

NEW FOREST NOTES DECEMBER 2000

New Verderers- Old Problems

On Friday of last week, two new Verderers were chosen in a contested election. The successful candidates are "new" only in the sense of being newly elected, for both of them are familiar faces on the Court. Jeff Kitcher had completed his second term and offered himself for re-election, while Dionis Macnair has returned to the Verderers' bench after an absence of three years. They have six years in which to wrestle with the same intractable problems which dogged the Forest throughout the 1990s and which remain unresolved today.

This was a somewhat lack-lustre election, although still generating more interest amongst the electorate in percentage terms than the recent parliamentary by-elections. It was almost as though the voters were too depressed and disillusioned to believe that things could get any better. Rock bottom prices for Forest livestock, the threat of the national park looming over the Forest, the Forestry Commission's attitude to such recreational developments as draghunting and an inevitable (if long-delayed) rise in marking fees, all contributed to the gloom. This almost seemed to be reflected in the candidates' pre-election meeting, usually an extremely lively event, held in a half-lit hall with the heating off, with one candidate absent and with only a thin attendance of voters, most of whom seemed incapable of putting much life into their questions. The chairman wisely brought it to a rapid end.

Verderers' elections have their own little pieces of ritual and tradition which, to my mind, make them attractive. The Official Verderer entertains the High Sheriff to dinner on election night. Lesser persons make their own arrangements in the pubs and restaurants of Lyndhurst, with one recent innovation being a pleasant small informal dinner presided over by the Clerk to the Court. All return for the count to commence at about 9.00 pm. That process is undertaken in the Queen's House, strangely quiet and deserted so late on a wet November night. Verderers' election nights are always wet. On such occasions the old building seems to exude Forest history. I was alone in the Courtroom for a while last Friday night and it was very easy to imagine the ghosts of former Stewards, Lord Wardens, Deputy Surveyors and Verderers, looking down amused on our 21st Century attempts to follow in their footsteps.

All the hard work on election night is undertaken by the Under Sheriff and his team, closeted in the library, while the candidates, their supporters and interested spectators assemble in the Verderers' Hall at about 9.30 for a declaration of the results usually half an hour later. This time the declaration was early, taking many would-be spectators by surprise. Some were only just arriving in the car park as I was going home.

The electoral process is a considerable drain on the Verderers' finances. This year's costs may amount to between eight and ten thousand pounds (exclusive of the costs of revising the electoral register which is refunded by the Forestry Commission), but it enables the Forest

community to choose its own representatives and thus to have a real say in how the common lands (in effect part of their farms) are managed. It is therefore probably money well spent.

Marking Fees

Last week the Verderers announced the first increase in marking fees for many years. The marking fee structure is complicated and nominally the fees for both ponies and cattle remain unchanged at £20 per head. In fact, however, there is a real increase in the pony marking fee of £3 per head because the “prompt payment discount” has been reduced from £5 to £2. The cattle fee has suffered a particularly steep rise (£14) because of the withdrawal of a £24,000 annual subsidy from the Forestry Commission. Why the Commission decided to withdraw the subsidy at this stage is not entirely clear, but it must in fairness be said that a comparable sum is being provided by them in the form of a grant to encourage animal welfare and this should help to limit further rises in pony fees for a time.

Increases in marking fees are about the last thing needed at the moment by hard-pressed livestock farming in the Forest. Several years ago, a report by independent consultants estimated the annual loss per mare to their commoner owners was about £63. That, leaving aside premiums for the best animals, must now be even greater. Cattle were (then) at least marginally profitable, but whether they will remain so in the face of this increase and of continuing turmoil in the market, is far from clear. Why then did the Verderers choose this moment to increase fees? The answer is that their options were extremely limited. After years of depleting their reserves to peg fees, in the hope that the pony market would eventually pick up, and of increasing staff costs in the face of animal welfare pressures, they were on the point of financial collapse. A deficit of over £36,000 was expected this year on the so-called “commoners’ account” which, without drastic action, would have risen to £42,000 next year. The books could be balanced only by a large cut in staff or by a marking fee increase combined with savings such as an abandonment of the pony worming scheme. The Verderers chose the latter course. Even so, the small reserves in the Gridding Fund (set aside to pay for repairs to certain grids and gates) had to be thrown into the pot and the respite thus brought about is only temporary. The Official Verderer announced to the Open Court on the 20th November that there would be a review of working practices over the winter months and that this might result in a reduction of staff. That, in the light of public concern over welfare (to say nothing of the distress to a valued workforce) is an extremely serious matter.

