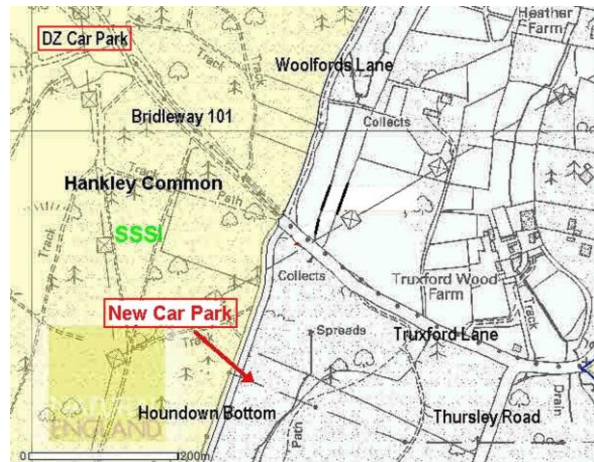


Closure of Hankley Common Central Car Park



Elstead and Thursley residents and visitors will be very dismayed that the MoD has announced the permanent closure of the Hankley Common central car park to the public from an unspecified date in January 2013. For about forty years, this car park has coped well with high Bank Holiday and weekend parking volumes for the many walkers, cyclists, horse riders and pushchair/wheelchair users who make it their starting point to enjoy the views over the surrounding commons. It is marked as a car park on Ordnance Survey maps and until 2011 the MOD encouraged visitors to Hankley Common and even constructed steps to make access from the car park to the ridge above easier. There were 34 cars in the car park on Sunday Jan 6th and it can take up to 50. It is one of the few car parks in the area without a height barrier, enabling horse riders to use horse boxes or trailers to access the Common without having to risk life and limb on the busy local roads (the others are at Stockbridge Pond near Tilford and the Moat on Elstead Common). A height barrier was recently installed by the MoD at Pitch Place, closing this car park to riders with horse boxes and large trailers.

The Hankley car park closure was previously threatened if dog walkers didn't clean up after their dogs. A bin was installed and the dog mess disappeared immediately, but the closure goes ahead, apparently for safety reasons. The MoD has constructed a small replacement car parking area (less than one third of the size) at Houndown Bottom, which will take about 20 cars (parked very carefully) or four or five horse boxes or trailers with difficulty. They are oblivious or uncaring of the discrepancy in capacity and the parking and access problems which will inevitably result. Access to the popular viewpoints on the Common will now be far more difficult for elderly people and parents with small children.

We have no information about exactly how this closure will be achieved. If the MoD intend to put a barrier across the bridleway at the junction with BW101 (Woolfords Lane), they would do well to remember that under the Highways Act 1980 the ONLY lawful reason for the erection of a gate on a public bridleway is where land is being brought into use for agriculture. Privacy or prevention of vehicular access is not a lawful reason and Surrey County Council has no power to license a gate or barrier constructed for this purpose.

What next? We could try to persuade the MoD to extend the size of the replacement car park. If cost is the issue (and at one point the MoD seemed to suggest that it was) maybe we can seek funding from local councils, access organizations, or businesses who benefit from the high visitor numbers to our commons, to get something approaching the parking capacity which this area needs? Perhaps the MOD might be persuaded to reopen the car park at peak periods such as Christmas and Easter, if training operations permit.

Elstead and Waverley Councillors have worked hard with support from the public during the past 12 months, to achieve at least some compromise. Hopefully future discussions will resolve the significant issues that remain.

Sandra Smith (Elslead)