

NEW FOREST NOTES DECEMBER 2015

Fireworks and the Forest

Early last month I visited Yew Tree Heath car park (near Hythe) on a Monday morning. The filth with which it was strewn was indescribable. Beer cans, plastic, and vast amounts of firework debris were everywhere, no doubt the results of the previous night's revels. This was not the result of a quick hit-and-run attack in which a couple of rockets were let off and the odd can ejected from a car. Rather it was the result of a sustained period of abuse, probably lasting several hours. Unlike the more usual drug-taking or fly-tipping, the detonation of large numbers of fireworks is not something which can be undertaken in secret. I find it incredible that the Forestry Commission is not on the highest alert in the evenings around bonfire night, so that this sort of abuse can be clamped down upon immediately. An army of "rangers", including those from the park, is busy encouraging visitors to enjoy themselves in the Forest, but it seems paralysed by, or oblivious to, perfectly predictable anti-social raids such as occurred here and no doubt elsewhere in the Forest.

Yew Tree Heath is one of the Forest's many urban fringe car parks, five minutes' drive from the housing estates of the Waterside, so that nothing was more likely than that it, or one of its adjacent parks would be a prime target for fireworks vandals.

There are actually few things which demonstrate more clearly than fireworks the divide between urban and rural cultures. Organized displays with well-chosen sites are a delight to everyone and if well planned should cause no harm. The random firing of rockets and bangers in garden plots adjacent to livestock fields is another matter altogether. Some horses and other animals are terrified by such thoughtless and dangerous activities. I am fortunate in that my few remaining animals seem very steady under fire, even when what seemed like the outbreak of World War III occurred two fields away at Halloween. Other people I know are driven almost desperate trying to calm terrified horses. These days it is not just a case of contending with the 5th November, but any evening for a couple of weeks either side of bonfire night can produce an outbreak of the menace.

Beaulieu dams

Those of us who walk in the Forest simply because it is a beautiful and quiet place probably have little difficulty in understanding the big and obvious things – the development and decay of woods, how the ponies are managed and so on. There are however, other people who seem to have eyes for what is invisible to the rest of us, and so it is with a friend of mine who some years ago began to notice something strange about the shallow valleys which cross Beaulieu Hilltop Heath. At various points within them he started to see patterns of molinia tussocks laid out in a crescent formation across the flow of water, often on very slight banks but sometimes little more than a pattern of vegetation. Eventually it became clear that what he was finding were very faint remnants of dams designed to impound water upstream in the form of shallow ponds. Now, after a great deal of fieldwork, we know of nine such dams at Hilltop. More recently they have also been found on Beaulieu Heath West. There the construction of two airfields damaged the surface of the Forest over

wide areas, but two or three more dams seem to have survived. Because the two heaths are the only places in the New Forest where such features are known to have existed they have, unsurprisingly, been named "Beaulieu dams".

What could have given rise to the making of these slight structures in such inhospitable boggy ground ? Clearly it had nothing to do with making reservoirs or drinking places for livestock. There is more than enough water retained in the bogs themselves for such purposes. The most likely explanation is that they were made to create shallow ponds to attract wildfowl and thus to facilitate the netting or shooting of victims. At the moment there is no indication as to the date of Beaulieu dams, but their restricted geographical distribution inevitably suggests a link to the Cistercian monastery at Beaulieu, established in 1204 and dissolved by Henry VIII in the 16th century.

Uncontested Verderers' election

This month, after an absence of two and a half years, I will be re-joining the Verderers' Court, along with Richard Deacon (chairman of the Court's staff committee) and new Verderer – Mr. Jim Greenwood, the Commons' Defence expert on the fiendishly complicated rules of the DEFRA subsidy schemes. In addition, Mr. Greenwood could hardly have a more appropriate surname for membership of a court of verderers !

