why the whole of the valley from Christchurch to Downton should be included and in any case the Agency itself omits some parts of the river terraces.

5.5 The Landscape Assessor’s report deals with submissions made by the authorities on the general conceptual matters set out beneath in relation to the ‘natural beauty’ criterion.

- The statutory natural beauty criterion was applied at all stages of determining the NFHA boundary. This is apparent from the LUC report (CD206), the evidence of that report’s author to the first local plan inquiry, and from the two reports of the Local Plan Inspectors. While the present NFHA boundary does not bind the Agency, if there are well-justified reasons for departing from it, the NFHA represents a robust, defensible and appropriate limit to the National Park;

- The current national landscape assessment guidelines (CD229) have not been applied in a transparent way. Too much weight has been placed on the national-level New Forest Countryside Character Area (CD209, p156) and the New Forest District Landscape Character Assessment (CD127) and not enough upon assessment of the factors that lead to value being assigned to landscape as set out in CD229. For instance, it is impossible to find any assessment of the rarity or otherwise of the landscape of the river terrace farmlands or any consideration of whether the Valley is a wild landscape. Nor is there any clear assessment of the tranquillity of the heathland areas to the west of the Avon.

- Rather than ensuring that the Lower Avon Valley meets the statutory criteria in its own right, the Agency has placed too much emphasis on seeking to establish that it has common character or links with the New Forest core. It is certainly appropriate and necessary to establish substantial linkages so as to meet the Agency’s own policy (CD301 para 51 and CD237 para 11) but this should be done after the statutory criteria have been satisfied or as
part of the ‘especially desirable’ requirement [S5(2) of the 1949 Act] because it is a New Forest National Park that is to be established. The approach has become too dependent on a wide interpretation of ‘forest landscape’ with the result that areas deemed to be historically or culturally connected have been assessed as having outstanding natural beauty irrespective of the actual condition of the modern landscape or its current intrinsic attraction or interest.

**Natural beauty**

5.6 The Lower Avon Valley comprises 3 landscape types – the Avon terrace farmlands, mainly east of the river; the Avon floodplain; and the heaths and pine forests to the west of the floodplain. There are strong contrasts between these landscape types and they are all different from those in the NFHA, containing few of the 4 key characteristics of forest landscape identified by LUC – ie, wooded character, heathy character, ancient character and commoning influences. Including these areas in the NFNP on the basis that they provide ‘different’ landscape types for the Park would result in the inclusion of an eclectic range of landscape types insufficiently connected with the Forest.

5.7 The Avon river terraces make a clear break from the edge of the Forest plateau and the rich mosaic of mixed landscapes which it contains. On the terraces there is no heathland and woodland cover is generally sparse, the main concentrations being close to Ripley Wood and around the Bisterne Estate. The area is generally flat and composed of 19th century enclosures with regular square shaped fields and a simple pattern of unexceptional intensive agricultural management. Views across expanses of often featureless farmland are either contained by simple hedgelines or, in summer, by tall maize crops. This type of landscape dominates much of the English countryside and here produces no strong sense of place. The river terrace landscapes therefore fail outright in terms of distinctive character. This area was rejected as a New Forest landscape type by the LUC report and that approach has been followed by the two Local Plan Inspectors.

5.8 Referring to condition, unspoilt character and intrusions, the river terrace landscape east of Burton village is curtailed by the tall east-west railway embankment. Areas of farmland have suffered field amalgamation and there are a number of substantial farm buildings. The poor condition of this area has been partially accepted by the agency in a boundary revision between the public and local authority consultation stages but this does not reflect the wider more average condition of the terrace landscape.

5.9 The Lower Avon terraces have little ecological interest and there are no SSSIs and only a few SINCs.

5.10 The Avon floodplain has a more distinctive character than the terraces. The braided and meandering channels represent an evolving landscape with an element of instant interest and a sense of an untamed environment. Most of the riverside areas comprise a secluded and very private landscape with minimal human activity. As such, they are highly sensitive to intrusion or increased activity. The river is set within a very low lying landscape and the channel is often lost to view, even within accessible parts of the flood plain. Because of the open terrace landscapes to the east and elements of the urban landscapes to the west, the river corridor does not have a strong landscape setting. The river is a very attractive feature and the flood plain has a sense of place, especially where the river is visible, but this is highly sensitive to the noise and visual intrusion of the urban area and infrastructure.
5.11 As a landscape resource the Lower Avon flood plain is a good example of a low lying floodplain landscape but it is not the only example in Dorset and Hampshire. Others in Dorset are the Frome, Piddle, and Stour. The area of the Avon affected by the ESA designation (CD300 A&B) extends in a long narrow corridor from Christchurch to Netheravon, north of Salisbury. Appropriate management of land use within the corridor is already provided for through the ESA scheme. Although this has not yet achieved all its aims a lot of land has been taken into the lower tier funding schemes. Much more needs to be done but it is clear what this involves. Addition of the floodplain to the NFNP will not achieve further benefits in that respect.

5.12 The Avon Valley SSSI citation does not show links with the New Forest. The SSSI’s interest arises from the Avon’s nature as a chalk river. Although there are references to this being supplemented by acid streams draining from the New Forest Heaths these contribute little volume, especially in dry summer months, and do not have a clear effect on the overall river ecology. The public consultation draft of the River Avon SAC Strategy makes no reference to any links between the management of these European sites and the New Forest core.

5.13 The lower section of the floodplain between the railway embankment and the A35 is dominated by these two major items of infrastructure and is heavily compromised by overhead power transmission lines (including 4 pylons within the flood plain). To the west there is a sewage treatment works and to the east a supermarket.

5.14 To the north of the railway the floodplain landscape is in generally good condition but is heavily influenced by the railway embankment, the sizeable village of Burton extending deep into the southern section of the valley, a power line and the water treatment works to the west. The smaller Cowards Marsh/Dudmoor Farm area is a semi-remote backwater with elements of suburban development.

5.15 The western heaths at St Catherines Hill and Leybrook Common are distinctive landscapes with a sense of place but are small parts of a suite of much more extensive areas of mixed heath and forest to the west of the land within the designation order. They are undoubtedly valuable as representative or rare resources and, at a superficial level, are similar to the heathlands of the New Forest. However, they are part of the different collection of Dorset Heaths, the vast majority of which are SSSIs and component parts of the Dorset Heaths eSAC, SPA and RAMSAR (189/3/3 app1 and CD232).

5.16 On ecological grounds the inclusion of some heathlands to the west of the Avon, as opposed to others, is essentially arbitrary. Any reliance on specific ecological characteristics would be difficult to justify. The heaths to the west of the Avon Valley included in the Order show affinities with all heathlands of southeast Dorset and the New Forest but there are a few features that link them with others to the west of the river. West of the Avon the substrate is generally sandier than elsewhere in Dorset or the New Forest and sand sedge (Carex arenaria) is a more constant feature of the dry heath communities. The boggy heaths in this area regularly support hare’s tail grass (Eriophorum vaginatum), a rarity on other heaths in Dorset and the Forest.

5.17 Unlike the New Forest, the Dorset Heaths have not been subject to continuing traditional land management practices. Consequently important habitats and species have been coming under increasing threat through natural succession, accumulation of humus, lack of poaching by stock, and human influences such as fires, erosion, tipping, predation of protected species by domestic pets and rats, and poor public perception.
5.18 To address these problems Dorset County Council is leading a partnership project known as the Urban Heaths Life Project, with major European funding (189/3/3 app6). This will include tackling issues affecting the heathlands at St Catherine’s Hill and Town Common.

5.19 North of Town Common significant intrusion can be expected in future from the allocated minerals site close to Avon Causeway at Avon Common. Although this area has been excluded from the proposed designation it could have an impact on the adjacent area of floodplain.

5.20 This area is also located below the final approach path to Bournemouth International Airport, which is within 1500m of the Agency’s NFNP boundary (see 189/1/2 app13). The future of the airport is clearly defined in adopted development plans. Continued expansion of airport facilities and associated employment land is a key feature of the South West Regional Strategy (RPG10), yet inclusion within the Park of land west of the NFHA boundary could threaten the operational integrity of the airport. Examples of concerns about this issue are (a) that the New Forest Committee’s draft strategy for the New Forest (CD215) calls for special guidance to control noise impacts from aircraft using the airport and (b) that the Council for National Parks opposed an application for a new passenger terminal (granted permission in October 2001) on grounds of possible impacts on the proposed NFNP.

5.21 189/1/2 app 16 gives details of current and predicted aircraft movements at the airport and indicates how the Avon Valley would be affected by noise contours under the expansion plans if these were implemented.

5.22 Not far to the north is Matchams Stadium (400m outside the Agency’s NFNP boundary). This is an established motor sports stadium (used for stock car racing and scramble bikes) which is recognised by the East Dorset Local Plan as conflicting with other nearby users because of noise impacts. Noise from this source, and from the heavy traffic on the north-south A338 dual carriageway severely affects the quality of the experience for visitors to Leybrook Common, including the viewpoint at Matchams View. In any case the viewpoint is some way from the core of the New Forest and is a poor place from which to attempt interpretation of it. While there are skyline views towards the perambulation on the opposite plateau these are often obscured by vegetation or the weather conditions, or seen against the sun. The more natural views obtained from here look southwards across the valley to Christchurch, Hengistbury Head and the Isle of Wight.

5.23 Turning to tranquillity and wildness, areas within the NFHA have these characteristics and although there are some intrusive elements such as the A31 corridor the landscape is capable of absorbing them. However, the Agency has provided little analysis of whether or where the Avon Valley has these qualities and the more open landscape here has less capacity to absorb disruptive elements of infrastructure. Fig JD T5 (189/189/4/3/G) illustrates that the Avon Valley is influenced by differing degrees of noise and visual intrusion. Ironically, the visually unremarkable landscape of the terrace farmlands is identified as among the most tranquil areas of the lower valley. On the other hand the heathlands and floodplain are affected by major roads and the presence of built-up areas. Overall there are no Zone E landscapes and only very limited areas of Zone D.

5.24 On the issue of scenic quality, the New Forest core contains open expanses, woodland lawns and picturesque villages, all of which are inherently attractive. In contrast, the Avon
Valley contains some locations that provide attractive views but their focus is generally the river itself as seen from higher ground where the meandering river creates natural landscape patterns that attract the eye. At a lower level there are some glimpsed views from the edge of the river terrace to the Avon and its meadows. On the eastern edge of the terraces there are attractive glimpsed views towards the wooded slopes of the Forest edge and from some places the low wooded ridge of St Catherines Hill/Town Common is a modest landmark. However, these varied views are not outstanding and their distribution is limited to discrete parts of the valley. Overall, they do not compare with the level of scenic quality expected within a National Park or AONB.

5.25 Turning to cultural and historical associations, the Agency claims (CD 107, page 32) that in the Lower Avon Valley ‘The land historically was part of the more densely settled farming zone that encircled the forest core, linked to the core via old droveways, and merits inclusion in the National Park on that basis.’ However, the evidence at 189/2/1-3 shows that the actual or potential links identified by the Agency are tenuous at best. In most respects the issues identified by the Agency (even if factually correct) would not constitute tangible links that users of the park could identify or connect with. The contrast in landscape types and the lack of visible individual features suggests that this is an aspect of natural beauty that few would recognise without full knowledge of comprehensive interpretation information. Even if strong cultural and heritage associations could be identified they would not be sufficient to justify including landscapes with the attributes of the Lower Avon Valley.

5.26 While some land within the objection area has rights of common these rights are widespread in many areas away from the core. They do not reflect the current active position in relation to commoning. They may never have done so because disafforestation of the New Forest was being considered at the time when the register was compiled (1858) and it was in landowners’ interests to register as much land as possible because the register would have formed the basis for compensation claims. In many cases whole farms were registered, including land well away from the core.

5.27 As far as the Lower Avon Valley is concerned the ERM report (CD126) identifies only 3 practising常见ers from Dorset, 2 from Sopley and 8-18 from Ringwood, with generally low numbers of stock turned out. Some common land in the southern part of the valley (eg Town Common) is grazed by the Christchurch Commoners who have no rights on the New Forest and are not part of its historic pastoral system.

5.28 CD219, which comprises a historic review of the loss of commonable grazing land in the New Forest, does not identify links between the current nature conservation management of the Avon Valley and New Forest. This report presents a somewhat idyllic view of pre-1964 straying and verge-grazing. It seems to aspire to show the desirability of reintroducing grazing to the adjacent commons (although many of those listed as such ceased to be commons at the time of the enclosures), the dispersed commons and other former grazing areas.

5.29 This is curious because the straying of stock was generally regarded with disfavour by commoners and others alike. Commoners were fined to recover stock from former pounds in the straying areas and actively selected ‘lane and hedge haunters’ for removal from the forest. While the presence of grazed verges had an impact on the landscape this diminished with distance from the core and few stock reached the Avon. The claim at p5 of the report that ‘...the extent of summer straying equates to the functional extent of the New Forest’ is hard to substantiate today. So to is the conclusion that ‘...if a National Park is to be established, the
boundary should include the former extent of summer straying as defined by this report’ (at map 1).

5.30 The development of the Avon water meadows in the late seventeenth century increased the potential for keeping larger numbers of healthy stock over the winter but there is no evidence that this was supplied to stock depastured on the Forest and English Nature’s claim on that matter is unsubstantiated.

5.31 Although the Large Bounds may have extended to the Avon in 1257-1280 they were later forgotten and are not substantial evidence of any link between the valley and the forest. No eighteenth, nineteenth or twentieth century writers referred to them until they were rediscovered in the 1970s and described by Stagg (189/2/2 app1). Tubbs (189/2/2 app2) considered that the Large Bounds of 1280 should be ‘interpreted as part of a more general and ultimately unsuccessful attempt to further the territorial ambitions of the Crown in the 12\textsuperscript{th} and 13\textsuperscript{th} centuries.’ Although heathlands of similar character to the New Forest may have existed on the river terraces before the enclosures it is unlikely that these areas (or other surviving relics of common such as those in the urban area of Highcliffe) were actually administered as part of the New Forest.

5.32 On the Domesday Manors mentioned in the ‘Links Paper’ (CD237), analysis of entries is difficult as manors were not always single units. The connection between separate sections is not always clear and none of the manors along the Avon Valley had been completely included in the Forest. Medieval court records do not make mention of any places in the Avon Valley.

5.33 References in CD237 to well preserved small parliamentary fields on the river terraces are linked to a series of 5 local enclosures between 1802 and 1868. However, 162 Inclosure Acts were passed in Hampshire. Fields relating to this period of agricultural history are comparatively common and there is no evidence that these field systems are of any particular importance.

5.34 Turning to drove roads, the Agency places considerable emphasis on the presence of these features. The thesaurus to the National Monuments Record defines a drove road as ‘a road or track specifically used by drovers or herders to drive their animals to market.’ This precise definition may not actually apply to any of the roads running out of the forest although the Agency implies that the roads came into being for the purpose of moving stock between the core and the valley.

5.35 There is no evidence that this practice actually took place either significantly or at all. The only evidence for ‘drove roads’ linking the two areas appears to be to the north of Ringwood where ‘drove’ is used as an element of a few road names. However there is the possibility that ‘drove’ has nothing to do with the movement of stock. On Ibsley and Gorley Commons the dialect word ‘droke’ was recorded at the beginning of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century as meaning a sunken trackway. Reference to roads shown on pre-and post-enclosure maps does not suggest the existence of any special link between the Forest and the valley beyond that to be expected between any adjacent areas of land.

5.36 The agency claims that ‘the historical evidence clearly shows that the Avon Valley is and always has been part of the New Forest land management system.’ However, there is a complete absence of any reference to land use in the Avon Valley in accounts of the past economy of the New Forest commoners.
5.37 On the issue of artistic and literary links, the boundary study (CD126) suggests that 19th century writers such as Gilpin and Wise (who were highly influential in the New Forest’s rise to popularity as a recreational landscape) perceived the Forest as extending westwards to the Avon. However, Wise’s book, written in 1863 as a guide for visitors to the New Forest, contains a typical description of the Avon Valley as a place separate from the Forest:

‘The valley of the Avon should certainly be seen, both because large parts of its manors and villages once stood in the Forest, as also for the contrast which it now affords to the neighbouring Forest scenery. Nothing can be so different to the moors (of the New Forest) we have just left as the (Avon) Valley. Though close to them, you might imagine you were suddenly transported into one of the Midland Counties, and were walking by the side of the Warwickshire, instead of the Wiltshire Avon’

5.38 Although Gilpin refers to the ancient boundary of the Forest as running down to the Avon, his comments on the valley also point out the differences between the two areas:

‘Along the banks of the Avon, from Ringwood to the sea, the whole surface is flat, inclosed and cultivated. There is little beauty in this part.

From Ringwood to Christchurch the country is flat, and the lanes close and woody. Scarce any distant view is admitted, except here and there, among the meadows on the right. On the left, Mr Compton’s park at Bistern affords some variety, running a considerable way along the road.’

5.39 Turning to cultural perceptions, it is difficult to find any New Forest artist who regarded the Avon Valley as an integral part of the area, eg Cornish (1894), Hutchinson (1904) and Rawnsley (1904). Although Pike painted in both areas (1846-1907) he also painted in South Devon.

5.40 Heywood Sumner is a notable artist who moved to the Avon Valley in 1802 and subsequently became the pioneer of New Forest archaeology. He made numerous drawings of the Forest and some of the Valley but his writings always regard them as separate (although one edition of Wise contains some illustrations by him of both areas).

5.41 Works of fiction also fail to make a link between the Forest and the Valley. The action in Children of the New Forest (Marryat 1847) never strays into the Avon Valley. In Skewbald (Seaby 1923) the Avon Valley is perceived as a distant place although the hero (a forest pony) strays from the then ungridded forest and wanders through lanes around Lymington. In The White Company (Doyle 1890) some time is spent in Christchurch but the implication is that the town is well outside the Forest boundary.

5.42 On archaeology, the scheduled monuments on St Catherine’s Hill and Town Common show no significant links with the New Forest. The Round Barrows are similar but are also similar to those found to the north and west. The only unusual monument is the ‘chapel’ site claimed to be linked with Christchurch Priory.

5.43 Finally, it is worthwhile looking at the qualities of the New Forest previously recorded as the reasons why it was felt to have outstanding natural beauty. These are set out in CD207 p46-52 and the LUC report (CD206) and are usefully paraphrased in the NFNP boundary study (CD126). They are:
an outstanding historic landscape. The most intact survival of a medieval hunting forest and pastoral system in England, if not Europe, although the origins of the system of land management are in fact much earlier. In addition it is of prime cultural importance, as the only Royal Forest where traditional ownership and practices survive.

A landscape with unique character. The forest is a mosaic of old woodland, managed forestry enclosures, extensive tracts of heathland with boggy ground, grassy lawns and enclosed areas of farmland and villages. In other words it is an intimate mix of a distinctive set of landscape types. There are particularly clear historical and functional linkages between all of these different landscape types.

A landscape with aesthetic appeal. As noted in CD207 the New Forest has long been a source of artistic inspiration. Over the years it has inspired writers, artists and photographers whose work has helped to shape other people's image of the forest. The picturesque qualities of the landscape are seen as being particularly English, and to many present an image of ideal countryside.

