

NEW FOREST NOTES AUGUST 2015

New Forest Elections

At a time when most people hope to forget all about elections for five years, another one comes along in the New Forest. It is the election of Verderers which takes place every three years in November. Verderers serve for six years, with two being chosen at one election and then three at the next. There are, of course, ten Verderers, but remainder of the Court is appointed by various public authorities to represent interests, other than strictly local ones, in the work of the Court.

The electoral system in the New Forest may not be perfect, but it is free from all those irritations which make Westminster and local council elections so objectionable to many people. There is no hint of party politics. There are no big expenses or attendance allowances paid to the successful candidates, although a small contribution is made towards travel costs – costs which can be quite considerable in a large area like the Forest. There are no high-profile public positions to be occupied by those elected. Indeed, I imagine that few people in the New Forest would be able to name all the present elected Verderers, let alone the appointed members of the Court, with the exception of the chairman. Membership is thus in the best tradition of public service, unpaid and unrecognized, and it is sought in the interests of the Forest and its community alone, rather than as a step on some political ladder. It is actually sometimes quite difficult to differentiate between the policies of the various candidates. All seek to ensure that the fabric and character of the Forest is protected, that the local farming community prospers and that the rules governing the Forest are enforced. Perhaps only in emphasis on different strands of management is there any real difference apparent.

One problem which the New Forest does share with national and local elections is apathy within the electorate. Voting depends on prior registration and this is not compulsory. Getting the electorate to register has been a problem ever since the Court's constitution was laid down just after the last war. In order to vote in a Verderers' election, you must occupy (not necessarily own) one acre of land to which rights of common over the Forest attach. In other words, the keeper of a riding pony who rents an acre of old orchard with rights has exactly the same voting power as a great landowner with an estate of two thousand acres. It is a system designed to ensure that the local agricultural interests have a fair share in deciding how the Forest is run, but the official appointees to the Court still command a majority if they vote as a block. In practice the Court does not often divide along these lines and the votes of each elector really do count for something. Still, that does not overcome the apathy and failure to register. Among those who do register, the turn-out at elections tends to be high.

Although the constitution was designed with stock keeping in mind, the electorate falls into two broad categories. Firstly there are the working commoners and secondly those householders with a paddock or large garden which gives the necessary area qualification. One can understand the small farmer's aversion to paperwork (I share it myself), even though filling out an electoral

registration form is not very onerous. Why the “residential commoner” fails to register is much more of a mystery. Many are passionately attached to the Forest and probably members of such groups as the New Forest Association, yet they too are absent from the register in large numbers. When I served on the Court, I used to find that the majority of concerns about the Forest came from this latter group, yet as often as not the person complaining, although qualified, was not on the register.

This summer, as always before a Verderers’ election, the Clerk’s office will have available the necessary application forms and will no doubt give the usual guidance on their completion and on the common rights available to potential voters. Commoners with, for example, strong views on TB regulations in the Forest or on some piece of Forestry Commission development on land in their area, really do have only themselves to blame if they fail to secure their right to vote during the next couple of months.

New disputes from old roots

From 1877 when the Court of Verderers was established, until 1949, there was a continuous simmering dispute between the Court and the Crown (as now represented by the Forestry Commission) over permissions for development on the common land of the Forest. The Crown found the granting of permissions a very profitable area of management. For example, power lines and water pipelines might be made across the Forest, for which good money would be paid by the developers of adjoining building plots, but this could also be very destructive of the grazing so the Verderers often tried to resist. At times the disputes became heated and ended up in court or in public enquiries.

All this was finally settled, or so it seemed, by the New Forest Acts of 1949 and 1970 which made nearly all development on the Forest subject to the Verderers’ veto. In respect of land required for public highways there is a provision stating that the Court’s consent shall not be unreasonably withheld, but the highway authorities have never tried to challenge the Verderers on their “reasonableness”. They know that they would have little chance of success. In the case of the proposed outer Lyndhurst bypass, Hampshire County Council preferred to promote an ultimately doomed parliamentary bill rather than attempt to seek arbitration.

Unfortunately, the New Forest Act of 1949 did leave a loophole in the apparent settlement of the permissions dispute in that private accesses could be granted by the Crown without the Verderers’ consent. Thus a building plot could theoretically be granted an access drive over grass (called a Forest “lawn”) in defiance of the wishes of the Court. On the other hand, a sewer pipe could still not be laid to the plot unless the Verderers agreed. Practically this did not prove to be much of a problem because the Crown and the Verderers worked well together. The latter never raised arbitrary objections to cables and pipes and the Forestry Commission usually respected the Court’s views on the proper protection of grazing.

Over the last year or so these satisfactory relations seem to have started to break down, perhaps as pressures on the Forestry Commission to make money increase. Accesses have been

granted to which the Court takes great exception. Worse still is a case near Pilley where gravel has been laid over grass with the Commission's consent to provide what the commoners say is patently a parking area and not an access. The Forestry Commission may not grant parking areas on the Forest without the Verderers' consent and it will be interesting to see how this conflict develops.

Excavating the Forest's distant past

Last month I spent several days working on a National Trust archaeological site in West Dorset and very hard work it was in rock-hard clay over a metre deep. Archaeologists in the New Forest are likely to encounter much gentler conditions at the end of August when excavating near Godshill on very shallow gravel soils. This work is to be undertaken by the New Forest History and Archaeology Group under the direction of Professor Tony King of Winchester University. It is part of a programme of fieldwork and excavation which has been running continuously for fifty five years and which has added immeasurably to our understanding of the Forest's distant past.

The Godshill site comprises two separate features, although they could well be of the same period. The first is very probably a Bronze Age burial mound (otherwise a barrow or tumulus). There are more than three hundred of such features on the common lands of the New Forest, but a high proportion of them has been damaged over the years. In the 18th and 19th centuries they were the target of antiquarians who wrecked the sites in pursuit of curiosities in the form of burial urns. As often as not they were disappointed, finding only charcoal and a few worked flints, but the damage had been done. More recently, and because many appear on the Ordnance Survey maps and are easy to find, they have been attacked by treasure hunters whose pernicious practices are equally damaging. The Godshill barrow is no exception to the rule of being badly damaged, but here the nature of the destruction was unusual. The site was hit by a large bomb during the last war, destroying about half the mound and leaving a deep crater in its place. The team will be cleaning and recording the damaged section of the mound, but will not cause further disturbance of the surviving part.

The second feature to be investigated is a very slight circle on a hillside just north of the barrow. The theory is that this could be a hut site. On Dartmoor there are in the region of a thousand such Bronze Age huts, but in the New Forest none has so far been identified. The reason for this could simply be that on the Moor they were constructed in part of stone and are very durable. In the New Forest, if they exist, huts of this nature would have been of timber and would have disappeared leaving very little trace. We know that there was significant use made of the Forest at the period, so it is reasonable to assume that small dwellings would have been present.

The New Forest History and Archaeology Group welcomes new members. Anyone interested in joining and taking part in this important piece of research, even if they have no previous experience of excavation, should contact the Group's fieldwork organizer through the website <http://www.nfhistoryandarchaeology.hampshire.org.uk/> They will be assured of a warm welcome and an opportunity to work in one of the most beautiful parts of the New Forest, but they should not expect

spectacular finds along the lines of Time Team projects. The New Forest was throughout history a poor and marginal agricultural area. The organizers will be content if they find a few scraps of pottery and add a little more understanding to our knowledge of the area's ancient past.

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