

NEW FOREST NOTES DECEMBER 2016

Latchmore Brook planning decision

Last month's decision by the National Park planning committee to reject the Latchmore Brook planning application, subsequently confirmed by the government, marked a significant step in the long-running battle over this development scheme. The Forestry Commission had applied for permission to carry out major engineering works to the entire length of the brook and most of its tributaries. The engineering, it was claimed, was designed to secure ecological benefits, although opponents said this claim was insupportable and that the inevitable damage to the beauty and peace of the Forest would be wholly unacceptable. The arguments on both sides have been repeated endlessly, but the processes involved have received little attention, either in respect of the planning decision itself or as to the way they may affect the future actions of the aspiring developer.

I have always held strong reservations about the value to the Forest of the National Park authority, especially in its role as an instrument of local government. Too often it has acted chiefly as a promotor of tourism and recreation for outsiders, while sometimes riding rough-shod over the interests of ordinary local people. On this occasion, however, I must freely admit that it has done well; reflecting the deep concerns of a wide section of the community by seeking to block what I and many others believe would be a deeply damaging exercise. The committee's decision was the more creditable in that it was made counter to the planning officer's recommendation that it should be "minded" to grant approval, while referring the matter to the relevant minister for final determination. It had thus been offered a politically cheap escape route and it did not take it, but opted instead for a refusal, albeit with the minister still being involved. The natural beauty of the Forest, its peace and quiet, historic landscape and the well-being of its residents are just as deserving of respect as the demands to secure ecological objectives. This is a truth which the committee's decision rightly recognizes.

It remains to be seen whether this refusal is simply another twist in the tortuous Latchmore conflict, or rather a new beginning in which, in the Official Verderers' words, we shall "all work together from now on to protect and improve the New Forest for future generations". The HLS scheme has done much good for the Forest and it would be sad if its remaining three years are to be soured by a continued rear-guard action by the Forestry Commission in an attempt to beat those who disagree with it into submission. Irrespective of the undesirability of such a course, I think the odds must now be on its being ultimately unsuccessful. The Commission has immense reserves of money and staff by comparison with the meagre resources of those who have fought for Latchmore, but I get the feeling that it, like the rest of the Forest, is rather tired of continual conflict and would now welcome the opportunity to concentrate on projects where there is agreement or at least acquiescence.

The Forestry Commission has a period of six months in which an appeal would have to be lodged. If it decided to pursue that route, I imagine that a public inquiry would follow, perhaps in the

latter part of 2017 and with a decision some time in 2018. At such an inquiry the national park would presumably defend its own decision as planning authority, making common cause with those who have resisted the development so far. The whole process would be extremely complicated and contentious. It would be reminiscent of the Shell oil inquiry many years ago. Then the Forestry Commission was forced, in the middle of the inquiry, to change from influential supporter of the intending developer, to a leading opponent. Let us hope that wiser council, along the lines of the Official Verderer's statement, will prevail.

This phase of the Latchmore story cannot be dismissed without a tribute to those who worked so hard and over so long a period to secure the planning authority's refusal of the application. The leaders of the Friends of Latchmore, of course, bore the brunt of this task. I know from personal experience of other conflicts, just how much time, effort and heartache is involved in such work. Dealing with obdurate and obstructive public authorities can be a soul-destroying business. Not since Jean Cobb's campaign against the Forestry Commission's plans to destroy all but 4% of the Forest's oak and beech plantations in the 1960s has the local community seen determination such as this. Nor was this dedication confined to the "Friends" alone. There were people in the affected parishes who spared no effort behind the scenes in working towards the events of last month. They too deserve recognition.

The search for a new Official Verderer

At the November Verderers' Court, the Official Verderer (chairman of the court) announced that he would not seek a further term when his present appointment ends in the spring. After the Deputy Surveyor, the Official Verderer is probably the most influential person in Forest affairs. Under an industrious and knowledgeable chairman the Court usually flourishes, but the converse is also true. In a discussion of the subject with my colleague Dionis Macnair (who has served almost as long on the Court as I have), she volunteered the view that the worst Official Verderer she had known was a gentleman (long dead) she went on to name. That gives nothing away, because to date they *have* all been men. I found no difficulty in agreeing with her assessment. In fact of the sixteen men who have held the office since the Court was established in 1877, Dionis and I have worked with no less than seven Official Verderers – to say nothing of seven of the eighteen Deputy Surveyors.