5.44 The Lower Avon Valley does not accord with these attributes. CD126 appears to suggest that the valley has been included to provide a landscape type not represented within the NFHA. A landscape character test is set out in a table to provide a yardstick for judgement of quality and potential for inclusion in the NFNP. This is a simple confusion between character and quality. The questions posed on page 25 of CD126 do not address several of the key points that need to be addressed in assigning value to landscapes.

5.45 The concept that the New Forest could form a National Park has been around for many years. The NFHA defines the area that most people would understand as the New Forest and, on the eastern side of the Avon Valley, marks a clear division between landscapes of different type and quality.

Opportunities for open-air recreation

5.46 There is no transparent assessment or audit of recreational opportunities in the Lower Avon Valley and the Agency has provided no justification for including substantial areas not meeting the statutory criteria.

5.47 The Agency recognises (CD301, para 24), that National Park designation requires that opportunities must exist (or potentially exist) to provide a markedly superior recreational experience within a landscape that is different from the bulk of normal countryside. These opportunities need to be substantial, realistic and realisable, based on the resource of the area’s natural beauty, and represented by more than a network of rights of way.

5.48 However, the Agency provides no coherent assessment of the Lower Avon Valley in this respect. The Dorset Authorities’ audit (at 189/4/3/JDT4) confirms that there is a very distinct difference between the resources and potential found within the NFHA on one hand and the Lower Avon Valley on the other. Contrasting with the extensive tracts of access land in the former, the latter has only occasional pockets of common land.

5.49 The river terraces have a network of minor lanes and footpaths providing a good level of access to the farmland but this is the area of least visual interest within the valley. The level of
provision here is not unusual within the countryside generally and, as the Agency accepted, does not provide a markedly superior recreational experience in its own right.

5.50 The floodplain itself is a difficult landscape to explore because of the limited number of crossings and the general absence of accessible routes. The Avon Valley Path only comes into close contact with the river near Christchurch and on the outskirts of Ringwood. This is a desirable situation from the standpoint of the ecological importance of the River Avon, which is considerable. Much of the floodplain is an SSSI, cSAC, SPA and RAMSAR site, recognised internationally for its wintering bird populations, particularly Bewick’s Swan and Gadwall and nationally for its European Goose and Pochard. It is also one of the eight most important areas in Britain for breeding waders on wet lowlands grassland, particularly Lapwing, Snipe and Redshank. Lack of access and consequent minimal human interference may one of several reasons for the presence of these populations.

5.51 The Agency has taken account of the potential for improving access to the river to assist opportunities for understanding and enjoying the area’s special qualities. However, this could be difficult to secure because of the existence of extensive fishing rights, the flooded nature of the riverside areas during much of the winter, and the probable impact on bird populations. In any case it is questionable whether the NPA would afford priority to enhancing facilities in such a peripheral part of the Park for a limited number of people. It is also relevant to note that there appears to be limited scope for recreational opportunities to be promoted as a payment option within the ESA scheme for the Avon Valley. As for visual contact with the river, even this is hard to obtain from many public vantage points.

5.52 The Lower Avon Valley cannot be viewed as an extension to the New Forest resource simply on the basis that the sum of its parts is greater than the whole. Nor is it reasonable to do so on the grounds that the inclusion of marginal areas brings the Park closer to the population of Bournemouth or creates opportunities for relocating pressurised facilities such as car parks, camping facilities, visitor centres and country parks away from fragile sites into ‘marginal’ areas. CD104 page 54 (final sentence) raises the suspicion that the designated area has been stretched to offer new scope for meeting recreational needs in a sustainable way and alleviating pressures on the Forest core. Such measures can be provided outside the Park, as exemplified by Moors Valley Country Park.

5.53 West of the river, the areas within the Order comprise small pockets left on the eastern side of the busy A338 dual carriageway. This road is a major barrier to recreational access since there are only 4 crossings within a 9 kilometre length, one of which is an at-grade footpath and another a main road.

5.54 Dorset County Council is seeking to contain access to these areas on ecological grounds and is confident that it has the necessary resources to manage them effectively as part of the chain of Dorset Heaths through the Urban Heaths Life Project. This will invest some £2.4m in the period 2001-05 on, among other things, countryside wardening and public education.

5.55 The larger area of heathland (Town Common) mainly serves immediate local residents in the Jumpers Common area as it is isolated from elsewhere and parking opportunities are very limited. From an ecological standpoint it is not suited for recreational use by large numbers of people and aerial photographs show existing problems of footpath erosion (189/4/3e). The Agency accepts that additional access to the area should not be encouraged, yet one of the principal reasons for including St Catherine’s Hill Town Common and Leybrook Common is
that they provide public viewpoints to allow appreciation of the Avon Valley landscape, so further pressures are likely to be brought about by their inclusion.

5.56 Separation of these heaths from the rest of the Dorset Heaths does not make sense in management terms and the Dorset strategy already involves trying to divert pressures from St Catherine’s Hill and Town Common to the Forestry Commission’s nearby Hurn Forest complex. Inclusion of Leybrook Common would also damage the Dorset County Council’s holistic approach by severing it from other areas of Avon Heath Country Park, of which it is part, and further visitors could endanger ground-nesting birds.

5.57 It is the wrong approach to brush aside the potential for damage to be caused in Avon heathlands or the floodplain, waiting to see if a problem arises and then attempting through the NPA’s budget to solve them by management. It is not ‘especially desirable that the necessary measures’ (of designation and the establishment of an NPA) be taken to include them within the Park. Indeed it may be especially undesirable to do so because there is no budgetary gap for a NPA to fill. The LIFE project has already increased wardening resources and funds for work on the ground at Town Common and splitting the Dorset Heaths in this way is only likely to introduce confusion.

5.58 The Christchurch Borough Local Plan includes a policy for the creation of a small country park at the southern end of the common at Cowards Marsh/Dudmoor Farm. This is a long-standing modest proposal aimed at securing improved and controlled access within the context of the sensitive nature conservation designation and should not change the very locally based patronage of the common.

The case for the Quarrying Consortium

5.59 Chapters 3 and 4 refer to a number of general conceptual matters raised by the consortium in the context of boundary sections 3-10 and 11-12. These matters are dealt with in the Landscape Assessor’s report. In addition, a further matter was raised in the context of the Avon Valley as follows:

- there are no grounds for extending the NFNP any nearer to the Avon Valley than the existing line of the NFHA, especially as the valley has never had previous national, county or local landscape designations. The NFHA is the area put forward after professional appraisal by LUC (CD206) and generally accepted by the two NFDLP Inspectors as meeting the statutory criterion of outstanding natural beauty. An early (pre LUC) version of the NFHA was also referred to by the Government in its reference to the New Forest as a candidate World Heritage Site, but only in the sense of expressing doubt as to whether it would all qualify.

Natural beauty

5.60 The Avon Valley river terraces between Ringwood and Ibsley have been subject to extensive sand and gravel extraction. This tract now typically comprises lakes edged by narrow banks planted with trees. There are occasional clearings and grassed paths together with recreational facilities including angling, water-sports and bird-watching. Extraction is active in some areas. In such cases screening bunds generally surround the sites and their associated plant, concrete block works and haul routes. Information about the planning permissions, after-care schemes, and time-scales of these sites is at 220/1/5, 6 & 11.
5.61 North of Ibsley and south of Ringwood the river terraces comprise medium to large fields growing arable crops and improved grass. Field boundaries are marked by low hedgerows and occasional hedgerow trees. There are small villages with more recent linear development associated with the A338 and the lanes running perpendicular to it.

5.62 All of the terraces from Fordingbridge to Burton (including the lakes and extraction areas) are described by LUC (CD206) as type 9 ‘terrace farmlands’ apart from a small area at Rockford. This is an intensively farmed landscape with a medium to large scale regular field pattern. The lack of wooded enclosures allows long views to the wooded slopes and, in places, heathland summits along both sides of the valley. As described by LUC this is ‘a simple farmed landscape with few ancient features and little heathland character.’

5.63 The New Forest District Landscape Assessment (CD127) describes the key issues for the gravel/mineral extraction areas as ‘change in land use; lack of biodiversity; changes in visual character of the area; impacts on adjacent areas in terms of noise, visual amenity, air quality and traffic; erosion of landscape pattern and historic routes.’ This is not a description of an area meeting the natural beauty criterion.

5.64 Comparing the lakes and workings against the assessment criteria set out in the national guidance for assessing landscape value (CD229), the consortium’s assessment is as follows:-

- Landscape quality:- Loss of original landform, land use, vegetation, and visual character; erosion of landscape pattern. Working areas have low quality. Restored water areas have better quality.

- Scenic quality:- Impacts on adjacent areas in terms of visual amenity. Working areas have low scenic quality. Restored water areas are attractive; but very different to the original and to Forest landscapes.

- Rarity:- Gravel workings and lakes are common throughout Britain.

- Representativeness:- The character is of gravel workings and lakes, which are not representative of the New Forest.

- Conservation interests:- Low on working areas. Restored lakes have nature conservation designations for wintering wildfowl, not characteristic of the New Forest.

- Wildness:- Working landscapes and man-made restoration.

- Associations:- Limited artistic representations or poetry related to mineral workings.

- Tranquillity:- Impacts on adjacent areas in terms of noise, visual amenity, air quality and traffic.

5.65 The New Forest District Landscape Assessment describes the key issues for the river terrace farmlands as ‘mineral extraction; loss of ancient deciduous woodland and replacement with conifer plantation; hedgerow loss and fragmentation of the network; and new roadside development.’ Again, these do not suggest landscapes of natural beauty at the national (or local) level.
5.66 The river terraces can be assessed against the national criteria as follows:-


- Scenic quality:- Flat, open, and intensively farmed with medium to large scale regular field pattern. Ordinary lowland British countryside.

- Rarity:- Common throughout lowland Britain.

- Representativeness:- Not a particularly strong character, nor representative of any New Forest landscapes.

- Conservation interests:- None in river terrace farmlands

- Wildness:- Cultivated, not wild.

- Associations:- There may be painting and literature about the floodplain landscapes of the Avon Valley to the west and there are many about the quite different New Forest landscape to the east.

- Tranquillity:- Mineral extraction. Busy A338 traverses the area north to south. Major urban areas of Ringwood and Christchurch.

5.67 Turning to the floodplain, parts of the flood meadows have their scenic attractions and charms together with ecological designations intended to protect the lush habitats and the species they attract. However, these are not New Forest landscapes and are separated from the core by the wide belt of 1-2km of undistinguished terrace farmlands lacking New Forest character. As indicated in CD301 (para 18) it was recognised at the Dartmoor National Park Variation Order Inquiry that ‘the critical test for boundary making in this case was whether the landscape was of both Dartmoor character and national quality’.

5.68 Referring specifically to the floodplain north of Fordingbridge, this should also be excluded although it was included in the NFHA under the back-up grazing criterion. This is the only place where the floodplain abuts the Forest landscapes without any intervening terrace farmlands, but the landscape type (river-meadowlands) was not considered by LUC to be a New Forest type in natural beauty terms. In any case the area has only one footpath so would not meet the recreation criterion.

5.69 The Agency’s ‘Links Paper’ (CD237) is irrelevant because the intrinsic qualities of the Avon Valley fail to meet the natural beauty criterion. The ‘unifying factors’ represented by past historic links (which are commented upon in detail by the consortium at 220/1/9) cannot create natural beauty where that attribute does not exist. Intangibles (such as the feeling of ‘getting away from it all’) can contribute to natural beauty but features that used to exist but are now absent or no longer discernible (such as many of the matters referred to in CD237) cannot contribute. Natural beauty must be apparent – it cannot rely on visitors possessing or acquiring knowledge about things that used to exist. Too many of the items mentioned in the paper fall into this category, if indeed they ever did exist in the way relied upon by the Agency.
Opportunities for open-air recreation

5.70 The consortium does not dispute that the NFHA meets the second statutory criterion by providing opportunities for a markedly superior recreational experience of national importance. However, areas to the west of that do not.

5.71 The agricultural land within the valley is not inherently different from other farmland in Britain which is crossed by defined paths. It does not provide a recreational experience of national importance comparable with the extensive stretches of open land found within the Forest. The restored pits are used for water-sports, including power boats. These uses conflict with ‘quiet enjoyment’. Other lakes have nature conservation designations for their ornithological interest where increased recreational use would be in conflict with such designations. Restored gravel pits are common features in lowland England and low-key birdwatching in such environments is not an exceptional experience. The floodplain could not meet the recreational criterion because it has only one footpath.

The case for the Hinton and Avon Tyrrell Estates

5.72 [Hinton Estate’s case in relation to Hinton Park, Burton Common, and land on the foreshore near Lymington has been dealt with under Boundary Sections 11-12.]

5.73 These two estates also suggest that the western boundary of the Park should follow that of the NFHA. A suggestion is also made that Bransgore should be considered for exclusion since it is an urban area immediately adjoining the NFHA boundary. Many of the estates’ points echo the views of the Dorset Authorities and the quarrying consortium.

Natural beauty

5.74 Chapter 4 includes reference to the general conceptual points made on behalf of the estates in the context of boundary sections 11-12. These are dealt with in the Landscape Assessor’s report.

5.75 The Avon Tyrrell Estate covers 1376ha abutting the perambulation and lying across the Avon Valley to the north of Sopley and Bransgore and to the south of Ripley Wood and Bisterne. Avon Tyrrell House is listed Grade 1. The house and its surrounding parkland (which is included on the English Heritage register) are within the NFHA and are now used as a residential centre run by UK Youth and visited by 16,000 people pa. providing numerous facilities for young people.

5.76 The estate’s land is used for agriculture, forestry, sport, wildlife and employment. There is extensive arable production on the river terraces and grazing and hay production on the floodplain meadows. A substantial dairy complex is housed in clusters of large modern buildings at Court Farm and London Farm. There is also an open pig enterprise with numerous corrugated iron arcs and some commercial strawberry production.

5.77 The flood meadows are available for autumn grazing after the hay-cut in early August but at this time of year it has a low value with few nutrients. Inundation normally occurs during the winter months. The inclusion of 148ha of the water meadows in the Avon Valley ESA scheme has significantly reduced summer and autumn stocking rates by increasing wetness.
5.78 Inclusion of the floodplain is inappropriate as it is both isolated from and unrelated to the New Forest. Any historical associations are now lost. The nature conservation interest of the area is not a suitable ground for inclusion and the late addition of the western commons into the designated area only compounds this inappropriate situation.

5.79 The relevant portion of Hinton Estate in relation to Boundary Sections 13-15 is the large tract of farmland stretching across the Avon Valley between Christchurch in the south and the northern end of Burton to the north. The estate’s farming enterprise in this area is focused on arable crops and dairying. The Avon terraces form ideal arable fields with shallow gradients, richer soils and favourable south and west-facing aspects. Most of this area is species-poor because it consists either of enlarged arable fields or areas rotated for arable and grazing to retain tilth and soil quality. Including this land would degrade the worth of the National Park designation and dilute the quality of land properly designated for inclusion.

5.80 The farmland within the bottom of the valley is mostly water-meadow, also managed under the ESA scheme, and used for grazing ponies and cattle and for hay production. Land use is seasonal due to winter flooding and the grassland is species rich with good ecological value. There is controlled access for fishing.

5.81 Referring to commoning, both Avon Tyrrell and Hinton Estates possess common rights over their extensive holdings in the Avon Valley but neither has exercised them in living memory. However, two of Avon Tyrrell’s tenants do so. One tenant (Middle Ripley Farm) grazes about 100 cattle on the Forest during the summer and feeds stock on maize silage during the winter. The other operates a smallholding near Elmers Copse.

5.82 Considering the proximity of some of the objection lands to the perambulation this may seem surprising but few if any of the larger landowners possessing rights actually do so. Furthermore the parishes adjacent to the estates are not an active commoning area. The most recent Verderers’ register identifies only 3 commoners in Bransgore, 2 in Christchurch, and none in either Burton or Sopley.

5.83 Back-up grazing is a market-led regime. The only land made available is low-quality land with poor stocking rates, usually on short-term annual licences linked to management for conservation purposes. The Agency’s consideration of the issue seems to make no distinction between existing back-up grazing and potential land but the difficulty of trying to pin down the importance of theoretically available back-up land is illustrated in an appeal decision at Walhampton (118 & 162/1/3 app5). Moreover, LUC recognised (CD206) the indications that commoners are now willing to travel significant distances to gain access to suitable land.

**Opportunities for open-air recreation**

5.84 The Agency has failed to take account of the difficulties experienced over the past 50 years in securing access opportunities under the 1949 Act access creation schemes (118 & 162/1/3 app6). Despite this poor record the proposed NFNP includes too much land which contributes nothing to open-air recreation and holds no prospect of ever doing so. This approach would lead to confusion, frustration and devaluation of the concept of National Parks.
5.85 The farmland and the floodplain have only limited rights of way and those on the floodplain are sometimes inundated for long periods. Even where paths exist these sometimes pass through tall crops such as maize, so that views are obscured, or cross fields used for by dairy herds which are better left undisturbed by walkers, children and dogs. The whole concept of encouraging access to areas of intensive agriculture in preference to the attractive areas of the open Forest is flawed.

5.86 The Agency’s desire for increased access to the floodplain is equally puzzling. There is controlled access to the river for fishing but no use (and no possible use) for sailing, rowing, canoeing or swimming. The existing Avon Valley Path avoids most of the areas subject to nature conservation designations but provides periodic views of the flood meadows, the river, seasonal birds and longer views to the New Forest and the Dorset Heaths. Both estates have implemented ESA management plans and agreements for the floodplain to bring a balance between the grazing regime and the habitat requirements. Further recreational access would conflict with these aims, as indicated by an ecological report prepared in 2001 (118 & 162/1/3 app9). This considered the implications of including the water meadows within the NFNP but concluded that increased recreational activities would have an adverse effect on the reasons for its international and national ecological designations and the objectives of the ESA. The appropriate approach is to avoid such potential conflict (which could only increase as a result of the inevitable public expectations arising from designation) by avoiding including such areas in the NFNP.

5.87 The Agency’s approach here is also inconsistent with that taken in relation to some areas that were excluded from the NFNP on grounds of their limited access, such as some of the commons next to the A338. At the same time, the estates recognise that there are areas within the NFHA (whose inclusion in the NFNP is not objected to) which could be made available for public access subject to protection of their individual nature conservation interests (eg Burton Common, Poors Common, Beckley Common and Shirley Common).

5.88 The Agency’s approach to the open-air recreation criterion, as indicated at CD104 p 13 (penultimate sentence) & Appendix E (final sentence) refers to the New Forest Committee’s strategy to develop new attractions outside the Forest core (set out at CD215) and seems to suggest that the aim is to expand the Park to create a buffer zone to alleviate pressure within the core. This is not a correct approach to the designation process.

The case for the Agency

The extent, character and special qualities of New Forest Landscapes

5.89 The Agency does not accept that the NFNP has to be limited to land of singular unified character. This is not a requirement of the Act or the Hobhouse report. Item 2(b) of the Agency’s boundary-setting criteria (Table 2 CD104) states that ‘Areas to be included may be of differing landscape character: quality will be the key determinant rather than uniformity’. The relevant footnote states that ‘A variety of landscape character is an important factor in the overall amenity of the Park. Usually however there will be some unifying factors, such as land use, ecosystems, or historical or cultural links which bring differing character areas together to be included in a National Park.’
ERM’s research on the extent, character and quality of the forest landscapes led the Agency’s Board and officers to agree with the conclusion that there are strong conceptual grounds for a NFNP of considerably greater extent than the perambulation or the NFHA. The view was taken that subject to land meeting the statutory criteria, the NFNP should encompass all the inter-related parts of the natural, cultural and historic landscapes.

