

## **NEW FOREST NOTES APRIL 2012**

### **The New Forest's shabby courtroom**

The Verderers courtroom in the Queen's House is really the hub of Forest life. For centuries it was the disliked headquarters of the Forest judicial system locally, but today it is the place where the Verderers sit in public session once a month (except December and August) to receive presentments and to make announcements. Apart from that it is used for a wide variety of Forest meetings and it is the place to which visiting dignitaries are taken and usually fed. School parties, foreign visitors and antiquarians all find their way there, yet it is dusty and run down in the extreme.

Last month was one of those occasions when a group photograph of the Verderers, their staff and senior Forestry Commission officers was taken and I must say I was ashamed at the state of the place. The decorations are poor and unsuitable. The floor is breaking up and the heating inadequate. The displays in the glazed cabinets are out of date and falling apart. Horrible modern chairs, including one in memory of a former Official Verderer which is so appallingly uncomfortable that nobody will use it, are littered about amongst the ancient oak fittings. Facilities for the projection of slides are inadequate and the stained deal public seating is extremely uncomfortable.

The state of the courtroom is one aspect of the Forest on which my views and those of the temporarily absent Deputy Surveyor, Mike Seddon, are in complete accord. When the HLS scheme was first set up, he suggested that the accommodation should be upgraded with the aid of a grant from that source. The justification for such expenditure would be key role which the court plays in educating the visiting public. Apparently his proposals came to nothing for technical reasons and a year later we are no further forward. With so much public money being lavished on the Forest, there must surely be some way of restoring this heart of the community.

I do not for one moment advocate wholesale alteration of the court, but rather a careful preservation of its existing character, while incorporating subtle improvements to its equipment and careful renovation of the fabric and decorations. The room is in any case a complete Edwardian fake except for the lower part of the walls and the old oak furniture, so this is not a case of "vandalising the ancient mediaeval Verderers' Court". Perhaps the national park might like to put some of its large resources to good use here, while the Forestry Commission, starved of funds as it claims to be, could contribute out of its provision for the maintenance of Queen's House. There may even be a place for contributions from local charities like the New Forest Trust and the New Forest Association. Meanwhile we will all continue to shuffle about in the dust and the cold.

### **Riding the perambulation**

When I first heard of this proposal for a relay ride around the New Forest's perambulation to mark the Queen's diamond jubilee, I had some reservations about it, but the idea now seems increasingly attractive and a much better way of celebrating than eating and drinking too much on the village green – probably in a rain storm. The proposal is that Commoners' Defence Association members (and their invited friends) should ride the entire boundary of the Forest in a couple of days with people doing their own particular parish so that there will be no touring about with lorries and horse trailers in the height of the summer holiday period. The project seems to be very fluid at present with no clear definition of what boundary will be ridden, although the present one dating from 1963 would

seem to be the logical answer. Any attempt to ride the ancient limits of the Forest would have horses ploughing through the industrial and housing estates of the Waterside. Whatever line is chosen, it will have to be more symbolic than actual because the present boundary is extremely tortuous with a reputed length of 90 miles and that might be difficult to cover in the two days envisaged by the organizers.

In the case of my own parish, the ride would be a comfortable three and a half miles over level heathland, but Beaulieu, on the other hand would have to face more than nine miles of difficult country, including the coast and lanes, to keep as near as possible to the line. I don't suppose anyone's horse would volunteer to swim the centre line of the Beaulieu River.

The old perambulation of a forest was a serious business for those who lived there. On one side of the line the forest law applied and on the other the restrictions on the population were fewer. I doubt if there would have been any question of horses in those days. It would have been walked, with every twist and turn of the line carefully noted and marked.

Today we have a cobweb of uninteresting official boundaries to the New Forest – council boundaries, park boundary, SSSI boundary and so on – but it is the “perambulation” which comprises the real boundary of the Forest as everyone knows it. It is shown on the Ordnance Survey's Outdoor Leisure Map (if with some errors) and for the most part it is very easy to identify on the ground. With few exceptions, if a Forest pony can walk there, the land is within the perambulation. Where it cannot go is outside the boundary.