I am not really sure why anyone should want the job of Official Verderer. Done properly, it involves almost limitless unpaid work, endless tedious committees, not a little aggravation and the need to work with a team of nine individualist colleagues with strong and often differing ideas on Forest management. After retirement you may have to wait a long time for your knighthood and its arrival is by no means guaranteed. The appointment is said to be made by the Queen, but it is in fact a gift of government and in recent times has been influenced by an informal committee including the Deputy Surveyor and the retiring Official Verderer. It will be noted that the Verderers themselves have no say in the matter. Since they must work with the chairman, that has always seemed to me to be a significant defect in the appointment system. No doubt the post will be advertised shortly, but on past form probably too late for there to be a sensible hand-over period.

Since the Verderers themselves are powerless in the matter, I suppose there is no harm in suggesting some of the qualifications desirable in the chairman. The days are fortunately long gone when an essential qualification for the job was the possession of a title – a baronetcy at least and preferably a peerage. The present holder of the post has, rather unusually, a good knowledge of the Forest on the ground, derived largely from his interest in hunting. Deputy Surveyor Lascelles famously wrote that “the only fit way for a gentleman to see the Forest is from the back of a pleasant, well-mannered, horse”. Old-fashioned as this sounds, there is still much truth in it if you really want to learn the Forest. I suppose by definition an Official Verderer is a gentleman or (these days) a gentlewoman. Geographical knowledge is valuable. I have known several Official Verderers who would have had difficulty pointing to the Knightwood Oak on a map, let alone Stinking Edge Wood or Halfpenny Green.

Leaving aside geography, the next quality which has, in the past, proved invaluable at times is an understanding of the law. By this I don't mean the special New Forest legislation alone, as that is short and fairly easily learnt, but more general property, tort and administrative law. The Court is a public authority and must work within the constraints that implies. I don't think this limits the candidates to solicitors and barristers. Someone with a background in land agency might be suitable as surveyors are required to acquire a good basic legal knowledge as part of their training. Several eminent DEFRA appointed Verderers have come from that profession.

Above all other qualities desirable in an Official Verderer is the ability to listen and learn, at least to start with. The chances are that the new chairman (unless particularly knowledgeable about the Forest) will find there is someone on the Court who knows more about nearly any subject than he does – whether it is bloodlines in ponies, EU subsidies or the rules governing the Verderers' Inclosures. The Forest is a complicated place and by the time the Nolan rules force his (or her) resignation in six or nine years' time, he may just about have acquired a good understanding of how things work.

Heywood Sumner centenary publication

Collectors of Forest books will know that one of the rarest and most valuable works in any collection is Sumner's “Ancient Earthworks of the New Forest”. It was published in 1917 by this famous archaeologist, artist, designer and writer in an edition limited to two hundred copies, printed on handmade paper and individually numbered and signed. It was originally priced at £1 (perhaps the equivalent of £80 today), but on the secondhand market, I suppose one would be lucky to find a copy for under £250. It is thus beyond the reach of many people who need a copy for its contents rather than its collector's value. Sumner wrote that it was written in time of peace and completed in the third year of the Great War. In his words, it is “a record of landmarks which proclaim the valour, the reverence, and the forethought of our ancestors in the great days done – completed during a time of greater days doing.” Sumner's writings are a delight. His maps in *Ancient Earthworks* contain ponies, deer, a horse and cart and even an early motor car, while the text is filled with digressions into landscape and history, but never detracting from a clear explanation of his subject. It is thus a world

away from nearly all modern archaeological reports which are jargon-filled and devoid of life and humanity

To mark the centenary of the original publication, the charity New Forest History & Archaeology Group has issued a photographic reproduction of the original at the very modest price of £12 plus post and packing. Full details are available on the Group's website:

www.newforesthistorvandarchaeology.org.uk

Anthony Pasmore