It is generally accepted that the New Forest is, first and foremost, a unique cultural and historic landscape. It is the most intact survival in Britain, if not Europe, of a medieval hunting forest. Alone among such forests, only the New Forest survives in anything like its medieval form as an institution. Its importance as a historical and cultural landscape is perhaps best summed up in the World Heritage Site description ‘The New Forest is a recognisable piece of medieval Europe that has survived virtually intact for over 900 years, due to the persistence of a style of land ownership, management and use.’

The key point is the complete interdependence of the open land within the perambulation and the surrounding land with forest rights attached. Both are essential parts of the commoning system but have different landscape and habitat characters. They are interdependent because they are different. The open Forest is mainly woodland and heathland; beyond this lies a belt of smallholdings and farmland landscapes; and beyond this again, the river meadowlands and coastal marshes that are also grazed by Forest stock.

This interdependence and connectedness was recognised by LUC in their work on the NFHA when they commented that ‘This continuity is both visual, in that the peripheral landscapes appear to be an extension of the forest itself, and historical in that they share a common history.’

Continuity is also evident in nature conservation terms. For example the New Forest Natural Area Profile (CD230, p6) notes that for much of the area's history the pastoral economy of the open forest relied on a wider area including the Avon Valley, the Waterside and the Solent coast and that ‘evidence of these links occurs throughout the Natural Area’. It is correct that the nationally and internationally important nature conservation sites in these wider areas are different in character to the New Forest cSAC but this only serves to underline their role as one component of the wider interdependent Forest system.

Many of the New Forest’s landscape characteristics also occur in other parts of the country, for example in the Dorset heaths, which show strong similarities with the New Forest in terms of geology, land cover and habitat types. However the New Forest is distinguished by the survival of traditional ownership and practices, the particular wealth of ancient landscape features and the influences of commoning, including the widespread presence of grazing animals and traditional smallholdings in the landscape. These characteristics extend over a much wider area than the perambulation.

The Cox and Reeves report (CD219) highlights the special role of grazing animals. It describes the extent of grazing around the open forest prior to the gridding in 1964, using satellite commons, grazing marshes, droveways, verges and village greens. Maps in the report show that summer straying of stock extended west as far as the River Avon while winter straying extended into Dorset. The report expresses a preference that the NFNP should cover the full extent of summer straying (see Map 1 of CD219), incorporating most of the grazing land lost since 1964. According to the report there would be substantial benefits to landscape and nature
conservation, as well as to the commoning economy, if open land around the forest could be restored to use as grazing for Forest stock.

**Natural beauty**

5.97 Landscape quality is a key concept in the assessment of natural beauty and is a function of distinctive character, the presence of key characteristics, absence of atypical and incongruous features, the state of repair of the landscape and its intactness. The New Forest District Landscape Character Assessment (CD127) was a major point of reference in assessing landscape quality. This district wide study was designed to complement the county landscape character assessment (CD220) and the historic landscape character assessment referred to in CD126.

5.98 Although CD127 was partly based on the landscape assessment prepared by LUC in 1991 for the purpose of defining the NFHA it updates and supersedes it. The study was commissioned and fully reviewed by the District Council, the County Council, the Agency and English Heritage. It was subject to public consultation, particularly in relation to the boundaries of the landscape types and character areas, and was formally adopted by NFDC as supplementary planning guidance. Therefore it is the single best and most authoritative source of landscape character and quality information for the District although it is neutral as to whether the landscape types and character areas within the New Forest meet the natural beauty designation criterion.

5.99 The Avon Valley is included in the NFNP on strong natural beauty grounds. CD104 P21-22 identifies the need to include:-

- the high quality river terrace and floodplain landscapes, reflecting their function as an integral part of the traditional land management system and cultural heritage of the New Forest, plus their importance to views of the New Forest;

- the river, water meadows on the floodplain, and other valley-bottom land, much of it ESA and highly suitable for back-up grazing for forest stock, together with the wet gravel workings, which are areas of European and international importance for their diverse wetland habitats, waders and wildfowl;

- the many fine historic landscape features concentrated within the valley, including the parliamentary enclosure landscapes and drove roads found on the river terraces, the remains of the water meadow systems, and the ancient settlements and river crossings;

5.100 The jewel in the crown on the western boundary of the NFNP is the River Avon Floodplain, described in the Avon Valley ESA Environmental Guidelines (CD300A) as containing ‘Britain’s most significant areas of managed water meadow system’. This is an outstanding landscape which easily merits designation. The meandering braided river and informal water meadows comprise a gentle, scenic landscape retaining a sense of wildness and unpredictability with small groups of willow trees and lines of trees along ditches creating variations in scale and degree of enclosure. Man’s first management of the river is demonstrated in places by the remains of the 18th and 19th floodplain management systems.

5.101 The floodplain forms a contrast with the wooded scarps and heathlands to the west and the orderly farmlands to the east and is a key feature in the dramatic views of the New Forest obtainable from vantage-points such as Matcham’s View.
5.102 The river terrace farmlands also have a distinctive character and sense of place. This wide swathe of farmland between the forest core and the River Avon has a peaceful, deeply rural character with a sense of space and time that presents an attractive contrast to the core. This is a more predictable, rhythmic, gently sloping landscape of geometric fields and open views. The lanes are often shaded by spreading mature hedgerow oaks, there are remnants of heath, and many of the fields are divided by belts of Scots Pine seen silhouetted against the sky. The winding roads and lanes, many running east-west often have wide verges, indicating that they are former drove roads linking the forest with the commons and pastures along the Avon. The villages have the linear pattern typical of peripheral New Forest landscapes.

5.103 Although some parts of the terraces are currently adversely affected by sand and gravel extraction there is no reason to doubt that high quality restoration of these areas to uses contributing to National Park purposes (agriculture, recreation and water storage) will be completed within specific timetables.

5.104 Inclusion of the valley in the Park has been influenced by its high ecological value. Most of the floodplain is an SSSI (Avon Valley (Bickton-Christchurch)), SPA and Ramsar site and the River Avon is a cSAC. As indicated in the SSSI citation (186/1/3, p61-63), the River Avon has a greater range of habitats and more diverse flora and fauna than any other chalk river valley in Britain. The sand and gravel river terraces along the eastern edge of the floodplain have areas of acidic grassland and heathland where former commons support an extremely interesting and varied flora including species rare inland in Britain. Most of the flooded gravel pits are within the SSSI.

5.105 Historically there was a strong link between Forest grazing and the Avon, with Forest stock roaming widely along the drove roads throughout the area pre-1964. Functioning commons still exist within the floodplain as at Winkton, Jocktrills, Avon Hams and Kingston North Commons. Forest rights of grazing extend throughout the valley and there are significant areas of land in use as back-up grazing, for example near Sopley, Ripley and Ibsley. Although the water meadows may not be suitable for off-Forest winter grazing they can provide very useful summer grazing and hay crops at affordable rents and are attractive as back-up grazing, as indicated by the New Commoners Defence Association. A strong commoning economy continues within the valley, particularly north of Ringwood and potentially the valley – especially the flood plain – could make an even stronger contribution to the historic dispersed pastoral system. This finding supports the inclusion of the valley in the NFNP on grounds of natural beauty.

5.106 Although the quality of parts of the river terrace farmlands has been compromised by agricultural intensification and active gravel extraction, overall the valley meets the natural beauty criterion because of its unspoilt, high quality landscapes, its ecological importance and its historical and cultural links with the New Forest.

**Opportunities for open-air recreation**

5.107 In determining which land meets the open-air recreation criterion, broad judgements have to be made about particular tracts of land and the recreational experiences that they offer. Although an approach based on an audit of facilities was considered at boundary study stage this was not pursued because the recreational criterion focuses primarily on opportunities for
experience of the outstanding natural beauty of the landscape itself rather than on local amenities and facilities as such.

5.108 In terms of recreation there is a clear case in principle for including coastal and river landscapes around the edge of the New Forest. Bringing these landscapes within the national park considerably extends the range of recreational experiences on offer. In particular, it provides opportunities for appreciating the ancient water meadows and wildlife of the Avon Valley.

5.109 While the core forest contains an exceptional resource of open access land it is inevitable that public access will be more constrained in the landscapes around the perambulation. However, the majority of these other areas have a comprehensive network of rights of way including rural lanes. In any case outstanding enjoyment of the countryside relies on the quality of the landscape setting rather than open access. The wetland nature of the flood meadow of itself limits access, but difficult access and isolation are part of the intrinsic appeal of such landscapes and they are valued for these reasons, especially as such qualities are increasingly rare in the modern world.

5.110 Taken as a whole the valley has the scope to provide outstanding opportunities for quiet outdoor recreation dependent on the natural beauty resource. Inclusion of the valley offers a wider scope of recreational opportunities than could be provided in the NFHA alone. The river terrace farmlands offer a network of quiet roads, green lanes and other public rights of way within an ordered farmed landscape. The floodplain offers outstanding opportunities to experience tranquil flood meadow landscapes with a strong sense of history and fascinating wildlife. The gravel pit landscapes offer scope for nature study and more active water-based pursuits. All are linked by the Avon Valley Path.

5.111 It is not necessary for access to be available to each and every parcel of land to appreciate the area’s character and special qualities. Inclusion of these additional landscape types will contribute to people’s understanding and appreciation of the range of landscapes within the New Forest system as a whole, as well as the ties that bind them.

2. Exclusion of Ringwood

5.112 This case was made primarily on behalf of Moortown & Tudor Rose Farms (23) and Linden Developments (375). However, the Dorset Authorities and the Quarrying Consortium also consider it inappropriate to include this urban area.

The case for Linden Developments

5.113 The company seeks the exclusion from the Park of the land indicated at Doc 375/1/1A/app13, as originally proposed by the Agency. Broadly, this area of contention comprises the land shown in the adopted local plan as making up the ‘built-up area’ of Ringwood, together with some additional parcels of land excluded from the Green Belt to the west of Crow Lane near Hightown Trading Estate (in which Linden have an interest) and west of Nouale Lane, plus some further land within the Green Belt at the Sewage Disposal Works.
5.114 Some general conceptual matters were raised on behalf of Linden Developments, coinciding with those raised in respect of Lymington on behalf of Lymington Precision Engineers and S J Fuller Ltd. These matters are as set out beneath and are covered in the Landscape Assessor’s report:

- the Agency needs to justify why certain areas are now included in the NFNP when they were previously excluded from the NFHA and AONB against the same test of natural beauty;

- that it is questionable whether townscape can exhibit ‘natural’ beauty as required by the Act;

- that a large town such as Ringwood cannot be included in the NFNP because the Act only provides for the inclusion of ‘extensive tracts of country’, an interpretation which is reinforced by the way in which the Act and the Hobhouse boundary-setting criteria have been applied elsewhere.

**Natural beauty**

5.115 Tracing the evolution of the concept of an NFNP historically, Dower and Hobhouse never conceived of including land outside the Forest core within a National Park. Later, a Countryside Commission report in 1983 (375/1/1A/app2) expressed continuing concern about the need for a National Park but again did not refer to land beyond the perambulation and the South Hants AONB, designated in 1967. The same approach was reflected in the Countryside Commission report ‘The New Forest Landscape’, published in 1986 (CD207) which only dealt with the perambulation.

5.116 Although the draft consultation report upon the original conception of the NFHA in 1987 covered a larger area than that eventually adopted (375/1/1A/app3) it still excluded any land in the Linden objection area. So did the LUC report (CD206) which worked up the Heritage Area concept in detail and provided the basis for the boundary adopted (with very little change) in the Local Plan.

5.117 The New Forest District Landscape Assessment (CD127) identified Ringwood and Lymington as landscape type 4 (Urban Areas) described thus: ‘...These tend to be large settlements which are inward-looking towards a town centre and which have a large area of residential development around their core which acts as a barrier between the town centre and surrounding landscape’.

5.118 The ERM boundary study for the NFNP (CD126, p22) proposed to deal with Ringwood by making it an excluded island near the western boundary of the Park. That recommendation was adopted by the Agency’s Board. Consequently the Public Consultation Report (CD104) comments that ‘Ringwood has been isolated from its landscape setting within the Forest by the A31 and no longer contributes to forest character. The Agency therefore proposes that it should be excluded from the National Park, as it has been from the Heritage Area. The proposed boundary follows the edge of the built-up area.’ However, this description of the boundary is not quite accurate: the proposed boundary included in CD104 also excludes the two areas excluded from the Green Belt.

5.119 Following the public consultation the Agency considered a report on proposed boundary changes (CD118). Annex 1 summarises and considers the responses in relation to Ringwood at p35-36 while paragraph 6 of Annex 2 concludes that:
‘Exclusion of the town of Ringwood has proved to be the most controversial issue in the consultation process, with 930 responses calling for its inclusion. The Board recognised when it considered the draft boundary last July that this issue needed particular consideration and that it would want to consider the views of respondents. Weight of public opinion in itself is not a reason for inclusion, but the responses did provide considerable additional information about the town in relation to the statutory criteria. The crux of the issue is the contribution that Ringwood would make to the character and purposes of the national park. There is new evidence relating to the town’s historical connections with the Forest, its strategic role in informing and educating visitors about the Forest, its transport and footpath links, and its social and economic importance. These arguments tip the balance (which members recognised was fine when they discussed this area last July) towards inclusion and so this is recommended.’

5.120 A similar justification for the change of view by the Agency occurs in the text of the Local Authority Consultation report (CD107) at p33. Although Linden has inspected the letters referred to in CD118, the Agency has not agreed to make copies available despite the company’s wish to present them to the inquiry. However, the summary of points in the Board Paper reveals no new strands of evidence that would not already have been clear to both ERM and the Agency; nor does CD107. While the Agency is entitled to change its mind it can only do so rationally if substantive new information is produced.

5.121 There is nothing in the Agency’s case to justify a departure from the Heritage Area boundary arrived at after careful consideration of all the land meeting the natural beauty criterion. It must therefore carry very great weight. Indeed, CD104 at p16 states that where the NFHA ‘works well’ it has been retained. It is unclear why it does not work well in the case of Ringwood, especially as the Government indicated at Para 6 of its response to the 1990 report of the New Forest Review Group ‘The future for the New Forest’ that it was not convinced that all the land within the then proposed Heritage Area ‘can be described as being of the highest national and international importance’. There has long been a general expectation that the NFHA, as it was eventually defined in local plans, would form the essential basis of the National Park. Any additional land would need strong justification.

5.122 The statutory criteria remain as laid down in the Act. Although the Agency reviewed its guidance on the interpretation of the criteria in 2000 (CD114) this contains nothing to suggest that large urban areas should be included. Indeed revised criterion 2(g) suggests a move in the opposite direction.

5.123 It is accepted that there will be cases of villages and small market towns embedded within a National Park whose character is not separable from the surrounding countryside. However, the inclusion of Ringwood, a substantial town with a population of 13,600, is inconsistent with the natural beauty criterion as it has traditionally been understood and interpreted.

5.124 The original Hobhouse criterion 2(d) states that ‘Towns or villages should not normally be cut in two by a National Park boundary. The inclusion or exclusion of a marginal town or village should be dependent on its character and beauty and its present or potential value for the accommodation of visitors’. By reference to existing parks it is possible to see how this guidance has been interpreted in individual cases and to show that small urban areas embedded within National Parks tend to be included whereas large urban areas on the periphery of Parks
tend to be excluded. Although size of itself may not be a determining factor it is relevant to note that:

(a) the Peak District excludes both Ashbourne (pop 7,700) and Buxton (pop 21,560) despite their cultural and historic associations with the Peak District and their important functions as visitor centres.

(b) the Lake District excludes Kendal (pop 24,430) and Penrith (pop 15,089), again despite strong links.

(c) the Yorkshire Dales excludes Richmond (pop 8,760), Settle (pop 2,350) and Skipton (pop 13,950) although all are at main entrances to the Park and have strong cultural, historical and tourism links.

(d) the North Yorkshire Moors National Park excludes Whitby (pop 14,120), Scarborough (pop 53,730) and Pickering (pop 6,710) despite similar considerations.

(e) Dartmoor National Park excludes Okehampton (pop 6,215) and Tavistock (pop 11,227) despite similar considerations.

5.125 The Agency’s officers’ report concerning the modern development of the Hobhouse criteria (CD116) recommended that new criterion 2(g) should read ‘Towns or villages should not normally be cut in two by a National Park boundary. The inclusion or exclusion of a town or village should depend on whether it contributes to the character of the Park, including its economy and community life, and its present or potential role for visitors; eg provision of accommodation, access to public transport, information or other services. Large settlements should generally be excluded as a National Park Authority should not be overburdened with responsibility for planning in urban areas.’ [Objector’s emphasis]. The last sentence was included in the Hobhouse report, but was deleted by the Board in its redefinition of the criteria and does not appear in 2(g) in table 2 of CD104, or in the relevant footnote. The matters raised in 2(g) and the footnote are nothing to do with natural beauty.

5.126 While Ringwood has historical links to the New Forest it has grown considerably over the past century and its historic core is ringed by relatively recent and unremarkable development, including industrial areas. Its conservation area includes a relatively small proportion of the town’s area and does not interface with the natural beauty of the Forest.

5.127 The Agency has allowed itself to be distracted from the central and statutory purposes of National Parks. Although Ringwood has some cultural, historic and functional links to the New Forest these are not in themselves aspects of natural beauty as defined in the statute. The second bullet point of Table 1 of CD104 is wrong in law in stating that in addition to the statutory elements (ie, flora, fauna, geological and physiographic features), ‘Archaeological, historic, cultural, architectural and vernacular features are also included (in accordance with guidance and precedent)’. Guidance and precedent (in whatever terms may be referred to here) cannot rewrite the law.

5.128 The Act refers to ‘extensive tracts of country’. A town such as Ringwood does not (and - as a town - could not of itself) possess attributes of natural beauty to the necessary outstanding national degree. Nor does it provide material opportunities for open-air recreation, which in itself means that the criteria are not satisfied. Any links to the New Forest do not need protection

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by National Park legislation. At the same time the Agency has not considered the potential
negative effects of applying restrictive National Park policies on the social and economic
development of the town or the extra burden placed on the Authority in administering the
planning functions of a complex urban area.

5.129 Referring briefly to the company’s land west of Crow Lane (outside the urban area but
excluded from the Green Belt) the New Forest District Landscape Character Assessment report
(CD127) refers to this as being within Landscape Character Area 7: Lower Avon Valley.
However, the land in question exhibits none of the 4 stated key environmental features of that
character area. Its inclusion within the Park is dependent upon inclusion of the urban area.
Without this, the land would not be a candidate for inclusion on the basis of the statutory criteria
since it is a flat parcel of land bounded by modern housing to the north and east, an industrial
estate to the west and the disused railway line to the south, now a footpath.

5.130 There is no reason why Ringwood should not be excluded as an island within a National
Park. There are precedents or near precedents in Snowdonia (which has an undesignated void at
Blaenau Ffestiniog), the North York Moors (which surround Whitby on its landward sides),
Pembrokeshire National Park (which leaves Fishguard as the only coastal break) and the Peak
District (where Buxton falls within a long narrow tongue of excluded land). The proposed
NFNP also includes a void at Fawley Power Station.

