

NEW FOREST NOTES JANUARY 2011

The venison of Christmas past

Christmas 2010 has seen the end of a tradition in the New Forest which goes back, in one form or another, for probably as long as the Forest has existed. The sole acknowledgement by the state (successor to the Crown) of the services provided by the Verderers has been the gift of a haunch of venison at Christmas. In December the Deputy Surveyor (chief officer of the Forestry Commission in the Forest) announced that the 2010 gift would be the last. In national terms I suppose the equivalent would be the Queen deciding to dispense with the giving of Maundy money.

At the risk of appearing ungrateful, I have to admit that venison has never been one of my favourite foods, while my wife will no doubt rejoice that the annual burden of amateur butchery practice has been removed from her. On the other hand, the end of such a tradition seems to me a sad and niggardly economy. From a budget of several million pounds, the Forestry Commission will have saved perhaps £100 per annum – the equivalent of one hour's work for a senior official, or the price of one tree in a plantation. I know we are in a period of austerity and that the Forestry Commission must save money, but the responsibilities attached to managing a great former royal estate should reflect other values than how many pennies may be saved by every minute economy. The value of tradition is one of them.

Perquisites relating to venison seem to go back a very long way because under the Charter of the Forest, 1217, bishops, archbishops, earls and barons were entitled to kill one or two deer "by view and allowance of the forester" when passing through a Forest to attend the king at the latter's command. Whether or not this was done in the New Forest, I do not know, but over the centuries there grew up a custom whereby large numbers of so-called "fee bucks" were provided annually from the royal forests. Some went to local landowners around the forests as supposed compensation to them for refraining from killing deer on their property. Others went to so diverse a collection of people as (in 1847) the Master of the Rolls and the Master of the horse to the Queen Dowager. In those days the Verderers of the New Forest each received not a mere haunch, but a complete buck! The Deputy Surveyor himself was similarly blessed, together with various local dignitaries such as the mayor of Southampton.

The business of providing fee bucks, in response to warrants issued by the Crown, fell to the Lord Warden's Steward, the last of whom was a particularly colourful character named Thomas White who occupied the Queen's House in Lyndhurst as his official residence. His papers seem eventually to have fallen into the hands of a Southampton solicitor. They were brutally cut up and stuck into a couple of albums, mostly obscuring or removing all but the name of the illustrious senders and Mr. White's address. A few letters are intact, chiefly relating to venison warrants. In 1841, for example, one noble lord, in submitting his buck warrant, complained to Mr. White that "the last buck was not fat as directed by the enclosed (warrant) that it should be". No doubt there was a certain amount of abuse in the system, but there was another entertainment provided by the Crown which would thoroughly outrage the attitude of parsimony now pervading the Forestry Commission.

Back in the pre-Deer Removal Act days, it was the custom in September of each year for the Crown to give the Verderers and court officers (including the jury) a dinner which cost on average £30

– 9s - 5d. That, according to one helpful website, is the equivalent of £2500.00 in modern money, making the 2010 cancelled haunch of venison seem very insignificant.

Ancient trees in Knightwood Inclosure

I suppose few visitors escape the New Forest without visiting Rufus Stone, Beaulieu and the Knightwood Oak. The latter is now an unappealing sight with health and safety fencing around it, worn paths and a scatter of supposedly Forest-enhancing sculptures placed on the approaches to the tree. There seems to be a passion for gilding the lily where New Forest landscapes are concerned.

The Knightwood Oak was once called “Queen of the Forest”, but apart from its great size there is little regal about it that remains. Still, Knightwood Inclosure is an interesting place so far as old trees are concerned. It was one of the last great statutory inclosures to be made in the New Forest (in 1867) and by that time the Office of Woods was already under pressure for its vandalism in clearing ancient trees to make new plantations. For that reason, Knightwood escaped the axe to a greater extent than most 19th century inclosures. Much of it was formed on heathland, leaving the old woods intact. Despite the ravages of time and of forestry policy in the 1960s, there are still a number of ancient pollarded beeches remaining. Their distribution marks out on the ground the pattern of former woodland, but we are probably the last generation to see them in any numbers. No more than a handful remain bearing the broad arrow of pre 1851 timber marking for the navy, and one of these is recently felled by storm, so that in months its arrow will be lost to rot.

