

New Forest Notes - August 1993

A new Council guardian for the Forest

THE Verderers' Court is evidently in for something of a shake-up. On July 19th, the Official Verderer (the chairman of the Court) announced the appointment of a new Verderer to represent Hampshire County Council in the person of Mrs. Margaret Ferguson of Lyndhurst. Mrs. Ferguson is well known as a vigorous and effective campaigner in seeking the construction of an outer Lyndhurst by-pass deep in the Forest -- a development universally opposed by the Forest societies, Verderers and Commoners. Of course the new Verderer has quite as much right to regard the New Forest as the best place to build this major new road as I have to think that view appalling. I can respect a sincerely held opinion, however much I may disagree with it. There is, after all, a long tradition of such policies dating back to 1871 when certain of the good citizens of Southampton shocked at the dreadful waste of land represented by the New Forest, called for it to be split up into farms for the benefit of labouring men.

Where I do find fault, however is with the County Council. Parliament has given the council the privilege of appointing one of the ten guardians of the New Forest and its ancient system of farming. In the past it has discharged that function at worst with neutrality and has at best given us such staunch defenders of the Forest as Mr. Alan Rice. He served with distinction and probably with some discomfort to his appointing authority, for many years. The insensitivity of the council in appointing someone dedicated to a policy so damaging to the Forest is one more demonstration of the unfitness of local authorities to meddle in the management of this unique national treasure.

Fortunately the bypass is not the live issue it was five years ago when the County Council promoted a bill to overcome the Verderers powers. It may be years before it again emerges as a significant threat. Meanwhile the Verderers Court is a very easy going institution and Mrs. Ferguson can expect a friendly welcome and to be judged, as all Verderers are, by their willingness to undertake the unspectacular dirty, day to day tasks of inspecting broken bridges, blocked drains, insufficiently restored pipelines and inadequately branded cows.

A Forest of Plans

Plans are a growing curse of the New Forest. Almost every organisation concerned in management seems determined to produce one or more, each fatter and glossier than its rivals. This year, so far, we have seen the Forestry Commissions management plan, a plan for horse riding management, English Nature's plan for heathland management, an ADAS plan for common rights and the National Trusts plans for its commons within the Forest. With a production rate of almost one a month, plans have become an end in themselves and a substitute for positive action. They all contain the same repetitive and pointless chapters on the characteristics, value and area of the different land categories. In most of them, the concrete proposals could be boiled down to fill two sides of one sheet of paper. When first issued, many of these documents produce fierce argument in the Forest resulting in some amendments. They are then consigned to the top shelf of everyone's book case and forgotten about, while the real and growing problems -- too much pressure upon too small and fragile a resource -- remain unsolved. Indeed, since the last war, there have been only two plans which escaped this fate. The first, the Baker Report of 1947, had almost magical qualities of brevity and

relevance which have resulted in its still being quoted today. It gave birth to the New Forest Act of 1949. The second was the so called Conservation Report of 1971 which led to the car-free zones, campsites and car parks.

In the matter of plans, the Verderers' Court holds a unique position in the New Forest: it has no plan at all. It has eschewed spiral binders, shiny covers, histograms, pie charts and appendices. When matters are brought before it, they are decided upon the simple flexible formula of questioning whether or not the proposal is good for the traditional character of the Forest, the Commoners or animal welfare. As a result, decisions are actually made and action taken on a fairly regular basis. I don't suppose the Verderers will be allowed to get away with this old fashioned efficiency for too much longer. We are told that the New Forest Committee has started a five year work programme on a new super plan which will "co-ordinate" everyone else's plans. Every national park must have its plans. so no doubt the Verderers will soon receive the order to start writing. That order might have come at the New Forest show when two government ministers were supposed to announce the fate of the Forest. However, they were apparently too busy to visit us. so perhaps we may expect from them a neatly bound report to add to the second shelf collection of my book case.

Turf Hill Inclosure

The last month has seen one really important proposal by the Forestry Commission, which has been wholly overshadowed by more exiting, but relatively trivial matters such as the Wilcox land exchange at Bramshaw. It is the plan for "landscaping" Turf Hill Inclosure and the adjacent Millersford plantation on the north edge of the Forest. These two woods and their status may be unfamiliar to residents of the southern Forest, but the principles involved here may be applied far more widely in future and it is the south which contains most of the Inclosures which could be subject to them.

In 1988 the Forest Review highlighted the loss of heathland during this century and made recommendations for the return of parts of the Forestry Commission timber plantations to Open Forest status and condition. The proposals were understandably, not attractive to the Commission and the recommendation was sat upon. Then, in 1990 the great storm blew down a significant part of Turf hill Inclosure, a plantation of conifer made in 1965. This was one of that strange category of plantation known as Verderers Inclosures authorised by the Court after the last war under the provisions of an Act which threatened five thousand acres of Open Forest. Fortunately, the shadow of wartime shortages had lifted by the time two thousand acres had been agreed, and it is fairly certain that the remaining three thousand acres will never be granted. However, the Commissions' grip on these Inclosures is tenuous at best, as they are held only on a 150 year old lease granted in 1958. Thereafter, they will revert to Open Forest in any case. The challenge today is to recover as much of them as possible, well in advance of the 150 year deadline. In a pre-emptive proposal the Forestry Commission offered to give up the blown down area and some narrow strips through the wood and through Millersford Plantation which is held on lease from the National Trust. The proposals would, on the commission's figures result in the opening up of 28% of these plantations and increase in broadleaves from 10% to 16%. It is clearly a good start, but does not in my view go far enough towards meeting the Review Group's recommendations.