

New Forest Notes December 1997

Additional public meetings for Verderers

NEXT year is to see a radical alteration in the way the Verderers' Court operates. At present and for as long as I can remember, public sessions of the Court have taken place every second month. These Open Courts, which usually last about one hour, precede a further three or four hour meeting in closed session. On the alternate months when there is no Open Court, the Verderers meet in committee only. When any important matter is raised in Open Court, no decision is taken upon it until after the next Open Court - i.e., there is a delay of two months before deciding the question. This is so that any supporting or opposing presentments can be heard in public before a conclusion is reached. For example, the Forestry Commission may apply at the March Open Court to establish a campsite. Objections from the public will be heard in May and the matter will be debated in committee immediately afterwards.

The new procedures will cut the delay in half. For a trial period comprising the whole of 1998, there will be an Open Court every month except August. This means that a campsite proposed in March will be commented on by the public in April and a decision will be reached in the April committee. The change is partly to reduce the inconvenience to applicants of having to wait two months for a reply to their proposals, especially as the number of applications made by presentment may increase following the Ombudsman report on ice cream sales at Balmer Lawn. The Verderers also hope, with a happy disregard of Parkinsons law, that the Courts business will be speeded up and shorter meetings will result. In those cases where the matter under consideration is complicated and a longer delay is desirable, the old two month rule will, at the discretion of the Verderers continue to apply.

These changes would have caused considerable problems for the Forest societies if they had been introduced a few years ago when all Forest meetings were geared to the bi-monthly Open Courts. However, both the Commoners Defence Association and the New Forest Association have found that pressures of work in recent times has demanded monthly meetings. The Verderers are therefore really just following their lead.

In addition to the change in the number of Open Courts, the Verderers are also considering what matters which need not be dealt with by presentment (by a strict interpretation of the Acts of Parliament) should in fact receive that treatment. For example controversial licenses for pipelines might well become the subjects of presentment or at least a public announcement that the Court has received an application and will not decide it without hearing opposing views.

This leaves the old question as to whether the public should be admitted to all the Verderers' meetings, including the committees. At the moment I think there is little enthusiasm for this in the Court, quite apart from the grave practical difficulties. I suspect that after the public had been thoroughly bored by a few hours of rather dull discussions there would be no enthusiasm among them either.

Departing Deputy Surveyor

The November meeting of the Verderers coincided with the departure of Mr. Arthur Barlow as Deputy Surveyor after five years in charge of the New Forest. Small presentations were made to him

by the Forest keepers and the Verderers. His period in office has seen a good deal of friction on certain subjects between the Court and the Forestry Commission and between the Commission and the Forest societies. Despite this the Deputy Surveyor remained cheerful and good natured throughout and there were many people in the Forest sorry to see him go.

Since the modern history of the New Forest began in 1851, there have been only 12 Deputy Surveyors. The combined reigns of the first two of these amounted to over sixty years. Of the 10 remaining, I have known and worked with (sometimes fought with) six, starting with Arthur Cadnam back in the 1960s. Those of us outside the Commission have never really been able to work out exactly how much personal power the Deputy Surveyor has in the New Forest. Does he make the important decisions or does he merely carry out policies dictated from above? The latter seems more probable, although I suspect that a really determined Deputy Surveyor is able to influence those who make the decisions.

The Forest is now a ship without a captain and I am told that until a new Deputy Surveyor is appointed a triumvirate comprising the land agent, the operations manager and the recreational manager will act as regent. Major questions will be referred to Bristol for a decision.

Decline of the Camp Shops

I predicted last month that the Verderers would have little sympathy for the Forestry Commission's proposals for trading an extensive range of goods in campsites, and so it proved. The Verderers rejected an application to sell a wide variety of items including gas and mantles, toilet fluid, washing powder, maps and books, fuel, toys, bottled water, string, soap, toothpaste and tin openers. They also rejected an application to sell a range of foodstuff at Ocknell and made it clear that any future bike hire proposals would be refused. The Court did agree to allow the sale of five items of emergency supplies -- bread, milk, torch batteries, tent pegs and freezer packs -- but at five sites only. No sales at all will be permitted at the remaining sites except for Holmsley which has long established and approved shopping facilities.

The decision is unlikely to please everyone. Some campers have made their contrary views very clear, while certain local traders wanted to see all sales, of whatever character, banned from all the sites. They argue that the Commission will inevitably try a covert expansion of the range of goods sold and it must be admitted that on past evidence their fears may not be unfounded. As a safeguard against such attempts, the permission to sell emergency supplies is for one year only and the Verderers will be carrying out random checks without prior notice. This conjures intriguing visions of Verderers in dark glasses and false beards trying to purchase pink teddy bears and five litres of toilet fluid under the counter. That aside, a refusal to allow the sale of these few essentials would undoubtedly be seen by the public as small-minded and mean and perhaps it would have been.

Inclosure Management Agreement

Almost lost in the deluge of presentments against camp site sales at the November meeting of the Verderers Court was an announcement by the New Forest Association that, after several years of negotiation, an agreement has finally been reached with the Forestry Commission on the way in which the timber inclosures of the Forest should be managed so as to protect their beauty and character. This agreement is really something of a land mark and, if it is properly observed, should

ensure an end to many damaging activities which have caused such controversy in the past. The agreement lists 19 points covering everything from the protection of character trees to the use of horse friendly gravel on Forest roads.

For a long time during the negotiations the protection of especially beautiful trees, dead trees important for wildlife and native non timber trees had proved a stumbling block. The commission would not give an unequivocal assurance that they would not be felled. In the end it was agreed that there would always be a presumption against such felling, but that if the Commission considers it necessary to depart from this general rule in any particular case, it will give advance notice of its intentions. This formula will therefore allow time for public opposition if the proposed felling is unjustified.

The agreement does not cover two crucial questions -- the reversal of the post war decline in hardwood areas and the exclusion of certain very valuable broadleaved inclosures from all commercial management -- but it is a good start. It is rather sad that most visitors and not a few residents assume that the Forest survives by some sort of divine guidance rather than, as in this case, the sheer hard work of such bodies as the New Forest Association. Its achievements deserve wider recognition and the larger membership which would follow from that. Copies of the agreement may be obtained free of charge from the Associations chairman, Peter Frost, by telephoning 01703 292960.