Another notable tree, which I am told is called the “Bustle Beech”, bears a sinister blue paint mark indicating that it is under consideration for safety felling. That would be a sad loss to Knightwood. The great Peter’s Oak, which grew in the inclosure near to the boundary of Holidays Hill, seems to have been standing in 1933 according to J.C.Moore’s book, but fell victim to wind or chainsaw before my memory. Only the Eagle Oak of all Knightwood’s great trees still resists both commercial forestry and any desire to convert it to a litter-strewn tourist attraction. It hides anonymously within a plantation of Corsican pine.

The Forestry Commission is seeking Higher Level Stewardship money for tree surgery to a number of old pollarded trees throughout the Forest. I am inclined to think that it would be better to allow these trees to fade away naturally, rather than to produce ugly skeletons with sawn-off branches in the hope of conferring a few more years of life. We have seen some such work within Hollands Wood camp. Still, I am assured that over the Forest as a whole the number will be small and thus hardly noticeable – so we shall have to hope for the best.

Salted roads

The severe weather conditions of December have resulted in salt being applied to Forest roads earlier and in larger quantities than is usual. I always think it remarkable that Natural England seems quite content with this wholesale spreading of chemical on the Forest, or perhaps it is just too scared of safety requirements to complain. Whether or not the SSSI enjoys its annual salt bath, the treatment has other dangers – the ponies and cattle love it. Three weeks ago I encountered a neighbour’s mare and foal standing in the middle of the B 3080 at 9.30 am in dense fog, licking the surface of the tarmac. I understand from the head agister that some road accidents, particularly to

cattle, can be attributed without doubt to salt-licking. How to overcome this problem is another matter.

In the early years after the last war, the Verderers or the Commoners Defence Association placed quantities of salt licks on the Forest for the benefit of livestock. In those times there was no threat from salted roads and the provision was purely a nutritional measure. Now it has been suggested that the experiment should be tried again. There are some difficulties with this, quite apart from the cost. The salt and containers would almost certainly be vandalized and, quite possibly, stolen. There is no guarantee that the livestock would oblige by leaving the conveniently salted highways and queuing patiently for access to a salt lick or two. Still, some commoners are already supplying salt outside their holdings and there are indications that this treat does tend to hold cattle nearby.

Diversion of the Lymington River

Some time ago the Verderers approved in principle the filling of portions of the Lymington River and its diversion, north of Brockenhurst, through Queen Meadow and the woodland known as Driver's Nursery. At the December meeting, the Court considered the detail of the project and laid down seven clear conditions on which the work may be carried out. First and most important of these is a requirement that the new stream must be kept clear of debris dams in future. Debris dams are accumulations of fallen timber, usually thrown in by visitors, which block stream courses and allow flooding of the surrounding areas. They have ecological advantages, but are very damaging to access into and through the woodland. Such dams are not a problem at present with the Lymington River in a deep well-defined course. Water simply pours over them and the adjoining woodland remains dry. However, the new course will be a relatively shallow scrape carrying water far more quickly than nature intended because of the extensive upstream drainage network. As a result debris dams will develop quickly and lead to repeated flooding. That is why their clearance is so crucial. To assist in controlling their development, the Verderers have required that the surrounding area is initially cleared of naturally fallen (portable) wood and that all sawn timber is removed within a specified distance of the new stream course. Guarantees of a free flow of water through Queen Meadow and Driver's Nursery have also been required, along with the clearance of side drains leading up to Hursthill and to Wide Lawn. At the latter there will also be clearance of some trees encroaching on the lawn.

As spending under the Higher Level Stewardship Scheme reaches its peak, stream filling and diversion projects are growing in number and there will be few valleys in the Forest which the Forestry Commission will not seek to alter to some extent. The Verderers' requirements for the Lymington River thus set an important standard for those schemes which the Court decides to approve in future.

Anthony Pasmore