The case for Moortown & Tudor Rose Farms

5.131 These objectors suggest 3 possible options for realigning the boundary as indicated at
23/1/1/appH. Version 2 creates an island of exclusion covering the same area as that suggested
by Linden Developments. Version 3 additionally omits an area of the Avon floodplain
immediately to the west of the town while version 1 follows the line of the A338 to the north of
the town and the B3347 to the south.

5.132 The farms make many submissions similar to those made by the Dorset Authorities and
the Quarrying Consortium (in relation to the Avon Valley generally) and Linden Developments
(in relation to Ringwood in particular).

5.133 Concerning the historic precedents in other National Parks raised by others, additional
examples are:

- Dulverton and Yelverton are included in Exmoor and Dartmoor respectively because of their
  contribution to the rural character of the Parks;

- Minehead is excluded at the edge of Exmoor, and;

- Bakewell (pop 4,000) is included in the Peak District but has a totally different economy and
  social structure from Ringwood.

5.134 The largest town within an English National Park is thought to be Windermere &
Bowness with a population of 8,000. In that case the town lies well within the Park’s boundaries
by the side of its largest lake. After Lymington (if it is included in the NFNP), Ringwood would
be the largest town included in any British National Park. It would also be the least
architecturally attractive. However, CD107 contains no analysis or recognition of the issues
related to these factors, merely a restatement of factors that would have been apparent when the original decision was made to omit the town.

5.135 The clear conclusion must be that the Agency Board has bowed to political pressure and weight of public opinion expressed in writing and at a vociferous public meeting, probably motivated by desire to bring greater protection for the town from future development. The protection of property values is irrelevant to National Park designation and such views are unlikely either to represent future generations needing homes and jobs or to fulfil the aims of the New Forest Economic Strategy.

5.136 The Avon Valley, within which Ringwood sits, has quite distinct characteristics from other New Forest landscapes as recognised in the considerations behind the NFHA. The valley has no strong cultural or historical links with the New Forest. No land west of the A338/B3347 was ever proposed for inclusion in the Heritage Area and the final version was cut back further to the east because of the non New Forest character of the watermeadows and river terraces. The historic landscape at Bisterne Manor was laid out in the early 19th century as a new landowner’s park in which he put ‘large speckled cattle’ not indigenous to the New Forest. Cattle grazing on the river meadows have to be vaccinated against liver fluke, leptospirosis and blackleg. If forest cattle were to be grazed there they would be in serious trouble without similar protection.

5.137 As for Ringwood itself, it is described in the New Forest Local Plan (CD221, pF22) as having ‘suffered greater disruption and change over the last three decades through highway schemes than any of the other towns in the District....Although the new road has brought major environmental benefits, this, together with the large retail development off the main car park has brought substantial changes to the pattern of streets and spaces in the town centre, and the way they function. The backs of properties have become exposed to view and dead areas have been created’.

5.138 The town’s built-up area has grown about 6-fold since 1896 and its character is dominated by modern development. It lacks any or most of the traditional character of other Forest villages and towns such as Brockenhurst, Lyndhurst or even Lymington. The cattle market no longer exists and the street traders’ market is no different from that in many other towns and has no real New Forest connections. The older part of the town within the Conservation Area is on the valley floor on the western side of Ringwood away from any vantage point in the Park. On the other hand, recent housing and industrial expansion has created a hard edge to the town from north east through to south east where it is closest to the Forest. The A31 cutting also significantly detaches the town from its immediate rural surroundings.

5.139 The alleged historical links between the town and the Forest have been seriously weakened over the years. Ringwood now looks outside the Forest to Bournemouth & Poole and Southampton rather than towards it. Ringwood’s local plan employment allocations are intended to meet not only the town’s own needs but also those of other places such as Fordingbridge (23/1/1/appG).

5.140 It is clear from the original Hobhouse report and the Agency’s revision of his boundary-setting criteria that towns on the edge of a Park, but excluded from it, can have a role to play in serving the Park’s economy and other needs. These could include issues concerning ‘community life’, ‘visitor accommodation’ and public transport access. In fact, Ringwood provides very few bed-spaces for visitors. Only two hotels (with a total of 14 rooms) are included in the official
hotel guide for the New Forest, while the ‘Where to Stay Guide’ refers to only 24 bedrooms. If left outside the Park Ringwood would be in a better position to fulfil those roles because development would not be so constrained. If included there would be conflicts between the normal development control approach in a National Park and the present identified development needs and role of the town.

5.141 It is clear that Hobhouse (at para 43) felt that conflicts such as this should be avoided by excluding ‘areas where the needs of urban or industrial development conflict with or outweigh the essential values of the Park.’ Future problems of this kind have been ignored by the Agency.

5.142 One such example could arise with future development of land owned by the farms: land adjacent to the sewage works offers an opportunity for development related to food processing using a dedicated pipeline for waste disposal in accordance with modern legal requirements.

The case for other objectors

5.143 Avon Tyrrell and Hinton Estates additionally raise the issue that inclusion of Ringwood would require the NPA to be responsible for all aspects of development control from domestic extensions to larger residential and commercial developments, retailing and other facilities. This would undermine their ability to deal in an effective and timely manner with proper National Park issues.

The case for the Agency

5.144 As acknowledged in relation to other boundaries, the NFHA is relevant because it was part of the blackcloth to the area of search for the National Park boundary. However, it can only be one factor because the criteria for the two areas are different, as explained in CD239. Land excluded from the NFHA can therefore be included in the NFNP. There is no special onus on the Agency to give special explanation in such cases and no justification for simply applying previous Inspectors’ decisions about the Heritage Area boundary. The focus should be on the reasons for including land in the National Park.

5.145 In general terms the designation process has placed more emphasis on landscape quality and an inclusive outward-looking approach whereas in identifying the NFHA more emphasis was placed on landscape character and a restrictive inward-looking approach concentrating on adding the minimal amount necessary to support the perambulation.

5.146 The NFNP boundary study (CD126) looked at Ringwood afresh, using independent experts, and the Agency used this to inform its own judgements. It also carried out public consultation (as well as the necessary statutory consultation) and appraised the outcome of both including the results of further fieldwork and technical study before deciding the boundary.

5.147 With regard to the updated approach to defining National Park boundaries (as set out in the revised Hobhouse criteria in table 2 of CD104), the Agency is the body charged under the Act with the statutory duty of considering which areas should be designated as National Parks and proceeding with their designation. It is therefore quite proper for it to develop policy guidance for defining boundaries around the qualifying extensive tracts, taking account of changed circumstances over the past 50 years. The revised Hobhouse criteria do not modify the statutory designation criteria.
5.148 The relevant Agency policy in this case is criterion 2(g) of table 2 (CD104) which states that the inclusion or exclusion of towns and villages lying within an “extensive tract ‘should normally depend on their contribution as a whole to the character and purposes of the park’. Footnote 2(g) indicates that ‘This may include a contribution to the Park’s economy and community life, and a value for visitors; eg provision of accommodation, access to public transport, information or other services’.

5.149 The examples concerning towns excluded from other National Parks are said by Linden Developments to be ‘large peripheral urban areas…..excluded from their adjoining National Parks’ whereas Ringwood has been assessed anew in the light of the statutory criteria and the Agency’s approach to defining National Park boundaries.

5.150 Ringwood is not on the edge of the Park in a situation where boundary-setting criterion 2(d) from table 2 of CD104 would apply. Rather, it lies within a broad sweep of countryside meeting the two criteria. Its sits within the countryside and its urban values are not outweighed by that fact. Its contribution should therefore be judged in relation to criterion 2(g). On that basis it should be included within the National Park boundary because it makes a contribution to the rural economy and community life of the Park and to the Park’s special qualities and purposes. The description of the town in the District-wide Landscape Character Assessment quoted by the objector should not be taken out of context. It simply explains how the built-up area has been distinguished from smaller settlements and identified as requiring more detailed analysis of settlement character by virtue of its size.

5.151 Initially the Agency acknowledged the historic nature of Ringwood town centre and the town’s former role as a livestock market for the area but took the view that, on balance, this urban area should be excluded from the NFNP because of the impact of modern development on the townscape and the dominance of the A31T. However, as described in CD118, the main strands of the arguments put by consultees and stakeholders in favour of Ringwood’s inclusion (summarised by ERM in the form of 12 bullet points) tipped the admittedly fine balance towards its inclusion.

5.152 Six of the bullet points are related to natural beauty, ie:

- an historical and cultural attachment to the New Forest dating back 1000 years (the original name Rimucwude means rim of the forest);
- the cattle market served the inhabitants of the New Forest for centuries. This no longer exists but there is a weekly market which attracts and serves local people and visitors;
- much of the new development is in character;
- the A31T is sunken and not dominant;
- the town contains many historic buildings;
- surrounding areas within the parish of Ringwood, such as Crow, are still used for grazing.

5.153 Three of the bullet points are related to recreation, ie;

- the town is a gateway to the New Forest, providing accommodation and information about the area to visitors;
- it has good, bus coach and road links;
- there are footpaths, including the Avon Valley Path, and further potential to develop walks along the River Avon.
5.154 The other bullet points do not relate to the statutory criteria, although one is a boundary setting criterion point relevant to table 2 of CD104 (ie that the town is socially and economically crucial to the area and contributes to community life within the park).

5.155 The information produced in relation to the exclusion of towns from other National Parks does not represent policy, only the way that it was applied in the particular cases. Inclusion and exclusion should not rely on any inflexible precedents, nor should any particular weight be attached to the size of a town in population terms. However, since the New Forest is a lowland area in Southern England containing coasts and river valleys it is more likely to include larger settlements within the Park.

5.156 With regard to the small pocket of land west of Crow Lane, the Agency accepts that it might not merit inclusion if Ringwood was excluded. However, it considers that there is no case for removing the land from the Order as it stands since it fits within an extensive tract meeting the designation criteria.

5.157 As for the claimed potential negative effects of National Park policies on the social and economic development of Ringwood this ignores the fact that NPAs have a duty to foster the economic and social well-being of local communities. Indeed, inclusion could have an enhancing effect because NPAs are expected to act as models for sustainable development and economic advantages can result from designation. Fears about planning restrictions are not part of the statutory criteria. Designation does not halt development: towns in National Parks still appropriately accept a range of new developments for housing, tourism and employment.

3. Exclusion of land at Breamore

The case for the objectors

5.158 Breamore Estate Company, members of the Hulse family and Dr A Hobson (objections 16, 42, 145 & 191) consider that the protrusion of the boundary into the Breamore area is illogical. Mr E M W Hulse considers that the natural edge of the Park is the River Avon because Breamore has not historically been part of the New Forest since at least 1280. Sir Edward Hulse suggests that if any extension beyond the river is accepted it should follow the A338 (the present Heritage Area boundary).

5.159 The proposed boundary would split the estate, comprising Breamore House and Park (both in Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs AONB) and the village. The main emphasis on the estate is historic settlement and property whereas in the National Park it is land and fauna. The estate has been a partner in The Breamore Project [16/1/2] which has resulted in the restoration of a large number of the traditional Breamore Estate buildings over the past 20 years. A number of permissive footpaths have also been created. This has made the area attractive to visit so long as numbers remain relatively small.

5.160 However, with so much restoration completed there would be few gains from inclusion. The area is more likely to survive without too much pressure if it is excluded and it is already a conservation area. Problems have already arisen with people perceiving the marsh as a common and gypsies have had to be evicted. Such problems of over-use and management could become worse with inclusion in the Park.
5.161 The Avon Valley is not part of an ‘extensive tract of country’ as it is divided into fields. Historically it has been grazed by dairy cattle, not by the type of stock reared on the Forest, and would have provided early grazing for sheep before they were driven up onto the Downs to the west. The river has always represented a boundary. There have been few crossing points and it was even used as a potential stop line during the Second World War.

5.162 The Avon Valley, especially at Breamore, should not be part of the New Forest: it looks nothing like it, and always would have appeared a lush green area of completely different character. The area should not be managed like part of the New Forest and its proper management would suffer from inclusion.

The case for the Agency

5.163 The land in the village core and at Breamore Marsh was not included in the original proposals for the boundary. However, after considering a substantial number of representations made in response to the public consultation report, the Agency concluded that circumstances at Breamore are sufficiently exceptional to justify one of the few extensions to the Park west of the Avon floodplain. The boundary was therefore extended to include the whole of the settlement and follow the conservation area boundary. This also made the western boundary contiguous with that of the Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs AONB.

5.164 The majority of Breamore is part of the river terrace farmlands landscape type identified in CD127. This is a distinctive New Forest agricultural landscape type characterised by a regular field pattern and quiet shady lanes. A small area on the western side is part of the enclosed farmland and woodland type. The whole area is part of CD 127’s Upper Avon Valley landscape character area and is therefore similar in character to other areas of the New Forest and Avon Valley that have been included in the National Park.

5.165 Breamore’s landscape quality is excellent and meets the criterion of outstanding natural beauty. There are no atypical or incongruous features and the landscape is in good repair. There are fine and distinctive landscape features, the vernacular listed buildings in the conservation area (associated with the estate village that served Breamore House), and the attractive manorial green and its grazing marsh which is an SSSI.

5.166 There is probably no definitive answer to the question of whether Breamore is or is not part of the Forest. Although it lies outside the Large Bounds of 1280 it is well within the band of land to which Rights of Common are attached. In any case ‘links to the New Forest have not been a significant factor in the Agency’s decision to include the village in the NFNP because the key consideration in determining the exact location of the boundary is landscape quality rather than landscape character, as indicated in Position Paper 1 paras 35 (2a and 2b). It is clear that Breamore should be included in the National Park on landscape quality grounds.’ [384/0/4/16 para 12]

5.167 The area meets the recreation criterion because the village is criss-crossed by public rights of way and offers many opportunities for open-air recreation and enjoyment of the area’s special qualities.

5.168 Referring to other matters, partial inclusion of the Estate’s land holdings will not affect land management as the NPA would have no control over that matter. Fears of recreational
damage to the SSSI are also unfounded as priority would have to be given to conservation in the National Park. The existence of other forms of policy protection is not a reason for excluding the area from the Park as no other designation is made for the same purposes or affords similar recognition.

4. Exclusion of land at St Catherines Hill/Town Common/Blackwater Hill

The cases for the objectors

5.169 These areas were added to the NFNP between the public consultation and local authority consultation stages.

5.170 Malmesbury Estate (323) owns the Manor of Christchurch of which Town Common is part. The common rights attach to the commoners of Christchurch and historically the area has never been part of the New Forest which lies to the east of the River Avon. Rather, the common forms part of the East Dorset heaths.

5.171 Town Common is bordered by urban parts of Christchurch and is so heavily used for recreation that it is at the maximum limit of its use consistent with its SAC/SPA/SSSI status.

5.172 The Herpetological Conservation Trust (206) leases and manages Town Common. The Trust broadly welcomes the National Park proposals but expressed reservations that they could be harmful to the wildlife interests of this area. Particular concerns were (a) the potential for the area to be used more intensively as a honeypot vantage point for views across the Avon Valley towards the New Forest and (b) any possible moves to extend active commoning influences in this area because traditional burning and grazing regimes are felt to be damaging to natural populations of sand lizards.

5.173 After consideration of the Agency’s response the Trust conditionally withdrew its objection, being sufficiently reassured that S62 of the 1995 Act would offer the necessary primacy to nature conservation interests over those of recreation.

5.174 Mr & Mrs S Tuck (376) object to the inclusion of a small part of this area of land added to the NFNP, namely their smallholding at 1 Blackwater. This is one of a small group of about 8 houses near the junction of the A338 and the B3073 at the foot of Blackwater Hill, although only Nos 1 & 2 have been included in the National Park boundary. They suggest exclusion of their property (which fronts a noisy main road and has views to a sewage works and a hospital incinerator, thus leaving the wooded slope of Blackwater Hill as the National Park boundary. In the objectors’ view their land contributes nothing to either of the statutory criteria and inclusion could hamper their commercial activities.

The case for the Agency

5.175 The area comprising St Catherines Hill/Town Common/Blackwater Hill was included in the National Park as a response to the public consultation stage (see map at CD107, p70). Whereas the character of this area was previously felt to be different from that prevailing in the Forest core, its heaths and woods (to which there is extensive public access) have outstanding natural beauty in their own right and include a number of spectacular panoramic viewpoints.
The area also has nature conservation interest as an SSSI and a number of features of archaeological interest.

5.176 The dramatic viewpoints provide an appreciation of the contrasts between the meandering river in its water meadows, the fields and villages in the middle distance and the distant New Forest woodlands. These views provide a visual link across the Avon and the Forest core; consequently, the fine recreational opportunities afforded by the extensive public access contribute to people’s overall understanding and enjoyment of the Forest. Since the area is close to the urban population of Christchurch, the requirements of S5(2)(b) are particularly well met.

5.177 As with the other Dorset Heaths discussed above, inclusion of Town Common in the National Park would not prevent the current and on-going strategic management of the heaths as a whole, giving primacy to nature conservation, and could bring additional resources for that purpose.

5.178 With specific regard to 1 Blackwater, this occupies about half of a relatively small area fronting Hurn Road between the A338 slip road and the edge of the urban area. Although the smallholding has some utilitarian buildings they are very typical of the New Forest landscape sub-type of ‘heath associated small holdings and dwellings’ and are seen against the attractive rising wooded backdrop of Blackwater Hill. They form part of the setting to the hill which is well-used for recreation and are a minor part of an extensive tract meeting the statutory criteria.

PROPOSALS FOR EXTENDED BOUNDARIES

1. Land west to the Moors River

The case for the objectors

5.179 About 9 objectors (96, 102, 126, 168, 240, 320, 322, 354, and 372) suggest that there is a good case for extending the boundary considerably further to the west as far as the Moors River and the eastern edge of Verwood, but excluding the mainly postwar developments at St Leonards, St Ives and Ashley.

5.180 This view was most fully expressed by the Council for National Parks (CNP) (354) and Mr J Thackray (322) who believe that the boundary should take in extensive tracts of land west of the Avon floodplain north of the A338/B3073 junction. Their suggestions would include land shown on the OS Explorer 1:25,000 map as (from south to north) Ramsdown Plantation, Sopley Common, Avon Common, Hurn Forest, Barnsfield Heath, Avon Heath Country Park, West Moors Plantation, Moors Valley Country Park, Ringwood Forest, Boveridge Heath, Cranborne Common and Alderholt Common.

5.181 The CNP considers that protection and management of the New Forest will best be served by the establishment of a National Park extending beyond the boundaries of the Heritage Area. To ensure fulfilment of the Park’s statutory purposes there must be a clear vision for a New Forest. This must embrace an area which is sufficiently extensive and robust to endure
indefinitely and perpetuate the uses, management practices and customs which imbue the New Forest with its special characteristics.

5.182 The national and international importance of the New Forest is matched by the growing forces working to diminish its special qualities. If designation is not to be a false dawn, the vision must be equal to the task at the outset, especially as it is clear that opportunities for reviewing National Park boundaries are rare. Realisation of the vision requires designation of the widest possible legitimate boundary although (even with the western boundaries proposed by CNP) the New Forest would remain one of the smallest National Parks. Failure to grasp the need to extend the boundaries widely enough would seriously weaken the NFNP and represent a very regrettable lost opportunity.

