

NEW FOREST NOTES - FEBRUARY 2000

Draghunting and the Park

January's Verderers' Court was one of those times, which are becoming increasingly common, when latecomers found neither seats nor standing room. They were condemned, by the Queen's House fire regulations, to stand outside in the cold. The attractions on this occasion were, yet again, the two controversial subjects of draghunting and the national park proposals.

The subject of draghunting in the New Forest and the history of how the proposal has been handled, is superficially straightforward. Back in September, the Deputy Surveyor (chief officer of the Forestry Commission in the New Forest) asked the Verderers to agree to a draghunting trial. He applied to the Court under the New Forest Act of 1970 which gives the Verderers a veto over recreational use and development. The Verderers, as is their usual practice, invited public comment, for and against the trials, to be made at their next (October) Court. In October, overwhelming opposition was expressed in a large number of presentments, some of which the Verderers regarded as relevant and some as falling outside their proper sphere of judgement. There were also supporting presentments with similar merits and faults. After careful consideration, they decided to refuse the Deputy Surveyor's request on the grounds that draghunting trials would cause disturbance to wildlife and commoners' stock and interference with other forest users. They wanted to see less pressure on the Forest and an active reduction in overuse and damage.

Following the Court, a Mr. Thomas, who hoped to be allowed to carry out draghunting in the New Forest, expressed dissatisfaction with the Verderers' decision. The Court agreed to reconsider the matter and received a lengthy presentment from Mr. Thomas at their November Court. The Verderers gave careful consideration to Mr. Thomas's representations and invited further public comment to be made in January. That they duly received, before concluding that Mr. Thomas had, in effect, asked them to grant him a licence for draghunting trials. Since it is not in the Verderers' power to grant such a licence, that was the reply that they gave Mr. Thomas.

So much for that part of the iceberg of draghunting which is visible above the stormy surface of New Forest waters. As all parties involved know perfectly well, most of the trouble lies concealed from view. It comprises a battle between pro and anti-hunting factions and the big battalions from which they derive their support. The cryptic press statement issued by the Verderers after the January Court set in motion a flood of rumours that the Court had "given in" and that draghunting would now take place. That was not true, but the story was all round the Forest within twelve hours.

Some proponents of draghunting see it as a means of undermining the New Forest Foxhounds by establishing a politically correct alternative. Rumour has it that the Forestry Commission is under intense political pressure to establish draghunting, as a precursor to banning foxhunting in the New Forest. It is also claimed that large sums of animal welfare

money are being poured into the draghunting campaign. One of my correspondents asserts that a large animal welfare charity is backing draghunting in this area to the extent of £15,000. Now so far as I am concerned, these political machinations are irrelevant to what is or is not good for the management of the Forest, but as a matter of plain fact, there seems to be a good deal of truth in the claims made by the hunters. In December the Forestry Commission abruptly changed its line on draghunting trials, or rather on the role of the Verderers in judging their desirability. At the September Court they had asked the Verderers for their consent to trials: now they claimed that the Court's consent was unnecessary and that they (the Forestry Commission) could authorise draghunting without the Verderers permission. The law had been reinterpreted.

Students of Forest affairs may remember that exactly the same claims were made by the Commission in respect of cycling. The argument goes that the Verderers' consent is required only for the grant of a "facility" and that permission to use of land for draghunting is not the grant of a facility. There the matter rests. No permit has yet been granted, the Verderers deny that the Commission's interpretation of the law is correct and, since we are in the 21st and not the 19th Century, I cannot see that any of the parties will be rushing off to the courts. However, if the Forestry Commission can successfully circumvent the Verderers Court over matters of recreation, it will set an extremely dangerous precedent. A revival of cross-Forest motor cycling such as was permitted here by the Commission in the 1960s, or the establishment of motor rallying on gravel roads such as the Commission allows in other forests or the expansion of mountain biking are all possibilities - if remote ones. At the moment the draghunting trials are in temporary abeyance, but no-one expects the subject to go away.

In all this, the Verderers have tried to steer a careful and proper course, having regard only to their statutory duties, the welfare of the Forest, its wildlife and livestock and ignoring the politically driven demands of the warring factions.

