

New Forest Notes - April 1992

[Space at the Verderers' Court]

The Verderers Court is rapidly becoming a victim of its own popularity. I have seldom seen the Courtroom so crowded as it was on the 20th July, with all seats and taken and with one or two Forest dignitaries forced to perch on the staircase to the Deputy Surveyors offices above. So far as I can judge, this pressure of interest comes not from holiday makers, most of whom wander Lyndhurst High Street without discovering the Courtroom, but from local people with a genuine concern for the Forest and the way it is managed. Yet it is only thirty years or so since Verderers meetings passed completely unnoticed. I can well remember occasions when the only public present comprised Major Ziegler as chairman of the Commoners Defence Association and three members of my family (my father was then secretary of the association). The Open Court often finished within ten minutes in those days.

If the present pressure of numbers on space continues to grow, the Verderers will be faced with a real dilemma. Either a new meeting place will be required or attendance will have to be limited by the space available and that means only the first hundred or so arrivals will gain admittance to the public session of the Court. Some years ago, when the Queens House was being restored, the Verderers retreated to the ugly, uncongenial but more spacious surroundings of the Lyndhurst Community Centre. I doubt if a return to that arrangement would really please anyone. The authentic setting of the "ancient Verderers Court" (largely built in 1904) seems part of the attraction, along with the agisters in their smart green uniform and the quaint opening of the proceedings. Such pieces of tradition certainly have their place and I would not want to see them abandoned simply to allow for greater numbers in less appropriate surroundings. However, this somewhat antique image of the Verderers is open to exploitation which could so easily result in the Open Court becoming a more public entertainment. Repeated requests for filming permission have been granted by the Court in recent years (usually only of the opening minutes) with all the lighting and recording equipment which accompanies such activities. The latest such circus resulted from a Countryside Commission application, apparently for use in a video to promote the national parks ambitions of its makers and to be shown at the national parks conference this autumn. Whether, thereafter, it will be used to sell the Forest for tourism remains to be seen. There is a fine line between being stuffy (of which I am regularly accused) and allowing the Court's public face to degenerate into an undignified entertainment. I believe that the Verderers have come close to overstepping that line on several recent occasions.

Water not Oil

The sudden appearance of a drilling rig near Cunniger Bottom caused some concern last month. The rig remained for several weeks and then disappeared leaving a

capped "well" with a locked manhole cover. Rumour as to its purpose varied from a clandestine search for oil to subsoil preparatory to some major development proposal. In fact its purpose appears to have been rather less sinister. Will Parke of the Forestry Commission tells me that it is one of a series of ten similar boreholes which have been sunk by the Wessex Region of the National Rivers Authority to monitor ground water levels. It has a depth of only forty metres and, once a month, the water level in the tube will be recorded. It seems that some of these wells, like that at Cunniger, have been deliberately constructed in undeveloped areas so as to give comparisons with more heavily used places such as the Avon Valley which is much affected by gravel digging. At face value, therefore, the borehole seems unexceptional. However, as one drought year succeeds another, it occurs to me that the New Forest may not for all time escape the hungry eyes of the commercial water suppliers and storers. The geological composition and physical characteristics of the Forest's valleys may well make them unsuitable or unattractive for reservoir construction, but if there are no insuperable technical problems, some of our heathland may well be at risk in the long term. The vulnerability of national parks to reservoir construction is notorious, although the Forests special legislation should give it protection short of an assault through parliament. From a practical point of view, the Schultze Gunpowder Company demonstrated the feasibility of small reservoir construction at Howen Bottom near Fritham in the closing years of the last century. At six million gallons, that reservoir is tiny by comparison with today's demands, but technology has advanced a great deal since the 1800s and larger structures may well now be a practical possibility in the Forest.

