

## **NEW FOREST NOTES DECEMBER 2009**

### **New elected member for the Verderers' Court**

The first contested election of Verderers in six years took place last week, with the result that a new face has joined the team following the retirement of John Adams. I often think that a Verderers' election causes scarcely a ripple in the surface of Forest affairs, except among the candidates and their families who have a nervous few weeks. The office of Verderer does not carry any special power or prestige and I imagine that few people outside the Forest community really care what the Verderers do, but for the holder it is nevertheless the most fascinating and absorbing of elective jobs in England. I have had the privilege of representing the commoners on the Court for quite a number of years now and I am very grateful to those electors who, on the 27<sup>th</sup> November, supported and returned me for a further six years. In remaining on the Court, I am joined by my long-time colleague Tony Gerrelli and by the newly elected Verderer, Richard Deakin. Richard may be new to the Court, but he could hardly be better known in the Forest after serving for almost as long as I can remember as treasurer to the Commoners' Defence Association. His roots are in the commoners' community of the Forest and his professional life in Waterside industry, from which he will retire in a few months time. In recent years he has been particularly active in helping to establish the New Forest Livestock Society which is now the key player in the running of Beaulieu Road pony sales. He should thus prove a worthy successor to John Adams and one more than able to tackle the agricultural and pony breeding problems which come before the Court. Perhaps more of a challenge may be the ever-increasing volume of work which relates to the protection and management of the Forest's land and the special but often intangible qualities of the area. Such matters as the refusal of new seats and notices which urbanize the Forest, the placing underground of powerlines, the control of intrusive recreational developments and judgements on conservation engineering work now take up quite as much of the Verderers' time as the criteria for approving stallions or the setting of subsidy and marking fee levels. Richard has wide interests, but in the past, not a few people have joined the Court expecting to concentrate solely upon animal management and have had (if conscientious Verderers) to develop new skills and acquire new knowledge very quickly.

I suppose that one of the oddest aspects of a Verderers' election is that the candidates seldom enjoy the luxury, apparently essential in parliamentary elections, of disliking their opponents and loathing the policies those opponents support. Almost invariably these days, our candidates are good friends with similar or identical opinions about the Forest. It is often a sadness that someone has to lose and in this election I have not the slightest doubt that the unsuccessful contender, Mike Cooper, would have made a very competent and well-respected Verderer. Of course it was not always like this. When I first stood for election it was because I was concerned that certain sitting members of the Court were not up to the job of resisting development and recreational pressures upon the Forest

which were even then emerging. Later on there was even the odd candidate (not from the commoners' community) who represented an actual threat to the Forest !

The Verderers have a system in which elections can take place every three years. At one election two Verderers will be chosen and at the next (as last week) there are opportunities for three. This means that the next potential election is in three years time when the remaining two elected members, Dionis Macnair and Jeff Kitcher, will either stand again or retire and when new challengers may come forward. In the October "Notes", I lamented the fact that the electoral register had shrunk again and that the names of many practising commoners were missing from it. However, it is now clear that there was also an inexplicable drop in the number of non-practising commoners (sometimes called the residential vote). If anything, that is even more difficult to explain. Why should someone occupying a good house with land, who (presumably) has chosen the New Forest because it is a wonderful place to live and who has a huge financial investment in his property, have so little interest that he cannot be bothered to register and vote ? Busy commoners are notorious for their allergy to form-filling, but for the apathy of the leisured resident there can be no explanation. Worse still, many of those people were on earlier registers and could not even take the trouble to return the pre-completed forms sent to them by the Verderers' office.

There is also an unanswered question as to who actually votes in the elections, bearing in mind that nearly 50% of those who do manage to register fail to turn up at the polling stations. We do not have the benefit of voting-intention or exit polls, but my impression is that the residential vote is poorly represented on election day, while those practising commoners who do make it onto the register are also sufficiently keen to turn out on a wet November Friday and drive five or ten miles to their polling station. There are always exceptions, of course, and what I call the "old Forest people", whether practising commoners or not, remain stalwart supporters of the Forest system. One hopeful sign is that despite a much reduced register, the actual turn-out this time seems to have improved significantly.

