

# NEW FOREST NOTES APRIL 2017

## The new Official Verderer

The Verderers of the New Forest have a new chairman in the person of Lord Manners. His appointment was announced at the March court and he will oversee his first meeting in May of this year, following the retirement of Dominic May, the present holder of the office, at the end of this month. Lord Manners will be the seventeenth Official Verderer (as the chairman is called) in the one hundred and forty years since the Court was established in 1877. He will follow in the footsteps of his father who held the same position for the ten years from 1983 to 1993. Also like his father he is a solicitor by profession (now retired) and that will be a particularly valuable qualification so far as the Verderers are concerned. The elected Verderers in especially have a very detailed practical knowledge of the Forest and its workings, but sometimes find themselves rather out of their depth on complicated matters of law.

The appointment of the new Official Verderer follows in a long tradition of choosing a representative of the big landowning families of the Forest, although that is a tradition which has not been the invariable rule in recent times. Both the present chairman and Mr. John Burry (1993-1999), were appointed from the world of business alone, although of course they are both local residents. Apart from the case of the late Maldwin Drummond, the modern trend has been to choose people who have not previously been deeply involved in Forest management and that can have its advantages. Such people come to the job without the baggage of established allegiances in local politics. For example, they will probably not be tied to the interests of forestry, the commoners, ecology or recreational development. The old rule, now long forgotten, was that the Official Verderer should stand impartially between the Crown and the commoners, in the days when the whole of the remainder of the court was elected by the latter.

Often the handover period from one chairman to the next has been rushed and inadequate, but this time things have been much better managed, with the new Official Verderer attending the March court as an observer and with the opportunity for him to do the same in April. If the open court of his first visit gave the idea of a lack of controversy and business (for the second court in succession there were no presentments at all), I think the range of subjects discussed in committee will have quickly dispelled such a wrong impression. There are also those problems which go on unaltered from one generation to the next, such as animal accidents, neglected Forest maintenance and the relentless and increasing pressure of recreation. Even some of the Forest's offenders have proved remarkably durable. I recently came across a photograph I took in 1991 of the former Lord Manners inspecting a huge waste heap from an illegal industrial site in the Forest. Twenty six years on the site continues to operate and the waste heap remains. Some things change very slowly in the New Forest.

### **The Verge Protection Officer**

The Forestry Commission is appointing a new member of staff with this rather grand title, although the work of the new employee will be simply a sub-division of ordinary estate management. The reason is that the verges in much of the Forest are being ruined by vehicles, particularly within the villages. There, just as with the Open Forest, the Forestry Commission controls the verges and roadside greens. The result of such damage is that there is a significant overall loss of grazing throughout the Forest, to say nothing of the ugly scars created by muddy wheel ruts and exposed gravel replacing the original smooth grass margins. All this deterioration arises from more traffic leading to more overrunning of the verges as impatient motorists refuse to slow down and simply charge towards each other with two wheels up on the grass. Then there is also the damage from those inconsiderate residents and their visitors who insist on parking outside their properties rather than within their own grounds.

Until now the Commission's attempts to deal with the problem have been clumsy and half-hearted. Ditches have been dug and dragons' teeth inserted with no sensible overall plan. The result has been that some of the work has had to be undone, while areas which were omitted from the schemes have been eroded by pressure displaced from one area of grass to another. If the new officer can prepare (and publish) the sorts of plans produced for the original "car free areas" in 1971-1972, this will be an important step forward and will do much to restore the declining quality of the lanes and greens in our villages.

Within the Open Forest itself the problem is on a larger scale and at the March court the Verderers approved a detailed set of plans for restoring the verges of the road from Ocknell Plain to Linwood. Here the idea is to make a single track road throughout, with numerous passing places and with more substantial protective works than have been attempted before in that area. Motorists will happily crash over smooth-profiled banks and ditches, but even the drivers of commercial vehicles and four wheel drive cars may be reluctant to take on a line of substantial dragons' teeth. The scheme is an ambitious one and there will inevitably be an element of trial and error about it, but with luck both the damage and the speed of traffic will be much reduced. This road has been particularly vulnerable as it is used as a rat-run, bypassing the A 31 when the latter is closed because of accidents, and that is something which has been happening with increasing regularity.

### **Recreational Management Strategy review**

Back in 2010 the National Park Authority took it upon itself to prepare a "Recreation Management Strategy" for the New Forest and a review of this is now starting. While the Park is entirely free to write what it likes about the way it considers the Forest ought to be run, it is not entitled to meddle in what actually takes place in the way of recreation on the common lands, except insofar as it uses its planning powers to judge any development proposals. Fortunately this was one of those bulky volumes (70 pages) full of jargon and coloured pictures that nobody has bothered to open since – at least within the Verderers' Court. The control of recreation on the common lands is, of course, a

matter for the Forestry Commission alone, regulated by the Verderers using their statutory and customary powers as set out in the Verderers' Policies. It is not for the Park to interfere in this process, although it may well have a role on the private lands where it may be able to coerce or persuade the landowners to support its objectives.

The fundamental objection to Park involvement in the management of the Crown lands is that it is always claiming to achieve absolutely contradictory objectives. First amongst these (although the Park naturally denies this) is the expansion and intensification of recreational use, under the cloak of "enhancing the visitor experience, educating and guiding, green tourism, inclusivity" and so on, while claiming that the protection of the Forest comes first. It will never acknowledge that the Forest has been significantly degraded, even in the short time that the Authority has existed, and that the decline is the result in part of its own policies. Now it says, yet again, that it can achieve the impossible benefiting recreational experience, benefiting the Forest and benefiting those who make money out of tourism. This is simply impossible and anyone who has observed the Park's activities over the last ten years knows that perfectly well. In the words of the late Colin Tubbs, the Forest cannot be all things to all men for all time.

No doubt the review will result in another report, even larger and more lavish than last time, and we shall have to waste a lot of effort on the various stages of its preparation. While all this is going on, the real issues are never tackled – litter, over-use leading to erosion, dog fouling and disturbance, mountain bike trespass and the sheer pressure of intolerable numbers of people in sensitive parts of the Forest. This criticism was dismissed last time as (unsubstantiated) "perceptions of what is right for the Forest" adopted by impliedly reactionary forces among which, I trust, the Verderers were effective leaders. I hope they will take up this role again.

### **Pratt's High Test plan of the New Forest**

This rather strangely titled map has hung on the walls of my house for the past fifty four years and is in fact a piece of advertising literature dating from 1930. I acquired it when the old people's home which formerly leased the Queen's House was closed down and its contents auctioned. It was produced by an artist named A.E. Taylor for Pratt's petrol company, a predecessor of ESSO, and measures about two feet square. It contains about forty little illustrations of Forest life, many accompanied by Shakespearian quotations appropriate to the subject. For example, a picnic party under unsuspected attack by adders has: "You spotted snakes with double tongues and thorny hedgehogs be not seen". The map has an elaborate border, rather in the style of the Bayeux Tapestry, depicting scenes from local history. I have only seen one other copy and that must have been a slightly later version as the name of Esso replaces Pratt's High Test in the title.

Taylor, it seems, was quite a prolific painter of such maps, sometimes with an advertising motive and sometimes without – as for example his map of the Eastern counties of England. For Pratt/Esso he made at least half a dozen maps of different parts of the country, including the South

Coast, the West Country and Wales. These rather beautiful pieces of work are far removed from modern advertising and to judge from the internet the prints now command quite high prices.

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