I think this is only the second time in over forty years that I have not had to fight an election. That, of course, is a considerable saving in cost for the candidates involved and for the Court itself. Elections are very expensive to run. On the other hand it can be argued that the absence of a contest (to say nothing of the very small number of commoners who registered their right to vote) shows rather a lack of interest in the Forest and how it is managed. That cannot be good for the Court and is so different from the time when I first became involved with the Forest. Then the electoral register was sometimes twice the size of the present one and the elections were hard-fought. I remember that at my first election, when I joined the Court along with Dionis Macnair (still serving) and Maldwin Drummond, who had already served for some years, we must all have seemed exceptionally young compared to the average age of Verderers before and since. Then the old guard on the Court had backed the wrong horse in supporting the Forestry Commission in its attempts to rid the inclosures of broadleaved trees and to take commercial crops from the Ancient Ornamental woods. It was also on the point of giving in to pressure for an outer Lyndhurst bypass. Altogether there was a lot of discontent in the Forest then.

Today the matters the Court must deal with are no less complex than in 1973, but the Verderers operate against a very different background of intense public pressure for more recreational concessions, the growing influence of the national park and of Natural England, and a subsidy regime which threatens the stability of the common grazing land. Only the appalling slaughter of the commoners' animals on the roads remains an enduring and distressing feature of Forest life.

I think the record for service on the Verderers' Court is still that established by the famous Briscoe Eyre, who was elected immediately the new court was established, and occupied the position from January 1878 until his death in February 1925. That remarkable record will, in three years' time, be equalled by Dionis Macnair. She will then have served for the same 42 years (allowing for a three year break in the middle of her time as Verderer).

Awards for Forest service

The New Forest Trust, a charity which helps to support various aspects of the Forest's life and environment, has been much less in the public eye recently than when it was established in 2003. Perhaps donations are less easy to obtain these days and so much money now pours into the Forest from national grants and the activities of public authorities that there may be less need for the work of a local charity. However, there are still tasks for which it is well suited and one of these is the annual awards to people who have contributed freely to Forest life, without any expectation of reward or acknowledgement. The big figures of local councils and statutory bodies (along with a politically correct leavening of lollipop ladies and other unsung heroes of the community) may expect their MBEs after a good term of years of sitting on committees, but someone who toils year after year on a show stand for one of the Forest societies or who attends endless site meetings on cold winter days can so easily be overlooked. The Trust thus invites nominations for what it calls its Diamond Jubilee Awards – nominations which can be made by any member of the public by visiting the website <http://www.newforesttrust.org.uk/new-forest-award> The chairman of the Trust reminded members of the Commoners' Defence Association about these awards at the autumn meeting at Bramshaw last month, pointing out that several of their members have already been recipients. In addition to the crystal glass award (retained at the New Forest Centre), the successful candidate also receives a cash sum and a certificate. Nominations need to be made by 31st May in any year and they are judged by representatives appointed from the Forest's societies.

Christmas berries

For a second year in succession the Forest is producing a remarkable crop of holly berries, even to the extent that some trees seem to have a pink tinge when viewed from a distance. The usual battle is now on between the birds and the holly dealers to see who can secure the most berries before Christmas. I am rather on the side of the birds. They leave less mess behind them and do not cause endless wheel ruts, which are seldom properly restored, over great tracts of the Forest.

The berries, coinciding with the November flowering of the gorse (which always seems to defy the logic of the seasons), have made the Forest particularly colourful over the last few weeks of dismal weather and compensated in some measure for the lack of autumn colours in the deciduous leaves.

Another seasonal berry which seems to have become much more common than a few years ago is mistletoe. There used to be a time when it was confined to a few locations in the Forest, but now individual trees seem to host the plant all over the place. It is usually too high up to be attractive

to collectors. On private land (for example in Lyndhurst and Hale) it seems to be particularly fond of lime trees and perhaps this is the source of spread onto the Forest. There its favourite host seems to be rowan, but I have also seen recent spread onto thorns and birch.

Anthony Pasmore