5.183 In CNP’s view the western boundary needs to be drawn to recognise the great pressures faced by the New Forest. It must aim to ensure long term viability and secure the statutory purposes. Those purposes must be considered at the outset; their relationship with the statutory designation criteria must be taken into account now and not ignored. The decision to create a national park is a profound one and should be supported by a boundary with long term resilience to the influences of development pressures, landscape and habitat fragmentation, declining land management, and poorly co-ordinated access arrangements, all of which might work to undermine National Park purposes.

5.184 While the Agency’s inclusion of some sites west of the Avon is supported, their extent falls far short of the area which could and should be included. The areas listed above were almost unbroken heaths in the early 19th century and even now comprise an exceptionally extensive network of heathlands, commons, native acid woodlands, wetlands and coniferous plantations representing continuity with the landscapes to the east of the Avon. Also, they are relatively unfragmented by roads and urban development, more so than many areas within the designation order. SSSIs at Cranborne Common, Verwood Heath, St Leonards/St Ives Heaths, Hurn Common, and Moors River reflect the great rarity of lowland heath habitats and the huge concentration of this type in and around the New Forest.

5.185 While most of Ringwood Forest is a SINC rather than an SSSI its afforested heaths are rich in heathland species despite the fragmented and sub-optimal condition of heathland habitats due to rotational felling and replanting. Data reviews by the RSPB and Hants Wildlife Trust in 1993 found that populations of heathland ground-nesting birds were of national importance, with numbers of nightjar and woodlark sufficient to meet SAC criteria. Populations of rare and protected heathland species such as smooth snake and sand lizard also persisted to SSSI and SPA criteria although the land is not currently notified as such. Some parts of Ringwood Forest have not been designated as SINCs but this is only because the Dorset classification system is more stringent than that applied in Hampshire.

5.186 The impact of predominantly coniferous plantations on much of the heathland does not damage its long-term value as part of the NFNP as indicated by the fact that substantial areas of similar type exist within the NFHA. Similarly, landscape damage resulting from existing mineral extraction sites within areas such as Ringwood Forest is no greater than that caused in parts of the Avon Valley within the designation order. Although there are some existing and preferred extraction sites in Minerals Plans, dating from a period when the value of heathlands was not appreciated, there is no reason why these sites should not be restored to a use and quality contributing to Park purposes.
5.187 The scale of the past loss of heathland makes the remaining areas a precious resource, particularly when, as here, many areas are relatively large, continuous, secret and tranquil tracts forming part of the wider landscape of the New Forest. In several areas (such as Ashley Heath, Ringwood Forest, Boveridge Heath and the extensive open heaths of Cranborne Common and Alderholt Common) there is a rare sense of remoteness which is strongly consistent with National Park criteria. Despite the current reluctance of Forest Enterprise to agree to reversion strategies in this objection area there is nonetheless potential for future landscape and ecological enhancement to occur. Designation of the Park presents an opportunity to develop a long-term vision for a much wider application of the policy being operated in the New Forest in which commercial production of conifers is being reduced in favour of restoration and reversion to pasture woodland, broad-leaved woodland and heathland. Much of the objection area presents similar possibilities and needs to be included in the Park so that the opportunity can be realised. In parallel with these reversion strategies new areas have to be found for woodland and timber production to support the existing forest economy: such needs could be met within those smaller pockets west of the Avon which have only modest potential to meet the statutory designation criteria.

5.188 The area has strong historic and cultural links with the New Forest and contains significant Iron Age and more recent remains. Its flora and fauna are chiefly the same as found in the Forest and the area therefore represents an actual and potential reservoir and overflow area for all species including New Forest Commoners’ animals and humans.

5.189 Not too much should be made of the A338 as a barrier to westward expansion of the Park. The A35 and A31 already run through the NFHA and the Peak District and the Lake District are crossed by the A57 and A66 respectively. In the case of the A338 the land on both sides has the necessary qualities to be included. Journeying along Matchams Lane and The Belt, the nature and quality of the land is generally consistent on both sides.

5.190 The proposed added area has exceptional value for recreation since much of it is owned by the Crown and recognised as access land under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000, conveniently situated for nearby urban populations. These areas present opportunities for many forms of quiet recreation compatible with National Park purposes and are greatly enjoyed by the public who can experience here all the things that people come to the New Forest to enjoy. Although there are some antique land closures by the Ministry of Defence these generally now appear to be obsolescent. Existing camping/caravan sites and horse-riding facilities offer scope for taking pressure off the Forest core, as do the existing country parks at Avon Heath and Moors Valley. Although there are some less quiet recreation facilities such as Matchams Stadium and a ski centre this is a robust environment and the current degree of development at these sites does not preclude their inclusion in a National Park, as shown by experience in the Lake District and elsewhere.

5.191 In summary, the addition of the suggested areas offers a considerable opportunity to conserve and enhance their already substantial qualities which continue those found on the eastern side of the Avon. In turn, this would contribute to the integrity and viability of the whole of the New Forest as a National Park by strengthening its long-term resilience to visitor pressure and development. It would also greatly expand the available heathland and commoning resource and provide additional low value agricultural land which could be available for back-up grazing.
The case for the Agency

5.192 Designation of an NFNP has to be confined to land meeting the statutory criteria. The Park should include all the qualifying land but cannot be stretched to drawing in the ‘widest possible boundary’ in the pursuit of an aspirational vision. While much of the land referred to may be mainly open country it does not meet the statutory designation criteria. Unless it does so it cannot be included. It is not reason enough to include land on the basis that it may be a fragile landscape, vulnerable to change or development, and/or in need of better management and protection in terms of land use, wildlife, cultural heritage and opportunities for public understanding and enjoyment.

5.193 The landscape quality of the objection area is at best mixed and at worst poor. The principal landscape types are forestry plantation and heathland. In the north there is also enclosed farmland. The commercial conifer plantations - which cover at least half of the objection area - are of uniform character, crossed by long straight roads and rides. They lack the more varied topography and species composition that characterises the New Forest timber inclosures.

5.194 The more mixed heathland and plantation areas accommodate a diverse range of land uses including MOD land, caravan parks, a dry-ski centre and go-karting. Along many of the main roads there are large areas of suburban development and a number of commercial activities such as car sales, kennels, and a major sand and gravel and landfill site. In addition the land adjoining Bournemouth Airport suffers from visual intrusion and noise. South of the A31 the A338 forms a major barrier between the objection area and the New Forest and, since the area lies well outside the visual envelope of the Avon Valley, there are very few views to the New Forest.

5.195 The SSSIs cover only a relatively small proportion of the objection area, have few (if any) significant links with the New Forest and do not meet the natural beauty criterion. Nor are there strong historic links with the Forest since the CNP’s boundary extends up to 6km west of the Avon and much of the objection land is well beyond the zone in which Forest rights occur.

5.196 The objection area does have substantial areas of access land and a reasonable network of rights of way but some of the available recreation types (eg the dry-skiing and go-karting activities) are unrelated to the character and special qualities of the Forest and incompatible with National Park purposes. In addition they detract from the area’s natural beauty.

5.197 The Agency does not accept that the reference to ‘enhancement’ as part of the first National Park purpose justifies the inclusion of land because its landscape and/or ecological interest has potential for enhancement or for restoration or reversion to heathland. Judgements on natural beauty have to be based on current condition, not potential or aspirational condition, except in the case of land where appropriate high quality restoration is already assured as a result of an existing planning condition. Nor is it acceptable to include land simply on the basis that it provides opportunities to increase the Park’s overall resilience to visitor pressures by reducing perceived pressures on more fragile areas.
2. Land to the west of the Avon between Town Common and Fordingbridge

5.198 21 objectors seek more modest westward extensions of the designation order boundary than those described above, generally as far as a north-south line between Town Common (north of Christchurch) and Fordingbridge bounded by (from south to north) Matchams Lane or the A338, the B3081, The Belt, and Harbridge Drove.

5.199 The objectors comprise New Forest Consultative Panel (89); New Forest District Council (106); the New Forest Commoners Defence Association (110), the New Forest Association (111); Ringwood and Fordingbridge Footpath Society (122); Hants and IOW Wildlife Trust (166); the Ramblers Association (226); the National Trust (228); Ellingham, Harbridge & Ibsley Parish Council (344); the Association for National Parks (356); together with 11 individuals (94, 96, 100, 102, 116, 123, 125, 177, 237, 243, and 347).

5.200 Not all of these objectors support every area of land within this overall sub-area, which can be more particularly broken down into 3 component parts – (a) land between Town Common and Ashley, (b) land at Ashley, east of the A338 and (c) land between Ringwood and Fordingbridge.

The overall sub-area

5.201 Objectors concerned with the overall sub-area generally see it as necessary to add these areas to the NFNP to ensure the inclusion of the Avon Valley as a complete landscape and land management unit. In their view the western boundary of the Park has been drawn too tightly. Although it purports mainly to follow the outer western edge of the floodplain as represented by the boundary of the Avon Valley ESA this differs in detail from the Environment Agency’s indicative floodplain map and is not clearly demarcated on the ground.

5.202 The designation criteria justify inclusion of the entire width of the valley landscape unit, taking in the whole of the river terraces and slopes at least as far as the skyline. A precedent for this approach was set by the Agency’s response to the public consultation stage when the boundary was extended away from the floodplain to include (a) the wooded slopes of St Catherines Hill and Town Common and (b) the Matchams Viewpoint together with Leybrook Common and Wattons Ford Common.

5.203 The proposed additional areas are similar to the above and to those on the eastern side of the valley. They comprise predominantly wooded higher slopes together with a mosaic of woodland, open farmland and occasional heathland pockets on the valley sides, and more intensively farmed land on the flatter gravel terraces above the floodplain. The whole Avon valley unit has strong landscape, historical and commoning connections with the Forest and the proposed added areas contain features of intrinsic landscape, ecological and historic merit. The resulting boundary follows a more consistent, robust and easily distinguishable line because it follows strong road lines and, unlike that in the order, it does not weave in and out of the floodplain.

5.204 The New Forest Commoners Defence Committee points out that until 1964 the droves, greens and commons that ran from the open forest down to the floodplain allowed stock to access the river and cross it at certain places. These animals then roamed the lanes, greens and commons to the west of the Avon, making this area a functional part of the wider forest grazing system.
The NFCDA and others also consider that the designation order takes inadequate account of the extent of land west of the river benefiting from Rights of Common. In their opinion it is highly desirable to include additional areas west of the river so as to increase the available protection for the existing and potential pockets of back-up grazing land to be found here.

2a. Sub-area between Town Common and Levbrook Common

The case for the objectors

The edge of the floodplain is generally felt by objectors to be a weak boundary, difficult to identify. Those suggesting a particular revision to the boundary mostly seek inclusion of additional land up to the A338 including Avon Common, Week Common and Week Wood. In their view this busy dual carriageway forms a firmer, more natural boundary and traffic has only a localised impact on nearby land. Others suggest that the boundary should be slightly further west, following the B3073 and Matchams Lane despite the severance effect of the A338 and the closer proximity of Bournemouth Airport not far to the west of Matchams Lane. This proposal would also include Ramsdown Plantation, Sopley Common and the remainder of the Avon Common area.

Objectors such as New Forest District Council, the Ramblers Association and the Hants and IOW Wildlife Trust consider that the heathland and semi-natural woodland in this area represent an important and characteristic landscape type and resource which is intact, well managed and in good condition. The coniferous plantations overlying heathland are very characteristic of similar landscape/habitat types in the New Forest and it is somewhat artificial to make a strict division here between the Dorset Heaths and the New Forest. The landscapes in this area provide a distinctive and aesthetically pleasing setting for the wider valley and make an important contribution to its overall character and natural beauty. Degraded elements and detractors are not present to the east of the A338.

Reference is made to the sub-area’s historic and ecological associations with the Forest, such as past links between Avon and Sopley, where the villages are east of the river while commons of the same name are to the west and were used by straying Forest stock pre-1964. Until 1974 the Hampshire/Dorset boundary was further west so these areas were administratively associated with the New Forest until then and many parts are compatible in character and use with New Forest landscape types.

Week Common is contiguous with the floodplain but forms heathland which is part of the St Leonards & St Ives SSSI, a constituent element of the Dorset Heaths cSAC and SPA. It is also included as access land on the draft map under the CROW Act. Sopley Common and parts of the steep slope of east of Ramsdown Plantation are also part of the cSAC and SPA. The former is also a nature reserve managed by Dorset Wildlife Trust while the latter is Forestry Commission land with a viewpoint.

That part of Avon Common to the east of the A338 is a commercial timber plantation owned by the Forestry Commission. There is no public access and it is currently managed for shooting. The site is a preferred area for sand and gravel extraction in the adopted Dorset Minerals and Waste Local Plan, but pre-application discussions involving the Dorset Wildlife Trust envisage the restoration of the working area (41ha) to wet woodland. An adjacent 21ha of
plantation would be felled and managed as a heathland extension of the adjacent Week Common. Public access would increase. Overall these changes would not diminish, and may enhance, the extent and quality of the features meriting inclusion under the statutory criteria.

**The case for the Agency**

5.211 It is agreed that the landscape of Ramsdown Plantation is similar to that of St Catherines Hill/Town Common, with a mosaic of heathland and woodland on high ground overlooking the Avon Valley. However, it lacks the latter area’s extensive nature conservation and historic designations. Moreover, its setting is not comparable because it is further from the Avon Valley and separated from it by the busy A338 dual carriageway which forms a major barrier.

5.212 The landscape quality of the rest of the objection area is at best mixed and at worst poor. The principal landscape types are plantations and heathlands. The plantations cover at least 50% of the objection area and are uniform stands of commercial conifers with long straight roads and rides and limited public access. They lack the more varied topography and species composition characterising the New Forest timber inclosures and have very little public access. Along Matcham’s Lane there are intrusive features such as suburban housing, assorted commercial developments, caravan parks and views of Bournemouth Airport. Parts of the objection area (no more than half) carry SSSI and other nature conservation designations of national importance.

5.213 The existence of a preferred area for sand and gravel extraction at Avon Common (under the Dorset Minerals and Waste Local Plan) provides an additional reason for excluding this parcel under the provisions of boundary criterion 2i [CD 104, table 2].

5.214 While the New Forest heaths and the Dorset Heaths have many geological and other similarities (and there is much merging in this transitional area) there is a distinction to be drawn between the historical and cultural entity represented by the Thomas Hardy heaths and those of the New Forest which have generally been perceived as extending only as far as the Avon. On the western side of the Avon only Town Common and Leybrook Common/Matchams View offer sufficient opportunity to look towards, experience, appreciate and enjoy the New Forest.

5.215 As for recreation, Ramsdown Plantation has open access and there are short lengths of public footpath and bridleway in the southern part of the objection area. However, most of the objection area is not accessible to the public and there is no link across the A338 except via Avon Causeway. Opportunities for a ‘markedly superior recreational experience’ therefore do not occur.

**2b. Sub-area at Ashley, east of the A338**

**The case for the objectors**

5.216 The Ramblers Association and the New Forest Commoners Defence Committee suggest inclusion of this area on the grounds that the A338 forms a firmer boundary than the straggly edge between this mainly low density residential area and the River Avon ESA. The Defence Committee considers that inclusion could help to protect views from the valley and there is the possibility that the area could yield some small pockets of back-up grazing.
The case for the Agency

5.217 The suburban housing and assorted commercial development here are inconsistent with the designation criteria and it would be inappropriate to include this area while omitting similar suburban areas north of the A31.

2c. Sub-area between Ringwood and Fordingbridge

The case for the objectors

5.218 The case for inclusion of this area (which includes the plantations at Bakers Hanging, the grounds of Somerley Park, and a belt of farmland and woodland between Lower Turmer and Midgham Farm) was most fully presented by New Forest District Council.

Natural beauty

5.219 The area displays typical characteristics of ‘river terrace farmland’, the most extensive landscape type within the valley. While the proposed NFNP sweeps over all of this landscape type along the eastern side of the valley, the approach taken on the western side is inconsistent, partly following a hard-to-distinguish line along the fuzzy edge of the floodplain and partly departing from that. Some obvious anomalies include that in the area of Midgham Wood and Midgham Long Copse where it is unclear why some woodland is included and some excluded.

5.220 The suggested boundaries are clearly distinguishable roads and would include extensive timber inclosures and plantations to the north of (and including) Bakers Hanging. These demonstrate key characteristics of a typical New Forest landscape type. There is some incongruous activity here including a small amount of mineral working but the great majority of the plantations are intact and in good condition. They have intrinsic ecological interest since they overlie former heathland and are included within the Ringwood Forest SINC.

5.221 These areas also provide an attractive backdrop to the historic parkland of Somerley Park which stands to the north. Somerley House is an imposing Grade 2* listed building built in the 1790s by Samuel Wyatt standing on a bluff above the Avon floodplain. Its grounds are included in the Hampshire Register and comprise an intact and distinctive landscape characteristic of its type and with aesthetic appeal. From the terraces there are spectacular panoramic views to east and south towards the river and its carriers, and – beyond – to the New Forest plateau.

5.222 North of Somerley Park there are attractive hanging, predominantly broad-leaved woodlands at the top of the slope (Turmer Hill, Kent Hill, Bleak Hill and Midgham) overlooking remnant ancient semi-natural woods, patches of grass and arable farmland on more gentle slopes, interspersed with strong hedgerows, frequent trees and winding lanes serving agricultural hamlets such as Turmer and Harbridge. These two very small settlements once formed part of the large estate associated with Somerley House and contain features such scattered listed buildings, coach roads, parkland trees and Harbridge Church, a prominent valley landmark. All these areas are characteristic of the Avon Valley and wider New Forest and display distinctive characteristics of those landscape types. The landscape is in good condition, attractive and intact, and there is a sense of remoteness and tranquillity and an absence of incongruous or detracting elements. Arable use is present but does not dominate. These are typical Forest edge
landscapes, much of which benefit from Rights of Common, and they are of comparable character and quality to those found on the eastern side of the valley.

5.223 Commoning is still active in these areas. 14% of all practising commoners in 2000 resided in the north-west parishes of Fordingbridge, Woodgreen, Hale, Ringwood and Ellingham, Harbridge and Ibsley. The latter alone had 25 commoners turning out 344 stock.

**Opportunities for open-air recreation**

5.224 In terms of recreation there is a good network of public rights of way and quiet country lanes between Turmer and Fordingbridge, including a section of the Avon Valley Path. In the view of the Ramblers Association it is important to include the whole of the Path within the Park, as far north as Fordingbridge/Downton. The routes in the area offer ample opportunity for walking and cycling and for understanding and enjoying the special qualities of the tranquil Avon Valley landscape and its birdlife. Some routes (such as those on the ridge south of Fordingbridge) offer fine views across the valley towards the Forest core. Other local opportunities for quiet recreation include horse riding and golf.

5.225 South of Turmer there is limited access or none. However, although Somerley House is not open to the public it is available for hire for corporate and other events and hosts a programme of special events during the year which are extensively enjoyed by the public at those times. Views are obtainable from the grounds in front of the house across the valley to the New Forest plateau beyond. The grounds also contain a golf course. Overall, the areas without access compare in size with other areas also lacking access that have been included within the Order. ‘Visual access’ to some of these areas is available from points such as the Avon Valley Path and Ibsley Bridge and there is future scope for improved access on foot and by cycle and horse, including possible opening up of some of the private bridges across the river such as that at Ellingham.