Yew Trees

In February this year I wrote about a visit to the felled yews of Sloden made by Tennyson on the 22nd July 1866. The Forestry Commission was then considering a suggestion that some of these once famous trees should be replaced in one of the storm damaged areas of the Inclosure. It is therefore pleasant to record that at a small ceremony on 22nd July this year, the first tree of the replacements was planted. The others will follow at a more appropriate planting time in the autumn. I hope that the great poet would have approved of this belated outcome of his visit to the Forest.

I suspect that this could well be the first official planting of yews in the Forest for a very long time - perhaps centuries. It is a tree which occurs quite widely on the Open Forest, and occasionally in the Inclosures, but it is almost always self sown and is usually found singly or in a group of two or three. Despite its reputation as a poison, it is heavily browsed, especially by the deer, and this accounts for the umbrella shape so characteristic of individual trees on the heath. All accessible green material is eaten up to the browse line, the maximum height to which deer and ponies can reach. However, when storms or snow uproot trees or detach branches, the Forestry Commission is quick to cut and burn the branches to reduce the risk of poisoning.

The yew trees which survive in Old Sloden (as opposed to Sloden Inclosure where the planting is to be done) have suffered greatly in recent years. Many are dead or dying and it has been suggested that air pollution is the cause of the trouble. Why some trees and groups remain unaffected is a mystery and the alternative theory is that many trees have simply reached the end of their natural lives. Whatever the reason, the new planting should be a welcome addition to the stock of Sloden yews.

The Ministers Mandate

The Forestry Commission is going through one of its periodic consultation exercises, this time seeking suggestions for updating the so called Ministers Mandate. Many of those who will be suggesting amendments and additions may have only a very hazy idea of how the Mandate originated and why it was and remains so crucial to the management of the Forests woodlands. In 1971, after years of conflict in the New Forest, the Forestry Commission was finally instructed to stop conversion of the old oak and beech woods to conifer plantations. Strict rules for the future management of the remaining hardwood areas were laid down in a brief but effective document called the Ministers Mandate. This, together with the provisions of the New Forest Acts, has governed the Commissions activities ever since in both the Inclosures and the Open Forest woodland. The obtaining of the Mandate was a major achievement for conservation interests and has meant that woodland management has been a relatively trouble free and amicable business for the last twenty years. In the dreadful pre-Mandate days of the 1960s, over 1,000 acres of old oak and beech was cut down and replaced with drab and lifeless conifer woods in flagrant breach of the New Forest Act of 1877. If the process had not been stopped by the Mandate, the Commission would have worked out the final stages of its secret plan to reduce oak and beech to no more than 4% of the Inclosures.

Today the Mandate remains a crucial foundation for the protection of the woods but, with the passage of time, one serious flaw has become apparent. A minimum rotation of 200 years was laid down by the minister for oak and beech. While in 1971 that appeared sufficient to protect most of the immediately threatened woods, we are today approaching the rotation date for large areas of particularly beautiful oak woods planted between 1800 and 1810. The loss of these woods, even allowing the gradual felling processes envisaged by the Mandate, would cause irreparable damage to the character of the Forest and promote a public outcry such as that of the 1960s.

Of course woods do not last for ever, at least in their even-aged plantation form, but felling is not the answer in these most sensitive of New Forest Inclosures. The recent New Forest Review suggested the solution in the form of a gradual process of natural conversion to Open Forest woodland status for the finest of these woods such as Amberwood and Broomy. Nature has already demonstrated the success of this form of management in the

case of such former plantations as Ocknell and Long Beech, parts of which have been left largely unmanaged for almost two centuries. There would undoubtedly be a change in character of those woods now faced with "regeneration fellings" if such natural management were to be submitted, but this would occur over a very long period. The woods would survive for future generations to enjoy and the rate of change from formal even aged plantations to informal Open Forest type woodland would be scarcely perceptible within one human life time. There would of course be a financial penalty in loss of timber sales.

It is hoped that in their enthusiasm to encompass every aspect of the Forests management in a new Mandate, the revisers will not lose sight of the original objectives or of the urgent need to carry forward those objectives through the Review recommendations.

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