The scheme for this ride is still in the very early stages of planning, but the most likely time for the event is a couple of days during August of this year. The last published perambulation of the New Forest (on the old line) was in 1801 while, so far as I know, the modern boundary has only been walked a couple of times. The most recent was when Peter Frost walked it a few years ago, while half a century back my late father and I drew up the boundary maps which were eventually put to Parliament in the New Forest Bill of 1963.

### **Who killed Annie ?**

I find Forestry Commission site visits to its stream filling projects extremely tedious. They are always held in the depths of winter for no reason that I can discover except perhaps to deter elderly and traditionally-minded Verderers from attending. Everyone on the outing repeats themselves several times over and a job which might be completed in a couple of hours is stretched out to almost an entire morning. Still, they do have their more interesting moments, usually unrelated to the business in hand. One such diversion occurred on a recent visit to Pondhead Lawn and the surrounding area.

We were working our way down the stream to Little Holmhill Passage when a Commoners' Defence Association representative, Richard Stride, remarked that his family had always known the area between the Passage and Little Holmhill Inclosure as “Annie's Grave”. That is a name I had never heard before and one which does not appear on any published map, but Richard's family has a long history of service to the Forestry Commission, working in the Forest, and his information on placenames is very reliable.

So who was Annie and how did she die ? I suppose we will never know the answer with certainty, but there are several possibilities. It was formerly the rather cruel custom to deny suicides

burial in consecrated ground and interment often took place on the parish boundary. I do not know the early limits of Lyndhurst parish, but the present boundary crosses Little Holmhill Passage, following the line of a mediaeval deer park. In my own village, one area on the margin is still known as “Suicides Graves”. There are also other “graves” dotted about the Forest. In the north there is Strong’s Grave and Norris’s Grave, while at Burley there is Collin’s Grave and at Sway, Elkham’s Grave. Whether all these are actual graves of people is uncertain. In the case of Annie, I think a more likely explanation is that she was not a person at all, but perhaps a much-loved horse killed while out hunting.

This bit of speculation might have been the end of the story if I had not mentioned the grave to a friend. He immediately said that he had seen the name or something like it on a map. It turned out that on a One Inch Ordnance Survey map in the Christopher Tower Library, published about the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a number of names had been added in ink. The map had belonged to the Cumberbatch family which had donated it to the library. The writing on the map appears to be that of someone not skilled in the use of a pen, or perhaps a very elderly person, but the additional names are clear. One of them is marked on the Ridge at Matley and is “Nanny’s Grave”. It is clearly one and the same with Richard’s placename, although which is the “correct” spelling and which the “right” site (650 yards separate the two) is likely to remain a mystery.

#### **A good winter for Forest ponies**

At every Verderers’ Court, in committee, the head agister gives a report on the health and welfare of Forest livestock and the work which his team is doing to ensure that the regulations are being observed. Occasionally this can be a depressing account, but in March he was able to report that fewer animals had been removed from the Forest over the last winter than for many years past and that the commoners generally were removing ponies before they reached a level where the regulations would require their removal. I suppose an outsider might at this point relax, sure that the warm spring sunshine had banished all further problems for the year. Unfortunately the Forest system does not work like that. Even when the first signs of green are apparent in the Forest, the condition of the ponies continues to decline right through April and often well into May as well. Warm dry weather which is the ponies’ friend during the winter months can quickly become their enemy during the late spring if lack of rain inhibits grass growth. The head agister reported that the business of dealing with sub-standard animals was greater at that stage than it had been throughout the winter. As the weeks go by and there is no rain, the prospects for the ponies are not particularly good, especially as many are near to foaling. Like other sectors of the farming community, the New Forest is now praying for rain.

Anthony Pasmore