**The case for the Agency**

**Natural beauty**

5.226 It is accepted that there are small areas of high quality landscape and pockets of ecological interest to the west of the Avon between Baker’s Hanging and Fordingbridge. Examples are the hanging woods on some of the slopes (especially above Harbridge), Somerley House and its parkland, and other individual features of nature conservation and historic interest, such as the conservation areas. However, the principal landscape elements are commercial forestry in the south and substantial areas of open arable farmland above and to the west of the break of slope. These have no connection with the New Forest. Much of the lower ground is very flat and open. There are few views of the New Forest except from Somerley, which is private. There is no suitable boundary line that would include only those areas of outstanding natural beauty and it must therefore fall back to the edge of the floodplain.

5.227 There is limited historical evidence to link this area to the New Forest. It was never within the Large Bounds and although the whole area (other than the plantations) has Rights of Common attached to it, in itself this is insufficient reason for inclusion.

5.228 Although some have suggested that the farms in the objection area form part of the management unit of the floodplain partial inclusion of land holdings will not affect land
management as the NPA would have no powers to control this. The existence of some commoning activity in the area is not sufficient reason to include it in the NFNP.

**Opportunities for open-air recreation**

5.229 Although the northern part of the area has a reasonable network of rights of way, Somerley and the plantations have none. Hence there is very limited scope for providing an outstanding recreational experience.

3. **Land in and around Fordingbridge town**

The cases for the objectors

5.230 32 objectors consider that various areas in and around the town of Fordingbridge should be included in the NFNP (43, 47, 55, 78, 97, 94, 96, 100, 102, 110, 122, 123, 125, 126, 131, 149, 167, 168, 197, 207, 211, 226, 237, 240, 243, 320, 322, 347, 352, 354, 371 and 377).

5.231 Objecting organisations comprise Hyde Estates (55); the New Forest Commoners Defence Association (110); Ringwood and Fordingbridge Footpath Society (122); Fordingbridge Society (167); New Forest Village Shops Association (197); the Ramblers Association (226); Council for National Parks (354); Fordingbridge Town Council (371); and Fordingbridge Museum Trust (377). Desmond Swayne MP (211) also seeks inclusion of the town if an NFNP is designated.

5.232 A considerable number of objectors put forward definite alternative boundaries around or within the town. Although these differ considerably in detail a common theme is that the Park should include the whole of the built-up area as defined in the local plan. However, many also suggest the inclusion of a more extensive area including the village of Ashford.

**Natural beauty**

5.233 According to the objectors Fordingbridge is widely perceived as a valuable north-west gateway to the New Forest and is regarded as an attractive rural town retaining its scale and sense of tranquillity. Detailed reference is made to the historic core of the town, including 72 buildings of historic and architectural interest and an interesting group of ancient streets and traditional buildings clustered around the ancient river crossing [see 371/1/3]. Reference is also made to the complex of streams making up Sweatford Water, which constitutes an extension of the Avon floodplain. These channels wind through the town and tend to be associated with attractive semi-natural recreation areas containing abundant wildlife.

5.234 The earlier ford and the subsequent 14th century bridge are seen as evidence of ancient links between the New Forest and the chalk landscapes to the west, emphasising the historic and current role of the town as a gateway to the Forest. Many perceive it as an anomaly to include the bridge and the area of Horseport but exclude the whole of the rest of the Fordingbridge Conservation Area within the main town.
5.235 The town offers many services to nearby parts of the NFNP including medical services, retail and business services, and community services such as schools, churches and many large seasonal community events.

5.236 The Town Council, New Forest Commoners Defence Committee and others believe that the Agency understates the town’s strong past and present links with the commoning system, pointing out that the town is within an area with Rights of Common and that until 2000 the parish boundary ran deep into the Forest at Godshill. Between 1978 and 1999 the number of commoners in Fordingbridge Parish rose from 5 to 10, while the number of commoners’ cattle depastured on the Forest increased substantially. The town was also well within the pre-1964 straying area and formed a route to the Forest for commoners from the Rockbourne area.

**Opportunities for open-air recreation**

5.237 There are many footpaths linking the town with the designated area including the Avon Valley Path. The riverside recreation ground (held and run by the Town Council and situated in the Park on the eastern side of the river) is the finest in this part of the country and much enjoyed by visitors and locals. The town has a plentiful supply of pubs, restaurants, a hotel, numerous B & Bs and good bus access from Salisbury, Ringwood, Poole and Bournemouth. The town also funds and supports its own Visitor Information Centre in the newly established Fordingbridge Museum without any financial assistance from the District Council. Well over 15,000 enquiries were handled between Easter and September 2001 despite the effects of the foot and mouth outbreak.

5.238 It is not understood why the larger towns of Ringwood and Lymington have been included for their gateway functions and contributory roles, despite the fact that they have much more modern development and, in Ringwood’s case, a smaller conservation area. Inclusion of Fordingbridge would benefit the Park by providing potential for relieving visitor pressure on more sensitive areas and continuing the town’s ancient gateway role. It would also benefit the local tourist economy and afford extra protection to retain the town’s special character and charm. Without this, development pressures along the western side of the Park will be funnelled into Fordingbridge.

**The case for the Agency**

**Natural beauty**

5.239 The landscape setting of Fordingbridge is dominated by the meandering River Avon and its extensive water meadows. The river, bridge, island and water meadows are therefore included as a scenic part of the Avon floodplain, the western edge of which forms a logical and consistent boundary of the National Park along the entire valley save for the exceptional cases of Breamore, Matchams View and Town Common.

5.240 However, inclusion of the town itself would demand a very clear-cut case to be made since it is on the very edge of the Park. It is a pleasant but not outstanding town with a distinctly urban character. To merit inclusion it would need to be an integral part of a qualifying ‘extensive tract of country’ as defined in the Act and possess outstanding landscape and townscape qualities. In the Agency’s view it does not fulfil these requirements to a sufficient degree although the judgement is a difficult one.
5.241 Where other towns have been included, such as Ringwood and Lymington, they are surrounded by land that is clearly part of the New Forest and meets the natural beauty criterion. This is not the case for Fordingbridge. The land to the north and west of the town is not part of a qualifying tract. It is pleasant countryside but has no special quality, is remote from the Forest and has no visual relationship with it. Nor does the town itself meet the natural beauty criterion. While the town has a number of features of historic, visual and architectural interest, the townscape is not outstanding. Modern suburban development and an unattractive and confusing central car park are obvious detracting features. However, Burgate House, the 14th century bridge and the built-up area of Horseport (on the opposite side of the bridge) have been included in the Park as they are considered sufficiently outside the main built-up area of the town.

5.242 It is accepted that the town has some historical, cultural and commoning links to the Forest but it also has strong community links to the west in the direction of Ashford, Sandleheath, the downlands, and Salisbury.

**Opportunities for open-air recreation**

5.243 Fordingbridge offers facilities for accommodation, refreshment and orientation to New Forest visitors, and a section of the Avon Valley Path runs through the town. However, it is the riverside and the water meadows (which are both included in the Park) that are the main focus for quiet riverside recreation including angling, walking and picnicking. With the exception of these areas the town’s contribution to recreation and tourism does not meet the standard of a ‘markedly superior recreational experience’.

5.244 The Agency’s approach to defining National Park boundaries is that settlements need to meet two tests for inclusion as set out under part 2g of the boundary considerations tests at CD104 table 2 and the relevant explanatory footnote. 2g requires a judgement to be made on the town’s ‘contribution as a whole to the character and purposes of the Park’, while the note explains that this ‘may include a contribution to the Park’s economy and community life and a value for visitors’. The Agency’s view is that the town fulfils some of these functions but does not have the necessary landscape and townscape qualities to qualify.

5.245 Commenting on other factors raised by objectors, the statutory criteria do not permit consideration to be given to fears about future development pressures, the inclusion of land in order to relieve visitor pressures affecting more sensitive areas elsewhere, or the benefits that might accrue to the local tourist economy.

**4. Land between Fordingbridge and Downton**

**The case for the objectors**

5.246 The CNP (354), the Ramblers Association (226), and Mrs B Hare (116) suggest the inclusion of additional land on the valley slope between Fordingbridge and Breamore, generally following the line of Whitsbury Road. Mrs Hare considers that this would reflect the area’s botanical and ornithological interest.

5.247 Beyond Breamore the CNP and the Ramblers Association propose the inclusion of additional land in the north-west corner of the Park. Both organisations consider that the Park boundary should be contiguous with that of the neighbouring Cranborne Chase and West
Wiltshire Downs AONB (as shown at CD107 p74). This would avoid the anomalous situation in which a small area of land between the A338 and the AONB between North St, Breamore (in the south) and Lions Lodge (in the north) would be excluded from both. North east of Lions Lodge the two organisations suggest different boundaries. CNP’s proposal is essentially confined to an additional wedge of land within the floodplain as far as the southern edge of Downton. The Association suggests crossing the floodplain via the route of the dismantled railway, joining the B road at Lode Hill and then linking up with the Agency’s boundary east of Morgans Vale. In their view this would provide a clearer boundary and an additional resource area for wildlife, visual appeal and quiet recreation with considerable back-up grazing potential.

The case for the Agency

5.248 Dealing with the land between Fordingbridge and Breamore, this is relatively flat river terrace farmland mainly consisting of regular geometric fields, straight lanes and scattered linear housing. Landscape quality and Forest links generally weaken beyond the edge of the floodplain and the nature conservation interest is only of local importance. Overall, the land does not have sufficient natural beauty and any opportunities for recreation are not of the necessary ‘markedly superior’ quality.

5.249 North of Breamore, the Ramblers Association’s suggestion would bring into the Park the open intensively-farmed land north-east of Breamore around North Charford Manor House, chalkland landscapes around Rye Hill Copse, and the mainly suburban settlements of Woodfalls and Morgans Vale. None of these meet the statutory criteria.

5.250 Although the area around South Charford Farm and North Charford Manor is within the floodplain its landscape quality is relatively poor since it is now mainly enclosed farmland in arable use and with mixed landscape quality and condition. It is inappropriate to include this area.

5.251 The land around Rye Hill Copse is underlain by chalk, has no outstanding landscape features and looks northwards to Downton. As for Woodfalls and Morgans Vale, these make no significant contribution to the special qualities or rural economy of the Park.

5.252 The CNP’s suggestion for further extension up the floodplain to Downton is unjustified because it would take the Park beyond the point where there is true connection with the New Forest. However, it is accepted that there must be some degree of arbitrariness about the point selected to cross the Avon at the north-west corner of the Park.

5.253 The boundary in the designation order follows mapped features and meets the requirements of the Agency’s National Park boundary-setting considerations in table 2 of CD104. The issue of a small area of land being left excluded from both the NFNP and the AONB is not relevant to the statutory criteria.

5. Land east of Burton

The case for the objectors

5.254 6 objectors (45, 64, 212, 226, 322 and 346) are concerned specifically about the boundary on the river terraces to the east of the Avon and to the east of Burton. All are dissatisfied with
the Agency’s late decision (made between the local authority consultation stage and the publication of the order) to omit all the land bounded by the eastern edge of the village, Preston Lane, the footpath leading south from Waterditch Farm, and the railway. Concern is expressed that this decision could pave the way for village-related developments planned by the landowner. In addition, one objection (64) seeks inclusion of the village itself, remarking that only 25% has street lighting and that its character compares with other villages that have been included such as Breamore, Redlynch, Bashley and Winkton.

5.255 The Ramblers Association considers this to be a very popular area for walking. In particular, it provides direct, fairly flat pedestrian links into Burton Common and other areas of the National Park from the urban areas of Christchurch and offers opportunities for circular walks. There are opportunities for riding and cycling on the quiet country lanes and paths and these could be improved. Hedgerow replacement could also reduce the scale of the landscape.

The case for the Agency

5.256 The Agency explain that this block of land was excluded after the local authority consultation stage in response to comments by Dorset CC and Christchurch BC that its landscape quality has been damaged by intensive arable farming, including hedgerow removal and field amalgamation, and the visual impact of development in Burton. In addition, the single footpath across the land does not offer a markedly superior recreational experience. Referring to Burton village, the objector’s comments are not related to the statutory criteria.

6. Christchurch Harbour & Hengistbury Head

The case for the objectors

5.257 21 objectors (18, 94, 96, 100, 102, 112, 123, 125, 126, 130, 176, 226, 236, 237, 240, 243, 320, 322, 347, 354, and 372) propose that the National Park should extend southwards from the point where the A35 crosses the Avon Valley, thus including Christchurch Harbour and Hengistbury Head.

5.258 The case is most fully put by the Ramblers Association (226) and the Council for National Parks (354) who argue that this whole area meets the statutory designation criteria. The distinctive summit of the headland at Hengistbury Head and Warren Hill is a fine example of a heathland summit, so characteristic of the New Forest. Its landscape quality is enhanced by attractive views on 3 sides. To the north is the heart of historic Christchurch and its priory, Stanpit and Grimbury Marshes, and the harbour formed by the combined estuaries of the Avon, Stour and Moors Rivers. To the east are the sand and shingle spit at the mouth of the harbour and the attractive pine-fringed sweep of Christchurch Bay, and to the south is the open sea.

5.259 The heathland, river valley, marshland and coastal landscapes of the New Forest are concentrated here to great effect and the diverse panoramas of wetlands and water constantly change with the effects of tide, wind and light.

5.260 The area has considerable wildlife interest, most of the objection area south of the A35 being part of the Purewell Meadows and Christchurch Harbour SSSIs where migratory birds are
attracted by the varied wetlands and other habitats. A significant portion of Hengistbury Head is managed as a nature reserve.

5.261 There is a rich cultural heritage and substantial links exist with the Forest. Hengistbury Head has extensive Iron Age monuments including defensive, settlement and burial structures. Christchurch was an important medieval town and harbour dominated by the Priory which, by the 13th century, controlled the overwhelming majority of the heaths and commons in the southern part of the New Forest. The historic heart of the town thus forms a tangible link with the land management practices which fashioned the New Forest landscape. Historical evidence runs from the 13th century when King John used the town as a base for his visits to the Forest until the 1939 promotional film about the town ‘New Forest Borderlands’. Stanpit Marsh is still used for conservation grazing and Hengistbury Head, like much of the urban land around the harbour, benefits from Rights of Common.

5.262 The objection area has excellent access by bus and rail and good local access routes including footpaths, cycle routes and nature trails. The Avon Valley Path begins at the Priory and runs deep into the New Forest to the north. Christchurch is an excellent centre for visiting the southern part of the Forest and the harbour offers many recreational pursuits including sailing and windsurfing. The heart of the town presents opportunities for public understanding and enjoyment of the cultural heritage of the southern New Forest.

The case for the Agency

5.263 It is accepted that some of the landscapes here are similar to types found within the National Park. This area also has nationally important habitats and historic features, valuable grazing marshes and strong historic links to the New Forest. However, these historic links are not particularly evident today and the area’s character is adversely influenced by the dense urban areas surrounding it tightly on all landward sides. The physical connection with the New Forest hangs by the narrow corridor of the river near the Priory and is further severed by the A35 dual carriageway just to the north. There is no direct access along this corridor. It is therefore not part of the extensive tract making up the NFNP. Hengistbury Head is also inaccessible from the NFNP without a lengthy journey through the urban areas of Christchurch and Southbourne.

5.264 The recreational facilities available in this area are not quiet countryside pursuits allowing people to enjoy and understand the special qualities of the NFNP.

5.265 In addition, inclusion of any part of the historic core of Christchurch near the Priory would conflict with item 2g of the Agency’s boundary-setting criteria [CD104, table 2] which aims to avoid drawing the boundary within an individual settlement.
LANDSCAPE ASSESSOR’S CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS ON NATURAL BEAUTY

INTRODUCTION

5.266 The Avon Valley presents a major challenge for defining a meaningful western boundary for the NFNP due to the variety of

- landscape character and landscape quality
- land use
- connectivity to the New Forest core area

5.267 In assessing all the perspectives put before the Inquiry it is evident that a wide range of options exists, all with reasoned arguments for both exclusions and inclusions of land varying from the NFNP boundary as defined in the Designation Order. In assessing all these perspectives, it is satisfying the Natural Beauty criterion that is critical to the process of defining a justifiable and meaningful boundary worthy of NFNP designation status.

5.268 Various conceptual matters related to the landscape of the Avon valley area and the natural beauty criterion are considered more comprehensively in my general report to the Inspector (Appendix 1). These matters include concepts such as defining the “extensive tract”, what is “New Forest” landscape character, the role of the cultural dimension in “linkages to the New Forest” and the consistency of landscape quality, to name some which are most pertinent to the consideration of these particular boundary sections.

5.269 When recognising land that satisfies the criterion it is critical to ascertain the degree to which landscape quality is present in order to define the area of nationally outstanding countryside for NFNP designation purposes. Also, it is important that convincing arguments are employed for what constitutes the landscapes of the New Forest and how the various types of landscape relate and connect to each other in order to understand the validity of this western boundary to the NFNP.

5.270 Diversity of landscape character is considerable in the Avon corridor arguably more than any other part of the NFNP boundary areas by virtue of the:-

- range of agricultural landscapes
- presence of the water-meadow and river system
- historical patterns of land use
- variety of habitat and biodiversity interests
- presence of sizeable areas of urban development close to and within the NFNP Order

5.271 In looking first to the overall landscape analysis of the Avon by LUC for the NFHA (CD206), landscape type 9 (Farmed Terrace) was totally excluded between Christchurch and Fordingbridge. Type 10 (River Meadowlands) was included only north of Fordingbridge on the eastern side of the river where it was identified as important for backup grazing with a close relationship to the Forest core area. On the other hand the Agency, in CD126, found that a much wider area of the valley satisfied the natural beauty criterion and included areas of River Terrace Farmlands and the Avon Floodplain types within the NFNP boundary of the Designation Order, so that the western edge of the floodplain often provides the western boundary of the NFNP, except in the Lower Avon where higher heathy ground west of the floodplain, such as Town and Leybrook Commons, is also included. The justification for this
considerable extension is based primarily on a wider definition of New Forest related landscapes, the ecological quality of the river system, and historical connections to the Forest.

5.272 Looking to the urbanised areas of the valley, the NFHA has consistently excluded the urban areas of Christchurch, Burton, Ringwood and Fordingbridge. Although LUC also recommended the exclusion of Bransgore, the village was eventually included in the NFHA as adopted. The NFNP boundary originally excluded all these urban areas except Bransgore, but after the public consultation stage the Agency also included Ringwood within the Designation Order boundary.

5.273 In setting out my conclusions for this extensive and complex part of the boundary of the NFNP it is more manageable to divide boundary sections 13-15 covering the Avon valley from Christchurch to Downton into several subsections (following the pattern in the case reporting), dealing first with proposed boundary retractions and then with proposed extensions. Finally, I conclude with my overall recommended boundary revisions.

PROPOSALS FOR A REDUCED BOUNDARY

1. RETRACTION TO THE HERITAGE AREA WESTERN BOUNDARY

5.274 After the first local plan inquiry the western boundary of the NFHA, as defined according to the criteria used for that purpose, was broadly along the bottom of the New Forest slope opposite Fordingbridge. The second local plan inquiry scrutinised and revised the boundary north of Ringwood and Blashford Lakes. However in considering the boundary of the NFNP as in the Designation Order there is a need to examine a wide range of additional areas that are included by the Agency and other parties to see whether they offer a more rigorous boundary alignment or interpretation of the natural beauty criterion as now understood.

