

## **NEW FOREST NOTES AUGUST 2012**

### **Another government threat to the New Forest**

Last year the government raised a hornets' nest by its proposals for overhauling forestry in the UK, announcing that it was minded to hand over areas like the New Forest to charities and to sell off other large parts of the forestry estate. Such proposals were strongly resisted and in the end an "independent panel on forestry" was set up to make recommendations to government. That committee has now reported and to the extent that it recommends that such areas as the New Forest should remain in public ownership and management, its findings have been welcomed. There have been some criticisms of the proposals it contains for more tree planting and commercial forestry, although I think that these relate more to private woodland and to less sensitive parts of the public land. Indeed, it is hard to see how more tree planting and commercialism could be accommodated in the New Forest within the constraints of European conservation legislation, so I don't think we need to worry too much about that.

The real and not immediately obvious danger of the report so far as our forest is concerned is that it recommends new statutory powers for the Forestry Commission or whatever new body replaces it. The proposals for such powers are very wide indeed but most worryingly include "promoting quality access to woodland for a wide range of activities consistent with the other purposes (of management)". That could have dreadful consequences for an already over-used and damaged New Forest. I doubt if the qualification "consistent with the other purposes" should give us much comfort. Who is to judge whether proposals are consistent ?

There are very clear parallels between what is now proposed and what happened in the Countryside Act of 1968 when new powers were conferred on the Forestry Commission nationally allowing them to provide accommodation for visitors, caravan sites, restaurants, picnic places, information centres, shops and lavatories. At a stroke the Act set aside all the protection of the New Forest's special legislation. It was only due to the Verderers, under the guidance of Sir Oliver Crosthwaite Eyre MP, promoting a bill to make the Countryside Act powers exercisable only with the consent of the Court, that the Forest was not effectively destroyed. Now history threatens to repeat itself. Whatever legislation emerges from the panel's report, there must be adequate protection for the New Forest Acts and the protective powers they contain. Only the Verderers' veto under those Acts stands against the Forest being converted into a virtual theme park. International conservation law has shown itself incapable of (or unwilling to) stand against recreational demands. In short the forestry panel may have averted one threat to the Forest, only to substitute another and perhaps far more serious one.

### **Deaths of two Forest champions**

Last month the Forest lost another two of its great champions of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the deaths of Archie Cleveland from Brockenhurst and Tim Dixon from Woodgreen. I worked

closely with both of them over many years and two more different characters with the same deep affection for the New Forest would be difficult to imagine.

Archie Cleveland served as an elected Verderer from 1976 to 1986. He was very much a traditional "small commoner", running stock from his South Weirs home, but principally employed as a builder and undertaker. His kind and reassuring nature no doubt accounted for his particular success in the latter field, something to which many Forest families, including my own, can testify. Perhaps it is the more surprising therefore, that this mild-mannered man was a veteran of some of the most terrifying naval actions of the Second World War, including service on the Russian convoys.

As a Verderer, he was an integral part of the team for many years and I occasionally had some quite significant differences with him on matters of policy. Such things never troubled Archie. He could argue forcefully for what he thought right and still greet you at the next Court as though he had just discovered a long-lost friend. I remember that when the Verderers were all lined up on Whitefield Moor to be presented to the Queen in 1979, he and I were standing close to each other for more than an hour (the programme was running late) and I am not sure which of us was the more nervous.

Tim Dixon was just as much a natural gentleman as Archie, but from a very different background and with rather different interests. He was a Fordingbridge solicitor who had spent some of his early career in Australia. His great passion in life was ornithology and the protection of the Forest on which its bird life depended. I first encountered him in about 1968 when the Forestry Commission was busily engaged in wrecking the New Forest by eliminating broadleaved trees from the Inclosures and by exploiting the Ancient Ornamental Woods for mining blocks. He joined Mrs. Jean Cobb's Action Group which took over the New Forest Association and ultimately defeated the Commission's endeavours. The Association had been in one of its periodic dormant phases. Tim then served on the Association's council for the next quarter of a century, during which time, as chairman of the woodland sub-committee, he harried the Forestry Commission over its mismanagement of the broadleaved woodland and its frequent illegal actions. This led inevitably to a furious confrontation in 1997 with the then president, Major Baillie, who was a staunch supporter of the Commission and who was forced to resign at a special general meeting. Tim was equally forceful in dealing with Forestry Commission officers whose policies were damaging the Forest. When there was a difficult and sometimes unpleasant job to do, Tim was the man the Forest turned to.

