

## **NEW FOREST NOTES DECEMBER 2006**

### **No change in the Verderers' Court**

Rather to the surprise of many in the Forest, the expected contest last month for two seats on the Verderers' Court did not take place. When nominations closed, only the names of the two retiring Verderers, Dionis Macnair and Jeff Kitcher, had been put forward, but perhaps that is not really so remarkable. These two members of the Court have given years of invaluable service to the Forest and it would have needed an exceptional candidate to mount a successful challenge to either of them. The Forest moreover, adopts a very sensible attitude towards age. So long as you do the job well, it does not matter if you are thirty or seventy years old. I suppose it is no secret that that Miss Macnair is, in terms of years, the senior member of the Court, yet she regularly out-walks her juniors in the sometimes gruelling day-long site visits. Both Verderers also exemplify what is best about the Court membership – a sound understanding of the Forest as a whole, combined with a highly specialised knowledge in some specific field. In Jeff Kitcher's case this is the practical management of livestock, while Dionis Macnair is the acknowledged leading authority on pony breeding matters.

The Court will now settle down for a further three years with an unchanged membership, assuming that none of the appointing authorities wishes to make alterations in its representation. Only half the membership of the Verderers' Court is elected: the others are appointed by various public authorities.

### **Stream filling at Brockenhurst**

At their November Court the Verderers decided by a large majority that the Forestry Commission's plans for diverting the Lymington River and filling and diverting several streams in the same area north of Brockenhurst should not be approved. A number of factors were taken into account in reaching this decision. They included the likely damage to existing lawns, the huge disruption which would be caused by the engineering work and the lorry transport of fill, the unpredictable consequences so far as flooding of the Forest is concerned, the ruinous effect of debris dams on grazing and the damage to beautiful landscape and favourite streamside walks in a relatively peaceful part of the Forest.

Those promoters in favour of the work argued that from a scientific conservation point of view the area is officially classified as in unfavourable condition and needs re-engineering, that saturating some of the streamside areas would improve the grazing and not harm it, that the disruption would be of limited duration and that the landscape that they would produce would be even better than that to be lost. Debris dams, they said, are a key ecological feature of natural forests and should be encouraged rather than eliminated.

Now, presumably, the Forestry Commission will divert the funds to less controversial conservation work in the Forest. There are still restoration projects on which both graziers and scientists can agree, with a little give and take on both sides.

### **South View and John Wise**

On the Brockenhurst road out of Lyndhurst (Gosport Lane) stands a Victorian house called South View. It is at present the subject of heated debates on planning and I offer no opinion as to the merits or otherwise of the redevelopment proposals. People either love or hate the village's Victorian character, but there is some interesting history attached to the house which I have not seen referred to in the press reports. Over forty years ago, C.F.Carr wrote of South View and its famous 19<sup>th</sup> Century occupant and I have not seen the information he gave published elsewhere.

It was at South View that the most influential book ever on the New Forest was written by the remarkable author, war correspondent and poet John Wise. His "New Forest – its History and Scenery" first appeared in 1862. I do not know how many editions followed. There were gold-tooled cloth bindings, calf bindings, oak veneered bindings and even one mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century edition. Early editions were illustrated by Walter Crane alone, but later-on some also included full page engravings by Heywood Sumner who might be described as Wise's spiritual heir. There was even an edition illustrated with photographs by the famous Short family of Lyndhurst – notable chiefly for the fact that this is one of the few Forest books which I don't think the Christopher Tower Library has yet secured ! Perhaps the most remarkable edition of all, only fifty copies for sale, was an enlarged version of the "Artist's Edition" with its oak faced covers, published by Henry Southeran in 1883. I have an un-numbered copy presented by the publisher to the author in December 1882 and which must once have graced the bookshelves in South View.

Wise was a vigorous walker, writing that he trusted "twenty miles a day was not too much for any Englishman" . His illustrator, Walter Crane, found this rather exhausting, but greatly admired the author. He wrote of him that "He was an extremely learned man, being a philologist, a naturalist, and an archaeologist; and being wide-minded, and something of a poet as well, he found intellectual food everywhere".