Fortunately there are some traditional elements of the election process which do not change. There is, for the candidates, the same uncomfortable late-night wait in the Verderers' Hall, within a darkened and strangely silent Queen's House. In the library the Under Sheriff and his staff labour on the count, overseen by the High Sheriff and the Official Verderer. Finally the results are announced in the Court by the High Sheriff, resplendent in her green livery, to the little group of assembled candidates and interested commoners. There follow congratulations and commiserations amongst the candidates and their friends, before everyone disperses into the night. The Court is left to darkness and, perhaps, to the ghosts of less democratic and more brutal proceedings of the distant past.

#### **The Verderers' Higher Level Stewardship scheme**

Negotiations over this project are proceeding rapidly with a view to getting everything approved for a start date in the early spring of 2010. A very substantial sum, far above the present stewardship level, is to be set aside for the support of commoners and their interests

in the Forest. The Verderers alone will determine how that is to be spent, subject to the scheme rules.

Where the scheme breaks entirely new ground is in funding for a series of other subject areas, namely, historic environment, resource protection, landscape, education and access and biodiversity. These are all horrible jargon titles but they allow for work which is actually badly needed in the Forest. Working groups covering each of these titles have been set up, with representatives from interested societies and authorities and with individual Verderers assigned to one or more of the groups. The first task is to choose projects which can be set up early in the scheme.

My allocation has been the historic environment and landscape groups, along with my colleagues Ralph Montagu and Dionis Macnair. On the whole I think that the groups have worked well with a wide measure of agreement on what needs to be done, but excellent projects do not always seem to conform to the obscure and far from sensible rules of the scheme. In the historic environment section, a complete lidar survey of the Forest is an early priority. Lidar is a system of scanning the Forest from the air so as to build up an incredibly detailed relief map in photographic form and showing features as little as 0.25m high. It can penetrate all but the densest conifer areas and holly. Lidar is of great archaeological value as already demonstrated by a trial area in the north west of the Forest from Pitts Wood to Woods Corner. It will also assist with the evaluation of stream-filling projects. There are other lesser schemes agreed in principle under historic environment. They include the restoration of built structures on the Forest and archaeological survey work on the areas which are burnt each year. Historical research into drainage schemes is also likely to be undertaken. As to the landscape working group, the most ambitious target is noise and visual screening of the A 31. Removal of unnecessary and damaging signs is on the menu and so is the repair and protection of eroded verges and roadside parking areas. As always with subjects which have the potential for damage, I am nervous as to what the education and access group might propose, but with luck the scheme rules, which are after all directed towards conservation, should help to limit any attempted excesses.

Events are moving fast and by January we should have a much clearer picture of exactly what will be involved and how much money may be forthcoming.

### **Lyndhurst Cemetery**

Lyndhurst parish council has applied to the Verderers for an extension to the cemetery at Boltons Bench. The site was originally taken from the Forest, probably in the early 1880s under legislation which is no longer operative. It is possible that a land exchange might be made if the proposal is acceptable in all other respects, but there are many hurdles which the council will have to overcome and not least the protected status of the land it seeks to acquire. On the whole I think the idea is unlikely to progress, but the council has been asked to suggest possible exchange land.

Unlike the churchyard which was vandalised some years ago by the church authorities, the graves and memorials in the cemetery are largely intact. There are

occasional attacks by non-clerical vandals here, but it is an interesting place with many famous Forest people in residence. I am told (although I have not seen it) that the grave of Lawrence Henry Cumberbatch is here. He was appointed Deputy Surveyor at the time of the Deer Removal Act and led the campaign for the inclosure and destruction of the Forest. His famous successor, Gerald Lascelles is there and his memorial was restored a few years ago by falconry enthusiasts. Best known of all is the grave of John Wise, renowned author of "The New Forest, its History and Scenery" published in 1863. There are even three of my great aunts lying side by side and altogether there are plenty of worse places in which one's remains could end up – especially now the bypass threat seems finally to have been lifted from the adjoining Forest.

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