

## **NEW FOREST NOTES FEBRUARY 2008**

### **Replacing the Official Verderer**

Members of Parliament have an advantage over the rest of us when it comes to implying questionable motives to the actions of those in authority – they enjoy parliamentary privilege. Mr.Swayne and Dr.Lewis may not yet have needed to use this privilege in the matter of the failure (so far) of the authorities to reappoint the incumbent Official Verderer, but their comments to date in Parliament have been quite forthright. Mr.Swayne fears that there has been “skulduggery” and Dr.Lewis suggests that the failure is not unconnected with the existence of the national park authority. The Forest community is, almost to a man and woman, in agreement with both assertions and it is interesting to see how we have arrived at this sorry state of affairs.

The chairman of the Verderers’ Court is called the “Official Verderer” and his appointment is nominally by the Queen, but in fact controlled by the government of the day. It is an unpaid but important and onerous post involving a conscientious holder in a great deal of hard and time-consuming work. I am inclined to think that the estimate of seven days work per month contained in the advertisements is much on the conservative side. The post has traditionally and with few exceptions, been held by members of old Hampshire landowning families, appointed as much for the respect their names command as for any promise of competence. The result, in post war years, has been very mixed. I have served under six Official Verderers, some of whom have possessed excellent qualities, but not all have been very successful in doing the job. Eventually they have moved on to other things amid polite expressions of regret from the Forest and silent hopes for better luck with the next one.

When Oliver Crosthwaite Eyre was appointed, just as the national park was about to be imposed on us, there were real hopes that here was someone able and willing to stand up for the Forest. There were still quite a lot of people around who remembered how his grandfather, Sir Oliver Crosthwaite Eyre, had tackled the Forest’s problems in the 1960s – even as an “ordinary” elected Verderer. Perhaps there were even a few very ancient Commoners who remembered his great great grandfather, the famous Briscoe Eyre, who had served on the Court since its creation in 1877 and who was still a Verderer in his declining years after the First World War. Anyhow, I think it is fair to say that these expectations were not disappointed. History is best written at arms length and will, in years to come, make its judgement on the recent leadership of the Verderers, but I have not seen such genuine sorrow within the Court or such widespread anger in the Forest as has prevailed since just before Christmas. Then the Official Verderer announced that he had offered his services for a further term, but the offer had been refused and the post would be advertised. The advertisement appeared in the middle of January.

How did the extraordinary decision occur not to reappoint the present Official Verderer ? More important, what lies behind it ? Government appointments of this nature are regulated by what are called the “Nolan Rules” and very lengthy and tedious they are if, as I

have done recently, you sit down and read them. What they boil down to in this case is that the present Official Verderer could properly have served a further three or four years. The fact that he has not been reappointed evidently suggested skulduggery to Mr.Swayne in the House of Commons.

The Forest believes (and the Forest is often very accurate in divining such things) that the Official Verderer has simply been too good at his job – too resolute in protecting the Forest, too good at supporting the Commoners and too effective in raising the profile of the Verderers' Court. It would, of course, be entirely wrong to suggest that such achievements are the sole responsibility of the chairman. The Verderers as a whole decide what is to be done, but without a knowledgeable and enthusiastic chairman to push them forward, even the best policies go nowhere. Similarly, the Official Verderer has not single-handedly negotiated the subsidies which have saved New Forest farming. Many other individuals – Richard Manley and Emma Rigglesworth to name only two – have played important parts, but it is the chairman of the Court who is the public face of such success.

Dr.Lewis will have to speak for himself as to the reasons why he suspects that the failure to reappoint is not unconnected with the existence of the national park authority, but I have yet to meet anyone who thinks his suspicion very wide of the mark. The Verderers have recently given a clear and widely published statement of their intention to protect the Forest against damage and particularly recreational damage. These are matters of great interest to both the Forestry Commission and the national park. It is significant that these two bodies, or at least important individuals within them, are well placed to influence New Forest appointments in the gift of the government. In short, a less knowledgeable, efficient and determined leader of the Verderers might be regarded in some circles as very desirable, even if a positively anti-Forest candidate would be unlikely to make much headway against the remainder of the Court.