1a. THE LOWER AVON VALLEY

5.275 The Dorset Authorities’ case argues (a) that the landscapes of the Lower Avon valley are not adequately related to those of the New Forest and therefore not valid for consideration as part of the NFNP, and (b) even if they were related, they do not possess the necessary landscape quality to satisfy the natural beauty criterion. I consider that this view is too critical as there are areas within the Lower Avon that do demonstrate New Forest related landscape character, are distinctive and intact, and do therefore satisfy the criterion in terms of landscape quality. In my opinion these areas are Hengitsbury Head, Stanpit Marsh, St Catherine’s Hill, Town Common, Ramsdown Plantation, Sopley village, Leybrook Common, Kingston village and North Kingston Common.

5.276 The main question for these areas is related to the extent of their isolation and lack of physical connectivity to the core Forest area. Even though some areas offer outstanding mid and distant views to the New Forest from the elevated sites mentioned above, they all are nevertheless collectively separated from it by either unacceptably large areas of low landscape quality with unrelated character such as encroaching urban areas or land that has experienced agricultural intensification.

5.277 I find that there are extensive areas of mediocre to poor quality landscape often occurring within the River Terrace Farmlands landscape type. Frequently this is the critical factor
separating land which otherwise could form part of the extensive tract of countryside that would satisfy the criterion. For instance at Kingston North Common across to Leybrook Common and Matcham’s View, I find physical isolation from the Forest brought about by the presence of ordinary countryside with extensive arable intensification, together with other negative landscape elements such as hedgerow loss and incongruous buildings. The same situation occurs eastwards of Town Common and Sopley village where degraded landscape quality due to the extent of agricultural intensification and the presence of uncharacteristic features is even more severe across to Bockhampton and Bransgore.

5.278 In the Lower Avon I find it difficult to reconcile the inclusion of the high quality landscape of the River Avon and floodplain as land sufficiently physically connected to the New Forest and included within the NFNP. So often it is resolutely separated from the core landscapes by the same wide swathe of low to mediocre farmland with little landscape quality or strong relationship to the landscape mosaic of the New Forest and therefore not worthy of National Park status. These river landscapes cannot be considered part of the extensive tract of countryside meeting the natural beauty criterion, when the dominant intervening component is a landscape type that in the majority so obviously falls well short of the landscape quality required to satisfy the criterion.

5.279 In assessing Bransgore, I find a markedly expanded New Forest edge village with substantial areas of modern housing which overwhelm the old village centre. This is distinctly different in character to the Thorney Hill settlement which is well integrated within the Heathland Small holdings and Dwellings landscape type of the surrounding countryside. I find that I agree with LUC’s analysis in CD 207 para 38 that due to the extent of recent development Bransgore fails to satisfy the natural beauty criterion even though it is located hard up against the landscape of the core forest area on its eastern side. However, to south of Bransgore and west of Neacroft and Waterditch, there is a small strip of farmland beyond the NFHA boundary that continues to display a relationship to the Forest with landscape quality that meets the criterion.

5.280 The exception to this situation is found in the land from Ripley Wood to the edge of the watermeadows below Bisterne, where I find there is a continuous and substantial degree of connectedness to the Forest from Bisterne Common westwards, in terms of landscape character and landscape quality satisfying the natural beauty criterion to a degree that qualifies this area for inclusion within the NFNP. There is a network of small copses and woods in this area, some with a heathy character, as well as a lesser degree of arable intensification throughout and a persistence of the original enclosure pattern with frequent hedgerow trees and historic landscape parkland trees around Bisterne Manor itself.

5.281 Apart from this, it is not possible to justify inclusion of any further land west of the A338 below Ringwood on natural beauty grounds because of the factors discussed above - isolation, urbanisation, unrelated character and insufficient landscape quality.

1b. THE UPPER AVON VALLEY

Blashford Lakes

5.282 Looking to the Blashford Lakes area north of Ringwood as far as Ibsley village, I find the landscape decisively affected by past mineral extraction and current workings east and west of the A338. Previous extraction areas have been reclaimed as a series of water bodies which form a waterscape of recreational and ecological value and interest. I therefore agree with the
Agency’s classification of the Blashford Lakes complex as predominantly an area of the Gravel Extraction landscape type with a limited area of the Heath Associated Small Holdings and Dwellings type. As such the area has little or no landscape character in common with the New Forest, even though the Lakes often provide the context and foreground to views of the steep and wooded forest edge which lies in close proximity to the east.

5.283 The landscape of the surrounding area consists of the urban area of Ringwood to the south, the Avon Floodplain to the west and the River Terrace Farmlands to the north. I find each of these is either insufficiently connected to the Forest or lacking in adequate landscape quality, or both, so that collectively they and the Lakes themselves do not form an extensive tract of countryside that qualifies to be considered for inclusion in the NFNP. Overall, with the history of past extraction and the scale of current activity towards and beyond the A338, I find this area (except for the Avon floodplain from Ringwood to Ibsley Bridge which is an outstanding landscape in its own right) to be essentially an engineered landscape with little New Forest character or landscape quality except at Ellingham. It thus fails to meet the natural beauty criterion and is not worthy of National Park status.

**Ibsley to Fordingbridge**

5.284 This section contains certain areas within the Floodplain and Enclosed Farmland and Woodland types which have considerable natural beauty and tranquillity, some with evidence of New Forest landscape characteristics and high landscape quality. These are all found west of the River Avon at Turmer and Turmer Hill, Kent Hill, Bleak Hill, Harbridge village and the floodplain and woods south of Fordingbridge to Bickton. In these areas I find a variety of distinct landscape character types, although not all are New Forest landscape types, such as those on the floodplain, but all demonstrate good to outstanding landscape quality. In particular, if it were not for its detached location the block of land covering Turmer and Kent Hills to Harbridge and Harbridge Farm would satisfy the natural beauty criterion for NFNP status.

5.285 However I find all the aforementioned areas are isolated from the Forest by the mediocre landscape quality of the intervening River Terrace Farmlands, as in the Lower Avon valley. With regard to the part played by various physical and cultural linkages identified by the Agency in CD237, I do not find that these are sufficiently significant to further justify the inclusion of areas of land not otherwise qualifying for inclusion on natural beauty grounds. The various linking elements identified in CD237 are covered in more detail in my general report in Appendix 1.

5.286 As in the Lower Avon Valley, the result is that with the degree of unevenness in landscape quality it is difficult to connect the high quality patches to the Forest core, due to the extent of the poorer landscape quality of the farmed landscape of the river terraces between the A338 and Gorley Lane. This land poses a consistent barrier to the flow of landscape quality found east and west of the river and in itself shows limited connections to the Forest either in landscape character or in current land uses. It is with reluctance that I conclude that the areas of high quality landscape on the west side of the Avon do not form part of the extensive tract of countryside that can be considered for inclusion within the NFNP.

5.287 I also conclude that it is difficult to see how the land west of the NFHA boundary across to the Designation Order can be justified for inclusion considering the inconsistency of landscape character and landscape quality present, to the extent that overall the land concerned is not outstanding and does not fulfil the criterion for inclusion within the NFNP on natural beauty grounds.
5.288 In my view the inclusion of land within the Designation Order beyond that verified for the NFHA is not possible for the reasons stated above. However, it has to be clearly recognised that defining a firm and robust boundary on the ground in this particular area poses some of the most difficult practical problems found at any point around the perimeter of the NFNP.

5.289 The present NFHA boundary takes a snaking line west of Gorley Road, including small areas of land just beyond the edge of the perambulation, because the 2nd Local Plan Inspector considered it appropriate to include a “tract of small fields with hedgerows and trees…generally consistent in character with adjacent areas east of Gorley Road” (CD 236 para 5.1.55). I support this general approach because although Gorley Road would be a firm boundary it would exclude small areas of traditional common grazing within the perambulation as well as some other New Forest features such as traditional buildings, farmsteads and smallholdings fronting Gorley Road and forming part of the communities of North and South Gorley.

5.290 However, the current boundary of the NFHA is not entirely appropriate for the NFNP because it follows a series of features such as ditches, fences, hedges, some of which may no longer exist, within an area west of the road where the landscape character is quickly changing to one not typical of the New Forest (River Terrace Farmlands) and deteriorating in quality.

5.291 This problem is least acute north of the Hungerford T-junction and in this area I recommend that the NFHA boundary should be adopted northwards to Criddlestyle since it forms a pragmatic line more or less following the foot of the New Forest slope and marked reasonably clearly by field boundaries, footpaths and Stuckton Road.

5.292 The greater difficulties occur in the area south to Cross Lanes at Mockbeggar. My recommended boundary here is drawn with the intention of including only that land west of Gorley Road which (a) is within the perambulation, (b) is immediately associated with frontage properties and features or (c) forms the immediate visual setting of the linear settlements along the road. However, I have had difficulty in achieving these objectives clearly, given the scale and age of the Designation Order map. This is another situation where an Inset Map at a more appropriate scale would make the limits of the designated area clearer for those who have to use the Order and it may be that some minor departures from the line I have indicated would be justified in order to achieve the objectives I have set.

**Fordingbridge to Searchfield Farm**

5.293 North of the B3078 I find that the landscape of the river corridor and floodplain has a direct relationship with the adjacent steeply wooded slopes of the New Forest which consist of the Ancient Forest Farmland and Heathland landscape types. Here the wide meanders of the river flow close to the base of the slopes on three occasions at Sandy Balls, Godshill and Hale. In between these meanders the water meadow pastures and old floodplain water management systems persist, the degree of intactness increasing northwards, except in fields closer to the A338. I also find that the Heath Associated Smallholdings and Dwellings landscape type found around Woodgreen penetrates well into the New Forest heathland plateau at Millersford and Cunningger Bottom also has a particularly integrated landscape relationship with the floodplain below the village.

5.294 In contrast I find the land within the meander to the east of Fordingbridge is the exception, as here the intensity of agricultural change from meadowland to arable agriculture is
most evident. Around South and North Charford Farms north of Breamore, which run dairy herds that graze the watermeadows, the landscape again becomes transitional towards downland character which begins to filter in from the north and west together with an increasing element of arable cropping closer to the road.

5.295 In assessing this area I conclude that this part of the River Avon and floodplain, except for the aforementioned area, has a distinct landscape character which is of outstanding landscape quality. The area also demonstrates a strong landscape relationship with the New Forest core area, the diverse landscapes of the river corridor and wooded slopes collectively forming an outstanding landscape suite. This can be considered part of the extensive tract of countryside that fully meets the natural beauty criterion necessary for National Park status.

2. EXCLUSION OF RINGWOOD

5.296 In terms of landscape character I find that the sizeable urban area of Ringwood lies between the Gravel Extraction landscape type of Blashford Lakes and the Agency’s River Terrace Farmlands type to the south of the town. The town abuts the Ancient Forest Farmlands type to the east and the Floodplain type to the west, but is separated from the latter by the A31 road corridor. The older part of the town lies mainly to the western side of the urban area and close to the A31 where there are many fine vernacular buildings of interest together with the strong focal point of the church, all delimited in their extent by the town’s Conservation Area. Beyond this there are extensive areas of more modern housing development, particularly to the north and east of the town centre, and a limited distribution of mixed development to the south of the town centre, terminating at the sewage works.

5.297 In considering whether the town and its setting possess landscape quality of merit sufficiently intrinsic to the New Forest landscape to meet the statutory criterion of natural beauty, I find that the town centre does have elements that link it visually and historically to the New Forest. This is achieved through the architectural styles and building materials of the Conservation Area and features such as the church spire landmark, seen while travelling from the Forest, and through evidence of the past Forest-related functions within the Conservation Area. However in my view these links are spatially and functionally limited and the points from the public consultation exercise (as relied upon by the Agency), do not provide convincing reasons for including Ringwood on natural beauty grounds.

5.298 I also find that the sheer scale of the town contributes markedly to its separation from the surrounding landscape. This is assisted by the physical and audible presence of the A31 on the west side, albeit in cutting, plus the predominance of extensive areas of quite ordinary late 20th century housing development to the east and the restored but artificial post mineral extraction landscapes of the Blashford Lakes to the north. To the south the town has a more direct relationship with the rural landscape with less imposition on the surrounding countryside. However, there is some development of light industrial character with little to commend it for inclusion within a nationally recognised landscape designation.

5.299 Even though the town is situated close to the high quality landscapes of the Avon valley and the backdrop of the Ancient Forest Farmlands landscape type found on the slopes above Poulner, overall I consider that the town is insufficiently integrated with the surrounding rural landscape to form part of a broad sweep of countryside that can be considered for inclusion. It therefore does not meet the natural beauty criterion necessary to qualify for National Park status. In the previous section I have already indicated while I recognise the high quality landscape of
parts of the River Avon corridor and floodplain, they are not always part of the mosaic of landscapes that qualify for NFNP status, so that the town’s physically close relationship with the Avon River does not necessarily lend any greater weight for its inclusion in the NFNP.

5.300 I consider that overall the urban area of Ringwood does not satisfy the criterion of natural beauty or form part of an extensive tract of countryside that does so. I therefore recommend that Ringwood should not be included in the NFNP.

3. EXCLUSION OF LAND AT BREAMORE

5.301 I find that the land included within the Designation order west of the A338 at Breamore is of undoubted high landscape quality. It also has a distinct character containing an outstanding collection of vernacular buildings throughout the main village and North and Upper Street, including the main estate buildings of Breamore Park. However I am not convinced that this landscape is of typical New Forest character. Even though the countryside is classified as being partly within a typical agricultural landscape of the Forest edge, namely the Agency’s River Terrace Farmlands type, and partly within the Enclosed Farmlands and Woodlands type of the Sandleheath area, I find that both these categories cover a broad and varied spectrum of landscape character. In my assessment the landscape character at Breamore in this northerly part of the Avon Valley is beginning to show signs of the downland character of the West Wiltshire Downs AONB, from the village architecture to the field pattern and emerging soil types in fields west of the village, increasing westwards. I find that this differentiation from the New Forest is also substantiated by the lack of any accepted historical relationship for at least the past 720 years.

5.302 In considering these factors I find that the boundary chosen by the Agency divides what is a distinct landscape character unit that includes all of Upper Street and Breamore Park. Although the Agency’s approach is to make landscape quality the key consideration in boundary determination rather than landscape character, I find it difficult to understand why some land on the west side of Upper Street and part of the historic landscape of Breamore Park has been excluded. The result is that the boundary in the Designation Order follows an indistinct route without clear physical features around the main village but divides both Upper Street and North Street.

5.303 My own view of this boundary anomaly is that it is clear that the NFNP was taken right up to the AONB to avoid a situation where a narrow band of high quality landscape was excluded from both designations. However given Breamore’s uncertain connections to the New Forest physically and historically and the desirability of avoiding splitting any part of the settlement, I conclude that the boundary should be drawn back to the raised dismantled railway embankment to the east of the A338, excluding Breamore in its entirety together with the nondescript fields between the embankment and the A338.

4. EXCLUSION OF LAND AT ST CATHERINE’S HILL/TOWN COMMON/BLACKWATER HILL

5.304 These heathy areas on the west side of the Avon including Town Common, St Cathertines and Blackwater Hill are in my opinion isolated, even though they afford some superb distant views into the Forest from their elevated positions and possess many characteristics similar to more extensive areas within the New Forest. However, in detail these areas are more ecologically akin to the suite of Dorset lowland heaths, have a different land management
history, and are distanced by the width of both the Avon floodplain and the River Terrace Farmlands from Burton to Bransgore. In addition I find that the Town Common area, despite its ecological and archaeological importance, is a heavily used local resource with a certain urban fringe atmosphere. I therefore find these areas too disconnected from the Forest to be considered as part of the extensive tract of countryside that can qualify for inclusion as part of the NFNP.

PROPOSALS FOR EXTENDED BOUNDARIES

1. LAND WEST TO THE MOORS RIVER

5.305 While I accept that in some ways this area contains characteristics and qualities similar to the timber inclosures within the NFNP, I do not find that the landscape quality is outstanding or worthy of national recognition. While I recognise the wealth of available recreational experiences within this landscape, I do not consider that this area forms part of the extensive tract of country that defines the NFNP, nor does it offer any visual access into the Forest. The area is much more closely related to other afforested areas of lowland heath in Dorset rather than to the New Forest which is a considerable distance to the east and beyond Ringwood, which in itself does meet the natural beauty criterion. I therefore find no reason on natural beauty grounds to extend the boundary of the NFNP across Ashley Heath to the Moors River and cannot recommend inclusion of this area.

2. LAND TO THE WEST OF THE AVON BETWEEN TOWN COMMON AND FORDINGBRIDGE

2a Sub-area between Town Common and Leybrook Common

5.306 Located on the higher ground on the west side of the Avon Valley, overall I find this area somewhat isolated from the Forest although it shares some common landscape characteristics. I can see the merits of including parts of this area within the NFNP, such as Ramsdown Plantation which has a distinct wooded and heathy character with good landscape quality and some impressive views towards the New Forest across the Avon floodplain, but it is nevertheless limited in area and dislocated from the valley by the impact of the busy A338. I find that this area, together with Week and Avon Commons which have poorer landscape quality, has stronger biological and physical commonality with the system of Dorset lowland heaths and therefore does not form part of the qualifying extensive tract of countryside.

5.307 The scattering of built development throughout the area, albeit predominantly recreational, in places further reduces landscape quality, mainly through site selection, materials and in places design standards. In addition the area also contains an identified preferred site for mineral extraction identified south of Week Common and experiences the growing nearby impact of an expanding regional airport with increasing traffic levels.

5.308 I agree that the western edge of the floodplain presents an unsatisfactory and possibly fluctuating boundary here and the A338 might offer a more easily recognised physical boundary for the NFNP, but I do not find that the proposed additional land demonstrates adequate New Forest landscape character or quality to meet the natural beauty criterion to qualify for NFNP status. Also as stated for the Lower Avon in the previous section, due to the degree of isolation of this area, I consider that the land between Town and Leybrook Commons (and hence any land
west of here) does not form part of the extensive tract of country meeting the criterion. It therefore cannot be considered for inclusion in the NFNP.

2b Sub-area at Ashley, east of the A338

5.309 The low density suburban housing south of the A31 at Ashley as far as Leybrook Common, is of high quality, well treed residential environment. While it is located on the higher ground that is often present north and south along the western side of the Avon above the floodplain and is within the visual envelope of the valley, it bears little relation to the landscapes of the valley or the core Forest area further east, other than a topographic commonality. I therefore find that the area does not possess the landscape character and natural beauty that is necessary for inclusion within a National Park and does not share the characteristics of other New Forest settlements. It is therefore not recommended for inclusion within the NFNP.

2c Sub-area between Ringwood and Fordingbridge

5.310 I find the area north of Ringwood between the Designation Order boundary and The Belt up to Turmer Brook, containing Somerley Park and the adjacent woods and plantations of Baker’s Hanging, to be of mixed landscape character and quality. The area is composed of the River Terrace Farmland landscape type which contains few Forest related landscape elements and on closer examination I find the woodland component has stronger connections to land further west at Ashley Heath.

5.311 This land forms part of the chain of elevated bluffs with evidence of former lowland heath ecology which was once part of the network of Dorset Heaths. These sites are found intermittently along the west side of the Avon valley but here have undergone a marked change in land management resulting, over time, in a change in landscape character with the introduction of plantation forestry, a practice commonly found west and north of here on similar soils.