The Verderers & the Park

I suppose it was almost inevitable that the Verderers should fudge the national park issue after receiving representations upon it at the January Court. There were the usual three or four supporters' groups, led by the Labour Party and the Ramblers Association, but the overwhelming majority of presentments called upon the Court to oppose the park plans. The Commoners Defence which is leading the opposition to converting the Forest into a park was joined in January by the New Forest Pony Breeding and Cattle Society - the largest and wealthiest of the Forest societies. Members of its committee voted two to one against the park when the matter was considered a few days before the Court. Countryside Agency representatives were present in the Court and, perhaps for the first time, had the opportunity of hearing at first hand, just how repugnant are their schemes to those most intimately connected with farming the Forest and to many residents. They were later given the opportunity to address the Verderers in private and to answer questions. As to the latter, the

answers seemed to me just about as evasive as the responses given to similar questioning in the New Forest Consultative Panel.

It is not the business of the Verderers Court to support the Commoners right or wrong and whatever the consequences for the Forest. However, it is a serious matter for the Court to ignore the overwhelming view of the electorate as expressed by the Commoners' Defence and Pony Breeders, supported by many others, on a proposal which strikes at the roots of the present administration and which will have incalculable consequences for the future of the Forest. The only other occasion on which I can remember this happening was when the Court granted away two thousand acres of grazing to be made into plantations - the Verderers' Inclosures - in the 1960s. Unfortunately the Countryside Agency has such influence within the Court that there is little prospect of the Commoners being supported, at least for the present, so a stalling decision to give further study and consideration is the inevitable consequence.

Car Park Problems

At the November Court, almost unnoticed amidst the national park and draghunting disputes, the Forestry Commission submitted radical proposals for altering the New Forest's car parks. The net effect in land-take is a negative 1.7 ha. In other words, about four acres would be returned to the Forest and overall car parking capacity would be reduced by 191 spaces out of the present 4,300. This returned grazing could account for the so far quiet reception of the plans. However, interested parties have now begun to look carefully at the detailed proposals for 64 parks, of which about fifty require the consent of the Verderers and/or the planning authority. In most cases it is just a question of tinkering with the boundaries, but more radical proposals such as greatly increased numbers of parking spaces in Kinightwood are beginning to cause concern.

The most comprehensive objection, addressed to the planning authority and copied to the Verderers, comes from the Hampshire Wildlife Trust. The Trust believes that an environmental impact assessment under the European conservation directives is required for the works. Such an assessment has not been prepared and this looks like the beginning of a battle which is likely to break new ground so far as plans to carry out development in the Forest are concerned.

Mobile phone masts

It seems likely that the New Forest is about to experience a new assault from the mobile phone companies who are anxious to secure mast sites in the Open Forest and Inclosures. A recent meeting with representatives of one of the large groups gave some interesting insights into their ambitions. In the week which saw the launch of the government's campaign against the use of these phones in moving vehicles, it appears that the through routes - especially the A 31, A 35 and the railway are primary targets for aerial development. What is particularly worrying is that for various technical (and I suspect competitive) reasons, the different companies are often reluctant to share masts. If one company forces a concession, there are three or four more on its tail demanding the same

thing. The Forest could quickly degenerate into the sort of mess now apparent across Dorset.

The company's representatives at the meeting had evidently given the matter a lot of thought - aerials on buildings, plastic trees, screening and so on, were all discussed. They seemed perplexed that while their special planning team had been able to secure the concessions they require in certain national parks, the New Forest was proving resistant. The idea that the beauty of the Forest should come before social, recreational and business demands seemed genuinely alien to them. However, that has for a long time (and much to their credit), been the policy of the Forestry Commission with the support of the Verderers. No new masts are allowed on New Forest land. It will be interesting to see if the government's trumpeting about how much it values the Forest is translated into firm backing for the Commission in what looks like an inevitable conflict. As one senior Forestry Commission officer put it, at an illegal 80mph, a motorist crosses the Forest on the A 31 in about seven minutes. To be deprived of his favourite toy for that length of time is scarcely a very great sacrifice.

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