The dreadful thing about this whole financial crisis is that it is so unnecessary – if only the authorities would acknowledge, other than with words, the vital contribution made by the commoners to the management of the New Forest. Without their animals there would be no Forest – just an impenetrable jungle of scrub. It is true that the Forestry Commission is putting in large sums towards the pony premium scheme, that it is now to finance a “welfare subsidy” to the Verderers and that it largely finances the Verderers’ “administrative account”. It has also

introduced a valuable scheme to give preference to commoners in the letting of its own substantial reserves of agricultural land and cottages. All this is welcome, but it is clearly not enough. A clear-cut direct payment to the commoners for the service they provide, made in respect of a fixed and agreed number of good quality healthy animals, is an essential minimum. It is not enough to reduce the extent of losses: there must be a real financial incentive for stock keeping. Similarly, there must be direct government funding for an adequate and efficient agister force. Everyone involved in the management of the Forest knows this very well. However, ministers and others continue to make speeches about how much they value the commoners and their work in the Forest, while allowing the system to crumble before their eyes.

Estovers

Perhaps once every decade there is a row over estovers – otherwise the right of certain property occupiers in and around the New Forest to receive a free allocation of firewood from the Forestry Commission. The right is now extremely rare due to the fact that it has always been unpopular with the Crown. Whenever possible the Forestry Commission and its predecessor the Office of Woods has bought up and extinguished the right. There are now less than one hundred households entitled to estovers.

The right of fuelwood is defined in a statutory register of 1858 as an “allowance of the quantity described of good fuel wood yearly from the open and unenclosed parts of the said Forest by the view and allowance of the Foresters . . .” The allocation is in terms of cords – a cord being a stack of timber measuring 8’ x 4’ x 4’. Most houses now have only one or two cords, although far larger allocations formerly existed in respect of some of the Forest’s mansions. The total cost of the right to the Forestry Commission is now about 221 cords annually. The requirements of the Register are flouted, by agreement of all parties, in that the supply is now almost exclusively from the Inclosures rather than the Open Forest. That is more convenient for the recipients, easier for the Forestry Commission and less damaging to the ancient ornamental woods.

The current dispute, aired last week in the Verderers’ Court, is over some rather officious wording in the Commission’s written notification (of their entitlement) to right holders, demanding insurance in respect of chain saw use and setting out other health, safety and management requirements relating to the collection of wood. There is also the perennial complaint that allocations are made in remote and inconvenient parts of the Forest.

As requested by the complainants, the Verderers took up the matter with the Forestry Commission and it now appears likely that the Commission will, in future, deliver firewood to the fortunate owners of the right, rather than expecting them to collect it. Whether they will do so free of charge will no doubt depend upon the negotiating skills of the claimants and the degree of nuisance they can cause by continuing to collect the wood and by complaining.

Verderer for five days

When a casual vacancy arises among the elected Verderers, as happened recently, the remaining elected members of the Court have the power to choose a successor to serve until the time when the retiring or deceased Verderer's term would have come to an end. Although in the recent case there remained only a few weeks of unexpired time, the Court was advised by the Under Sheriff that the power ought to be exercised. Accordingly, the elected Verderers decided to appoint Mr. Ralph Hayward, a senior member of the Forest community with a lifetime of service to the commoners to his credit. The choice was made in appreciation of Ralph's work rather than as a practical contribution to management, but several records were probably broken in a matter of days. The new Verderer took up his seat on the Verderers' bench on Monday morning and was replaced by the newly elected members of the Court on Friday evening, making him almost certainly the shortest-serving Verderer of all time ! I am told that Mr. Hayward is eighty one years old and in that case he may well be the only Verderer to have joined the Court at so advanced an age – not that this inhibited him in any way from making a forceful contribution to the debates in committee. No doubt January will see him back in his more usual position facing the Court, representing Denny Lodge Parish Council.

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