5.312 I appreciate that the Baker’s Hanging woods are an attractive vegetation mix, with some deciduous woodland rather than exclusively coniferous plantation blocks, and with a mixed age structure allowing the limited persistence of some former ground cover of the lowland heath habitat. Nevertheless the landscape character is more related to areas further west and the landscape quality is poor to medium with limited connection to the New Forest. The intervening floodplain and Blashford Lakes complex adds to the physical separation of this area from the core NFNP area.

5.313 Turning north to Somerley Park itself I find a distinct but not outstanding, historic designed landscape in a prime location on the edge of the floodplain but little New Forest landscape character evident and mainly screened by woodland from the valley. Again, the grounds are within the River Terrace Farmlands type, but very different in character to the area described above, indicating the wide spectrum of landscape that this type covers. As far as one can tell, with the limited visual and physical access, the only views available are a relatively distant one from within the New Forest at Mockbeggar Hill, which is across the lakes and gravel workings south of Ibsley, and only a partial glimpsed view from Ellingham churchyard. The parkland is also limited in its physical connectivity to the Forest for the same reasons as before, that is by the interception of the floodplain and the post mineral extraction landscape at Blashford.
5.314 With the inconsistent and intermittent landscape quality and the overall lack of physical and ecological connectivity, I find this area does not possess sufficient natural beauty to satisfy the criterion and does not form part of the extensive tract of countryside that can be considered for inclusion within the NFNP boundary.

5.315 Looking north to the area between Lower Turmer and north to the edge of Fordingbridge, initially I find a much more intact landscape both in character and quality as far as Kent Lane and Harbridge village. Here a sense of tranquillity is evident with landscape characteristics such as heathy deciduous woods with open areas and individual veteran trees, together with a scattering of thatched cottages and other vernacular village and farm architecture, all of which is connected visually and physically across the river through Harbridge village and Ibsley Bridge to the New Forest at South Gorley and Mockbeggar. Going north again, beyond Kent Lane the landscape grades into ordinary arable farmland with copses leading to Midgeham Farm and beyond to Fordingbridge Lane.

5.316 Looking west from Harbridge Drove, I find that the essentially afforested landscape west of Ringwood Forest across to Verwood is increasingly separated from the New Forest by actual distance, topography and land use, with little or no relationship with land across the Avon corridor. There are some areas of lowland heaths such as at Cranborne and Alderholt Commons but again, as in the Lower Avon, these are more closely connected with the network of lowland heath sites across Dorset and not with those of the New Forest.

5.317 In conclusion, although there are limited areas of high landscape quality west of the Avon, some with a New Forest related character, most particularly as described between Turmer and Kent Hills across to Harbridge, overall it is not possible to recommend their inclusion. This is due to isolation from the core Forest area by the extent of the river floodplain, albeit a high quality landscape in its own right, and the questionable landscape quality of the river terrace farmlands beyond.

5.318 Therefore I conclude that areas west of the Avon in this section do not form part of the extensive tract of countryside meeting the natural beauty criterion and cannot be included within the NFNP.

3. LAND IN AND AROUND FORDINGBRIDGE TOWN

5.319 Looking at the character of Fordingbridge and its countryside setting, this urban area lies within the Agency’s River Terrace Farmlands landscape type lying close to and west of the River Avon, but also meets the edge of the Enclosed Farmland and Woodland type of the Sandleheath area which extends further west into true downland landscape. I recognise the high quality of the town’s historic core which extends across to the east side of the Avon at Horseport, all of which is befittingly covered by its Conservation Area status, but away from this core considerable modern housing development has occurred, especially to the north. While I accept that there are undoubted historical connections to the countryside both east and west of the town the influences are unavoidably multifarious, which adds diversity in built character and orientation but results in a less specific connection to the New Forest today.
4. LAND BETWEEN FORDINGBRIDGE AND DOWNTON

5.320 On the west side of the Avon Valley between Fordingbridge and Breamore the River Terraces landscape type is prevalent but I find the landscape quality is unremarkable rather than outstanding and anyway fades as one moves west. In addition the area is physically and culturally distanced from the New Forest, a fact which is exacerbated by the A338 which offers a robust boundary here. Even though the area possesses characteristics common to the landscape type it fails to meet the natural beauty criterion, so does not qualify for inclusion in the NFNP.

5.321 North of Breamore the landscape character commences a major transition towards downland from South Charford Farm northwards and is not distinctly of New Forest character. While I appreciate that the landscape quality here is high, it is not of the appropriate type for inclusion without weakening the rigour with which the boundary is selected for what is recognised as the New Forest, rather than any other nationally recognised landscape fulfilling the natural beauty criterion.

5. LAND EAST OF BURTON

5.322 The land east of Burton outside the area covered by the Designation order falls within the River Terrace Farmlands landscape type which suffers from the impact of agricultural practices and incongruous development previously covered in the section above on the Lower Avon Valley. I therefore find that this area does not demonstrate sufficient landscape quality to meet the natural beauty criterion and cannot be included within the NFNP.

6. CHRISTCHURCH HARBOUR TO HENGISTBURY HEAD

5.323 While the land from Hengitsbury Head to the A35 does possess some areas of high landscape quality, overall it is insufficiently connected to the landscapes of the New Forest and in addition is compromised by influences of the surrounding urban areas. It therefore fails to meet the natural beauty criterion that is necessary to qualify for inclusion within the NFNP.

LANDSCAPE ASSESSOR’S RECOMMENDED BOUNDARY FOR SECTIONS 13-15

5.324 In section 13 the recommended boundary follows the NFHA from the railway at section 12 northwards along the base of the slope below Burton Common as far as Waterditch. It then turns west along the minor road as far as the small watercourse that is also the administrative boundary between Hampshire and Dorset and follows this line up to Waterhouse Farm. From here it follows the minor road west then northeast to Bockhampton Corner. It then circumnavigates the whole of Bransgore as defined in the local plan, also excluding existing and proposed public open spaces on the north and south edges of the village. The NFNP boundary then picks up the existing NFHA boundary again on the north side of the village on Derritt Lane at New Merryfield Farm and follows the NFHA northwards as far as Ripley Wood.

5.325 At the far western edge of Ripley Wood, which is nearest to the parkland at Bisterne Manor, the NFNP boundary departs from the NFHA line to follow the line of woods leading to Lower Bisterne Farm, joining the B3347 south of the farm following the small watercourse running from the woods towards the Avon. The boundary then follows the southern edge of the woods lying west of the B3347 leading to Lower Side Copse and then turns north along the west side of the wood before picking up the field boundary and drainage channel at the northwest
corner of the wood which leads to Alder Bed Copse. From here the boundary meets an east-west channel and footbridge on the edge of the wood and then follows the west side of wood to Wattons Ford track and bridleway. Then the boundary turns east following the bridleway and Avon Valley Path to Dean’s Farm and back to the B3347 via a minor road. On meeting the B3347, the NFNP boundary follows it for a short distance to the Dragon Lane turn-off from where it follows the eastern edge of the wood north of Bisterne Church. Half way along the wood edge the boundary then follows field boundaries that enclose the main parkland of Bisterne Manor across to the edge of Three Corner Copse to rejoin the existing NFHA boundary. The NFNP then follows the same line as the NFHA to Ringwood.

5.326 In section 14, in the vicinity of Ringwood, I recommend that the boundary for the NFNP should be the same as for the existing NFHA boundary, excluding and following the built edge of the town as shown in the local plan. From North Poulner onwards the recommended boundary for the NFNP continues to follow the NFHA to Cross Lanes.

5.327 From Cross Lanes to the Hungerford T-junction the NFNP boundary requires a detailed line to be carefully defined around the linear settlements at a larger scale than the Designation Order maps, following the principles set out under 1b Upper Avon Valley subsection Ibsley to Fordingbridge. North of the Hungerford T-junction the recommended boundary again follows the NFHA boundary as far as Criddlestyle on the B3078.

5.328 In section 15, the recommended boundary again follows the NFHA from Criddlestyle long the east bank of the River Avon to Lower Burgate on the A338 where it joins the Designation Order boundary for a short distance to Burgate Cross. The recommended NFNP boundary then departs from the Designation Order to follow the line of the raised embankment of the disused railway line, rejoining the Order boundary to the south of South Charford Farm. From here to Searchfield Farm no revisions to the Designation Order are recommended.

**INSPECTOR'S OVERALL CONCLUSIONS ON THE TWO DESIGNATION CRITERIA**

**THE LOWER AVON VALLEY FROM RINGWOOD TO THE COAST (between the NFHA boundary in the east and Moors River in the west)**

5.329 I agree with the Landscape Assessor’s conclusions on the extent of the land meeting the natural beauty criterion for inclusion in the NFNP. The wide flat river terrace farmlands (mainly used for extensive arable cultivation and dairying) do not have sufficient scenic and landscape quality to merit designation.

5.330 As for the ‘links’ between the New Forest core to the east and the adjacent terraces and floodplain to the west, CD 237 represents the Agency’s response to my invitation to give a full account of what it saw as the factors binding these landscapes together and justifying the inclusion within the NFNP of landscape types not previously considered to be an integral part of the New Forest mosaic.

5.331 The paper sets out the links in terms of various topographical, ecological, historical and socio-economic factors discussed in the ‘Links Paper’ (CD237). The paper undoubtedly
establishes some links in terms of aspects of the historic dispersed pastoral system, occasional fragments of former commons, fords, and possible drove roads but from my extensive visits to this area I find them to be overwhelmed by the current reality of large-scale farming within a flat landscape which is not of outstanding natural beauty. Map 2 in CD237, showing the geographical distribution of the “landscape and socio-economic/cultural links”, serves only to demonstrate the lack of impact of these features within the present day landscape.

5.332 In my view the Agency also overplays the ‘landscape archaeological’ significance of the parliamentary enclosure fields found on the river terraces, since any remaining traces of connections with former more heath-related landscapes are so infrequent and patchy, and this is a common national field type.

5.333 Turning to areas west of the terraces, there are some areas of considerable natural beauty within the floodplain and on some of the surviving Dorset Heaths and plantations, but these areas also fail to merit inclusion individually or collectively as part of any coherently definable “extensive tract” of qualifying landscape. This is because of the varying effects of intrusion by urban influences and other detractors, the existence of noisy features such as the A338 and Bournemouth Airport, fragmentation, distance from the New Forest core, and lack of sufficient connection in terms of history and/or land management. Consequently, there is little point in my assessing in any detail whether or not the very extensive areas both within and beyond the Designation Order meet the second criterion.

5.334 However, considering the matter briefly (and moving successively from east to west away from the Assessor’s recommended NFNP boundary line), the extensive river terraces contain a network of minor roads, byways, bridleways and footpaths, including the Avon Valley Path. These collectively provide plenty of (often very quiet) links between the Forest core, some attractive Avon Valley villages and the coastal towns but for most of the time these routes pass through a generally rather featureless farming landscape with sometimes only very distant views of the New Forest slopes or the heathy land on the west bank of the river. The recreational experience here can sometimes be very pleasant but on the whole it is unremarkable and far from ‘markedly superior’ on any national scale.

5.335 Referring briefly to Ringwood, I do not consider that this substantial town qualifies for inclusion under either of the criteria, both on the grounds referred to above by the Assessor and for the reasons I have already set out in relation to the similarly-sized town of Lymington at paragraphs 4.173 and 4.176.

5.336 Turning to Bransgore, according to the Local Plan this village has a population of about 4,300, making it the 10th largest settlement in New Forest District. As it is a substantial village situated right on the edge of the qualifying tract and cannot really be said to meet the designation criteria in its own right I consider that it should be excluded from the NFNP, with the boundary drawn around the built-up edge defined in the Local Plan. As in the cases of the larger towns of Lymington and Ringwood, this would allow the District Council to continue to address the planning issues arising here, most of which have little relationship with National Park purposes. Brockenhurst (3,400), Sway (3,400) and Lyndhurst (3,000) would then be the largest villages in the National Park. All of these are more truly embedded within the centre of the NFNP, fulfil more obvious visitor functions related to National Park purposes, and more properly warrant planning control exercised by the NPA.
5.337  The next major landscape element within this overall area is the water meadows, which are at their widest in the section below Ringwood. I saw from my accompanied visits that they have considerable attraction but very little access in the area south of Bisterne. While this corridor would never be suitable for large-scale access in my view the difficulties of providing at least some carefully-managed, time-limited access were probably over-stated by some objectors. Such access could potentially be markedly superior but (as discussed above) the floodplain corridor here does not fall within a sufficiently coherent extensive tract of New Forest countryside.

5.338  Across the River Avon there are some attractive landscapes with good open-air recreation opportunities at Town Common, Ramsdown Plantation, Sopley Common, Week Common, Matchams View, Avon Country Park and Hurn Forest. However, as described above, I have agreed with the Assessor that these do not represent a coherent extensive tract of sufficiently outstanding natural beauty and the same is true of their potential for open-air recreation. Some areas afford opportunities for quiet recreation within a reasonably extensive ‘natural’ environment with some sense of remoteness and tranquillity, but these are usually at the more extreme western edges of the areas in contention. Nearer to the Avon the quality of the experience on the heathlands and commons between Town Common and Leybrook Common is notably diminished by the very noisy corridor of the A338 dual carriageway. Here, the sound of traffic is a constant detraction to enjoyment of the areas open to public access to the west of the river and also reaches far into the flood meadows at those points where sound-eroding features are less present.

5.339  To sum up, I support the Assessor’s view that departures from the NFHA boundary are only justified in very limited cases in the lower section of the valley. The first is a minor amendment west of Godwinscroft and Neacroft where the stream at the foot of the slope beyond Waterditch represents a clearer boundary on the ground. The second is the exclusion of Bransgore for the reasons already described. The third is an extension of the NFHA boundary west of Ripley Wood to include the manor, parklands and church at Bisterne and a small area west of the B3347 where the Avon Valley Path runs through an arable field to reach an interesting area of mixed wooded and heathy character leading down to the ancient Wattons Ford. Although I do not recommend inclusion in the NFNP of the meadowland immediately adjoining the ford, this area is the only one of its type near the floodplain in the lower valley that retains sufficient connectivity with land of New Forest character and quality to justify designation. Inclusion could bring some criticism that this is a somewhat narrow westward projection of the designated area. However, in my view incorporation of the land into the National Park provides an opportunity to demonstrate and explain ancient connections between the Forest and the limits of its ‘Large Bounds’ that are elsewhere hard to appreciate in any meaningful way on the ground.

THE AVON VALLEY BETWEEN RINGWOOD AND DOWNTON (between the NFHA boundary to the east and Boveridge Heath, Cranborne Common, Fordingbridge and Breamore to the west)

5.340  As in the case of the valley below Ringwood, I concur with the Landscape Assessor’s conclusions on the geographical extent of land which both meets the natural beauty criterion and displays a firmly established ‘New Forest’ character. Although there are some highly attractive areas west of the floodplain with landscape characteristics similar to those found in some areas of the Forest, these are not sufficiently extensive or continuous to justify stretching the
boundaries of the NFNP across non-qualifying areas such as Blashford Lakes and the river terraces.

5.341 Referring briefly to Fordingbridge, I recognise that the town has long historic and cultural links with the Forest which in some senses are still retained and valued today. The attractive centre of the town (around the High Street, the bridge, and the riverside gardens) also acts as something of a focus for visitors to the general area of the New Forest, although the quality of the open-air recreational experience of visiting Fordingbridge (if it can be truly described as such) is pleasant, rather than ‘markedly superior’ on a national scale.

5.342 I agree with the Assessor that the town does not immediately abut land with qualifying outstanding natural beauty. In addition, the elevated A338 forms a substantial firm barrier that would be difficult to cross merely for the purpose of including the town. Even if Fordingbridge did lie next to qualifying rural land, I would not support the inclusion (and still less the partial inclusion) of this settlement of 6,100 within the designated “extensive tract”. For reasons similar to those already set out in relation to Lymington, Ringwood and Bransgore I do not consider that inclusion of Fordingbridge within the NFNP would lend greatly to the statutory National Park purposes. Rather, it would result in further deflection of the NPA’s efforts away from those purposes. Exclusion of all these urban areas would leave the NPA freer to concentrate its activities and resources on the issues of smaller centres like Lyndhurst, Sway and Brockenhurst (all with populations of 3,400 – 3,000) which are truly embedded within and permeated by land meriting designation against both of the statutory criteria.

5.343 In view of the above conclusions (and as in the case of the Lower Avon Valley), there is little point in my assessing how far the second statutory designation criterion is met on other land outside that with the requisite natural beauty.

5.344 Briefly however, the Blashford Lakes complex offers good opportunities for angling, sailing and other quiet water sports, and bird watching on those lakes retained for conservation. Nonetheless, similar complexes of water-filled gravel pits used for these purposes are found in many areas of lowland England and so the recreational experience is not unusual or markedly superior on a national scale. Although some lakes have close views of the lower New Forest slopes, the recreation experience here is not particularly New Forest-related.

5.345 Turning to the river terraces, there are relatively few paths here and those north of Ibsley pass through countryside that is adversely affected by current mineral extraction and the presence of many low-grade scattered buildings used in connection with horticulture. There are better paths in the Stuckton area but even here some are affected by field amalgamation through hedgerow removal, and most pass across pleasant but unremarkable countryside.

5.346 Moving further west I saw that there are some excellent recreational experiences available on and near the Avon Valley path in the Ibsley Bridge, Turmer, Harbridge, Kent Hill, and Bickton areas. However, the ‘high points’ of these experiences can be sometimes be disconnected from one another when the routes pass through pockets of lower quality land, thus reducing the overall recreational experience. Moreover, they do not link well with land within the Forest core. There are also some long quiet walks available in areas progressively further west in parts of Ringwood Forest and Cranborne Common. However, as explained by the Landscape Assessor, none of the areas mentioned here can be justified for inclusion in a qualifying part of the NFNP extensive tract. Thus, overall, the landscape does not provide the basic resource required to provide a markedly superior recreational experience.
5.347 Within the areas of the valley in contention here (Ringwood to Downton) the Assessor and myself have found that the natural beauty criterion is only met within the Avon floodplain west of the Godshill slopes, Woodgreen and Hale Park. Although this area was included in the NFHA only on grounds of the back-up grazing criterion applied to that exercise, I consider that both the slopes and the floodplain are high quality landscapes meeting the designation criterion. Moreover, the immediate juxtaposition of the floodplain (which here has both width and a relatively wild atmosphere) with the high quality characteristic New Forest landscape types creates an ability to appreciate the former close interrelationships between these two elements that has been lost or seriously reduced elsewhere.

5.348 I have no hesitation in concluding that this area also amply fulfils the open-air recreation criterion. There are excellent opportunities to experience the tranquillity of the floodplain (and its changing seasonal character) via the Avon Valley Path between Burgate Manor Farm and Folds Farm, the Woodgreen to Breamore road, and the footpath from Hale House to South Charford Farm. The two paths in particular offer good links with rights of way through fine scenery at Castle Hill and Hale Park and there are opportunities for circular walks through these diverse but interrelated landscapes which could potentially be greatly enhanced by the provision of access along the disused railway, which forms the recommended NFNP boundary here. The footpath leading south from Folds Farm below Frankenbury also takes a route which offers the opportunity to experience both the fringing woodlands and the edge of the quiet pastoral floodplain.

OVERALL RECOMMENDATION (Boundary sections 13-15)

5.349 I recommend that the NFNP boundary for these sections be modified as shown on the attached maps and described in the summary of recommendations at pages 5-6.