Aside from woodland matters, Tim Dixon took a leading role in opposition to the early attempts to build an outer bypass for Lyndhurst, acting for the Verderers and the Forest societies in the first planning inquiries. His final major challenge was to the Forestry Commission's recreation policies in the Forest, again representing the Forest in a professional capacity and in particular seeking counsel's opinion on some of the illegal developments.

Altogether, Tim Dixon was about the last person one would have wanted as an opponent, and consequently an invaluable ally in any campaign to protect the Forest.

### **Youth groups and litter**

I know it is not politically correct to criticise youth groups of any type, least of all those engaged in healthy outdoor activity such as the Duke of Edinburgh's Award trips, but that cannot alter the facts. I have long believed that youth parties are responsible for much of the litter deep in the Forest. The difficulty is proving it. I have seen such groups resting and enjoying a picnic and on a subsequent visit I have found the area covered in cans and other debris. Of course the presence of this rubbish and the stopping place of the group could be entirely coincidental, but I doubt it.

Last month a sharp-eyed and public-spirited Burley resident obtained exactly that proof which has always been so elusive and wrote telling me what happened. On a Sunday morning he saw a Duke of Edinburgh Award group leave camp and stop outside his house to consult a map. As he watched, some of the boys were adjusting their kit and he saw them throw down items onto the Forest. He was on the point of going out and confronting them when they set off. My correspondent collected up the litter and, having ascertained the origin of the group, parcelled it up and posted it back to the head of the Surrey school concerned, together with a moderate, but firm letter of complaint.

To do justice to the head teacher, she did acknowledge the offence of her students and promised to deal with it, but also clearly regarded attack as the best form of defence. She castigated my informant for infringing Royal Mail rules by sending rubbish through the post ! As he commented, she seemed far more concerned about the technical infringement of postal rules – the parcel contained nothing which could have injured or infected a postman – than the damage her students had caused to the Forest.

Surely there should be clear instructions to all such organized parties that they must respect the Forest and that anyone failing to do so would be disqualified from whatever contest he is engaged in. One of the party should be made responsible for policing this instruction or, if this is not possible, all groups should be accompanied by a supervising adult. I must say that it is hardly surprising that children act in this way. Many of the groups I encounter are clearly resentful of being sent off into an environment they don't understand and don't like. They are often lost, cold, wet and tired and it is the Forest that pays the price of this resentment.

I am sure that there are some groups which are well trained and prepared and who are respectful of the Forest and its values, but I think they are probably in a minority. The wisdom of trying to force the countryside down the throats of reluctant urban children is, to my mind, very questionable.

### **Verderers' records**

At intervals of a decade or so, the Verderers' Court runs out of storage space and sends its papers to the Hampshire Record Office in Winchester. The first of these shipments occurred in 1976 and included such papers as survived going right back to the establishment of the Court in 1877 and even some documents before that date. Unfortunately, much was lost or destroyed about the time of the Second World War or earlier, including priceless pre-

1877 records. The latest consignment to Winchester was in June of this year when 18 boxes were sent covering mostly the 1980s and 1990s. The files remain closed for 25 years, but are then freely available to local historians. Because of the explosion of paper in recent years, drastic weeding of the documents takes place so that anything not judged to be of historical interest is destroyed. Some files likely to be relevant to current management are retained at the Verderers' office. All the Court's old minute books, on the other hand, are held by the Christopher Tower Library in Lyndhurst and are again available for research, although minutes for recent years are more readily accessible through the Verderers' website.

Anthony Pasmore