A very curious fact about the appointment of an Official Verderer is that the Court itself has absolutely no say in the matter. There are not even informal soundings of senior members of the Court and the first thing the Verderers know is a press release that Mr.X (or Mrs Y) has been appointed. I have not the slightest doubt that all my colleagues will welcome and endeavour to work well with the man or woman chosen, but if it is anyone other than the present Official Verderer, I don't think the Forest will easily forget or forgive those that it believes responsible to trying to sabotage an efficient and successful management.

### **Lottery bid collapse**

Last month I wrote that the Forest's bid for National Lottery funding was in bad trouble and now it has collapsed altogether. The Commoners Defence Association found that it could no longer support the bid because work which would have benefited the commoners could not go forward. The association accordingly withdrew and, at a meeting of the bid committee in January, it was agreed that it was useless to continue. The committee dissolved itself.

That is not entirely the end of the story. The park officer in charge of the process has a little time to run on her contract and is going to search for alternative funding for individual elements of the bid. I must say that on reading the final list, I was rather horrified by some of the so-called “arts” elements. One is described as “Elders Speak – working with three pyramids of three schools in Forest and Elders. Site-specific community plays, school performances. Based on New Forest heritage and environmental responsibility” – the cost a mere £141,750.00. I suppose this is slightly better than pickling a cow in formaldehyde for public display, but not much. No wonder the Commoners got cold feet.

### **Car park developments**

The Forestry Commission has in the pipeline a programme of car park development. It comprises the expansion and/or re-design of parking places in the Wootton, Burley, Wilverley and Dibden Purlieu areas and, despite the horrific amount of paperwork it has generated, envisages a fairly modest boost to parking facilities. The rather poorly substantiated justification for the work is, I understand, that it will attract people away from less robust areas. The scheme is at present with the planning authority and has not yet percolated widely through the Forest. Still, rumours of what is intended have already raised concerns about (for example) the effect on pony-driving at Dibden Inclosure.

I am quite at a loss to understand why the Forestry Commission invests innumerable staff hours working up elaborate planning applications on which the park will presumably consult experts and on which Natural England becomes involved, when it knows that it must ultimately come to the Verderers for a simple “yes” or “no”. A single hour’s discussion with the Court and a few sketches on the back of an envelope could have told them whether or not more detailed work on each project was justified. The problems with the Dibden proposals would have been spotted at once. The survivors of such initial screening would ultimately have to be the subject of a formal presentment, but a huge amount of time and money would be saved.

I can only think that the Commission hopes to build up a momentum which will bulldoze aside any possible opposition from the Forest. If it can show that the national park approved the scheme and so did Natural England, surely the Forest societies, Commoners and the Verderers could not be so unreasonable as to disagree? Perhaps it should know better.

### **The Forest’s coastal archaeology**

In the non-political backrooms of the national park, an interesting project has been devised for an archaeological survey of the Forest’s coast. Its objective is to make a record of features which are threatened by erosion or development. This record can then be used to guide future management. A bulky thirty page prospectus has been prepared and a meeting on the subject was held in Brockenhurst in the last week of January. Its purpose was to consider how the project is to be taken forward and funded. There is, to my mind, rather too much stress on access and interpretation, considering that the survey will be dealing with what is still a relatively quiet area, but that will be a matter for the landowners involved. I am

told that a heavy emphasis on public entertainment and education is necessary in order to attract grant money.

Although described as a New Forest project, almost as much of it is outside the park boundary (let alone the perambulation) as within it. Included is the western shore of Southampton Water and the coast west of Keyhaven. I know little about marine archaeology, but if the dire predictions of sea-level rises are correct, the losses to this low-lying coast will be huge and a timely piece of research of this sort is very welcome.

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