

NEW FOREST NOTES AUGUST 2003

Two new Verderers

August is the one month of the year when the Verderers' Court does not meet. Those Verderers not encumbered with livestock probably go on holiday and the Clerk recovers from her three days at the New Forest Show. August thus tends to be relatively uneventful, but not this year. Within a few days of each other, the appointment of two new members of the Court has been announced.

Appointed Verderers (they are chosen by the Crown, the County Council, the Countryside Agency and DEFRA) serve for a fixed period which is usually three years. Thereafter they may be reappointed for a second or more terms. Both the retiring Verderers – John Perry for DEFRA and Donald Anderson for the Forestry Commission – have served several terms. Tribute to their work was paid by the Official Verderer at the July Court. In recent years the appointing bodies have taken to advertising the unpaid posts and inviting applications from the public. I have been unable to discover exactly how far the strings of appointed Verderers are pulled by the departments selecting them. Many years ago, when my father held the position of Ministry of Agriculture Verderer, he was told distinctly that the less the Ministry heard from him about the New Forest, the better pleased they would be and that he should accordingly act on his own initiative. No doubt things are very different today, although I am told by the new DEFRA appointee that the post is regarded as an independent one with no direct instructions as to policies to be followed. That said, I don't suppose an appointed Verderer who was not more or less in sympathy with current ministry policy would be likely to survive for more than one term.

The new "forestry" Verderer is the Hon. Ralph Montagu. I have not yet had the pleasure of meeting him, but if family credentials are anything to go by, he should be off to a good start. His ancestor, Lord Montagu, was first of all an elected Verderer and then chairman of the Court from 1890 to 1892. Of him, Deputy Surveyor Lascelles wrote: "Lord Montagu was of all the men in the world the last that should have taken up this burden. A man at once the most amiable and high minded of English gentlemen, he had, as many a time he told me, in our conversations on the impending retirement of Lord Basing, every disqualification for the post he often refused and finally was over-persuaded to assume." Lascelles objected to the fact that Lord Montagu was closely associated with opposition to the Crown in the Forest and that he was also the largest owner of common rights. The new forestry Verderer may well suffer from the latter shortcoming, but he has certainly not been closely involved in Forest matters in the past. I imagine that Beaulieu is still one of the largest private estates in the Forest (if not the largest), but I am told that the recreational empire there is in other hands than those of the new member of the Court. Nevertheless, I doubt if the potential benefits of a close working relationship between the largest private provider of Forest recreation and its state counterpart will have escaped the notice of those making the appointment.

The second appointment is by DEFRA (in fact both Verderers owe their posts to the same department, but for convenience their titles are separated) is, by contrast, a small commoner, exercising rights of pasture through ponies and cattle turned out from her Linwood holding. Pat Thorne has taken an active interest in Forest affairs for a decade or so now. In 1994 she was one of the joint authors of a report prepared for the New Forest Committee - "Recreational use of horses in the New Forest Heritage Area". It was a carefully researched study of horse use in the New Forest which, like so many bulky Forest reports, migrated immediately to the back of the cupboard and was forgotten.

Pat Thorne represented Whiteparish on the Consultative Panel for many years and served on the Commoners' Defence committee which was established to further the association's opposition to the national park. Her appointment brings the female constituent of the Verderers' Court to 30% - probably for the first time in its history. Moreover, the addition of a further practising commoner to the five elected Verderers is likely to be widely welcomed in the Forest. For the first time in years, all members of the Court live within or very close to the perambulation.

Stallions mares and foals

Those commoners (mostly small people with one or two animals) who have had their mares locked up to keep them away from the stallions have been able to breathe again and release the captives. All stallions should have been removed by 6th July and I understand that all but one did in fact go on time. At the July Court, the head agister gave an interesting report on this year's equine mating season in the Forest and the product of last year's season as evidenced by new foals. The overall impression is that the number of foals is down, but the distribution is patchy, naturally reflecting the areas in which stallions were turned out last year, but also the areas to which they wandered. There was general agreement that this year there has been a considerable movement of stallions over wide areas because the number of territories has been reduced in proportion to the reduction in stallion numbers. More interestingly, the mares also have been moving long distances in search of a mate.