John Wise travelled widely and his works include a book on Robin Hood, a two volume novel, a history of Shakespeare and his birthplace and reports from the battlefields of the Franco–German War. Between his travels he always returned to his beloved New Forest and to South View. His last visit was in August 1889 and he died the following spring. He is buried in Lyndhurst Cemetery, surrounded by the Forest and within a few minutes walk of his old home. I seldom pass the house without thinking of its most famous former resident and what he gave to the Forest. His book is an account of a beautiful, peaceful and now only partly recognisable place, but one which was even then (1862) threatened by commercial forestry and by plans for selling-off the woods and heaths for housing and agriculture. What John Wise wrote was undoubtedly a powerful weapon in the campaign to defeat those plans.

### **The Commoning Review**

I have quite lost count of the number of surveys, reports and plans which have been published on so-called "commoning" - a horrid if convenient term for which I think Capt. Tim Moore must take responsibility. It means the farming of the Forest through the medium of

common rights. Its practitioners are, correctly, called “commoners”. The subject seems to have an endless fascination for sociologists and researchers while the commoners, with varying degrees of toleration or amusement, accept the rain of forms and questionnaires with which they are deluged. They are analysed by age, income, land occupation, housing, family history, opinions and probably soon by the length of their big toes. When you are part of such an exotic community and acclaimed as a key element of the “sustainable” management of the New Forest, you had much better act the part than grumble. That way the flow of public money may be more conveniently channelled in your direction. However, at a Commoners’ Defence meeting I attended recently, one commoner did remark bitterly that there is an awful lot of talk about how valuable his services are, but not much action to match the words.

The latest group of researchers to investigate this interesting subject is sponsored by the National Park and its work is to be called the Commoning Review. It will be headed by the Official Verderer and has a star-studded steering group of leading figures from the “commoning community” and from the Park. The steering group will appoint topic groups. To use its own language, slightly abbreviated, these will appraise existing research and commission new research where necessary. They will involve persons and organizations especially “young people” (beloved of the National Park). They will make recommendations on key issues and they will produce reports to the steering group. The topic groups will cover planning, housing and land; statutory recognition for commoning and finance for the Verderers; education and awareness including recreation, conflict etc; and Open Forest grazing needs.

I have no doubt that the intentions of all this are entirely worthy and a great deal of hard work and writing will be undertaken by all concerned. Their conclusions will, I understand, be reflected in the further plans which the National Park Authority will produce. I will, as always, dutifully fill in all the paper work I am sent, but I really wonder if the Forest has not gone just a little bit report-crazy.

We already know what the problems are in the Forest. Land is scarce and expensive; housing is prohibitively expensive; pony markets are over-supplied and unstable; the system is only held together by subsidies of one form or another; Forest farming is under intolerable pressure from uncontrolled recreation; terrible numbers of ponies and cattle are killed on the roads; and so on. Must we really start yet another review to discover the obvious and make recommendations to solve the (more or less) insoluble? I am told that we must, so the commoners had better climb out of their cow yards and pony trailers and start sharpening the pencils – yet again.

### **Echo of a distant past**

One of the delights of writing these notes over the years has been the number of kind letters and comments I receive ( responses of the opposite sort appear in the correspondence columns), chiefly from those who remember and mourn for the Forest of the past – perhaps even a past beyond my memory. One such letter arrived recently from a former Brockenhurst resident now living in Lyndhurst. It was very short, but quite remarkable in that its author

remembers a time so distant that for me at least its events are the subject of history books rather than human experience. At the time when this lady was four years old, the legendary Deputy Surveyor, Gerald Lascelles, was still in power and the First World War lay in the future. The Verderers' Court was still dominated by the formidable Briscoe Eyre and tourism meant a few genteel guest houses and the great Spring influx of wealthy people for the late hunting. It was not these great events which inspired my correspondent in those days, but the nightingales, night jars and kingfishers outside her home on the Forest edge – long since eliminated or pushed back to the remote depths. The 20th Century went a fair way to ruining the Forest. She writes, not surprisingly: “ I cannot walk out about as I did then”, but a kind Forest-knowledgeable family no doubt makes good this loss so far as possible.

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