The reduction in foals seems to have done little to curb the appalling killing rate on the roads during this spring. Lunatic drivers have been mowing down foals – often in broad daylight – while even one highly prized stallion was killed in daylight near Ipley.

Election 2003

There is to be an election of Verderers on 28th November and, as usual, both the Court and the Commoners Defence Association are anxious to ensure that all those entitled to vote are included on the electoral register. There is always a certain amount of confusion about the registration process, so it is probably worth repeating the details. The essential point is that if you don't register you will not be permitted to vote – whether or not you have registered in the past.

If you are on the existing (2000) Verderers' electoral register, you should by now have received a form and Freepost envelope from the Clerk to the Verderers. You must complete the form, sign and return it by 1st September or you will be prohibited from voting. If you think

that you are on the existing register and have not received a form, you should apply at once to the Verderers' office.

If you are not on the existing register and are unsure if you are qualified to vote, you will have to do a little research. The voting qualification is the occupation of not less than one acre of land to which is attached rights of common over the New Forest. You do not have to be a large farmer or landowner. The tenancy of a small area with rights is quite sufficient and it is important to note that rights extend far outside the Forest. You may occupy land in Ringwood, Totton or Fawley and you will probably have exactly the same chance of being qualified as someone in Lyndhurst. Of course the Verderers are particularly anxious that all practising commoners should be on the register, but you do not need actually to own ponies or cattle. Many of the larger houses in villages like Burley have gardens with rights which entitle their occupiers to vote.

How do you find out if the land you own or rent has the necessary rights? In the Verderers' office at Lyndhurst there is a set of large volumes of 1/2500 maps on which is recorded all the land to which rights attach. That area of land is reputed to be in excess of 60,000 acres and extends from the suburbs of Southampton to the outskirts of Bournemouth and from the sea almost to Salisbury. The atlas of rights is open to inspection during normal office hours and, if you are un-used to looking at maps, assistance will be provided by the Clerk. It is appreciated if members of the public make a prior appointment to see the atlas by telephoning Southampton 282052. Help will also be given in completing the forms.

There remains one further question which is often asked by those seeking to register. What happens where there are joint owners or occupiers of land? That depends upon the area involved. If there are more than two acres with rights there is no problem: both are entitled to vote. If the area is more than one acre, but less than two, then only one joint occupier may vote.

So much for the technicalities, but I suppose it might also be asked why it is important that everyone should vote. The answer to that must depend upon what value is placed on the New Forest. The Verderers (at present) have a large measure of control of all forms of development, including recreational development, and the survival of the Forest thus depends upon their willingness to exercise those powers. If you don't want to see a new cycle route or road through some favourite part of the Forest, it is likely to be the Verderers alone who can stop it and, more importantly, have the political will to do so. The strength of the Verderers to resist such damage depends in turn upon the wishes of those who choose the five elected members of the Court. Quite apart from these development control powers, the Verderers also provide an essential service in employing the agisters and generally managing the agricultural use of the area. That may not seem particularly significant, but the whole character of the Forest depends upon its grazing livestock.

Official Verderers

In the entrance hall of the Queen's House (the Forestry Commission's local headquarters) at Lyndhurst there hangs a dozen or so framed photographs of the Deputy

Surveyors of the New Forest since 1851, commencing with Lawrence Henry Cumberbatch and awaiting a portrait of the recently retired Donald Thompson. The collection is sometimes, perhaps unkindly, referred to as the rogues gallery.

When Maldwin Drummond retired as Official Verderer last year, it was thought that a corresponding collection of photographs of Official Verderers should be made and Maldwin agreed to undertake the task. Since then it has been progressing well, but of the fifteen holders of the office since it was created in 1877, pictures of three are proving elusive. The first problem is the Rt.Hon George Baron Basing (in office 1877-1890), next is Henry F.Compton (1936-1943) and finally the Rt.Hon. Sir Francis Lindley (1943-1950). If anyone can help in making good these deficiencies, they should contact Mr.Drummond direct at Manor of Cadland, Fawley and their assistance will be much appreciated.

Anthony Pasmore