

New Forest Notes - July 1999

Publicity for the Verderers

In recent months the Verderers have developed a taste for publicity. A rash of new ideas is aimed at explaining to the public who the Verderers are and what they do. I am not entirely sure that the public wants to have the powers and constitution of the Court rammed down its throat. Most people seem satisfied with the basic knowledge that the Forestry Commission and Verderers "look after the Forest" and don't want to bother themselves with the details. I can sympathise with this attitude: I have a vague idea what the Environment Agency is and does, but I have little desire to explore its inner workings. Those who are already interested in the Forest have no trouble in informing themselves. Nevertheless, a comprehensive if gentle process of ramming has been instituted.

To start with, the Court is to have a new glossy annual report saying what it has done and who its staff are. It will include the accounts. This is in addition to the monthly press reports of the Verderers' doings. The proposed distribution of this report is, at the time of writing, still rather vague, but no doubt anyone interested will be able to obtain a copy from the Clerk's office if they have not already found one unsolicited on the doormat. .

Secondly, for those with an exceptionally high boredom tolerance, the monthly minutes of the Court may now be read at the Verderers' office (by appointment because of the extreme shortage of space). Unannounced visitors are likely to find every available inch occupied by the Clerk and her assistant tackling piles of paper, the Official Verderer dictating letters, an agister or two and even the odd dog completing the hive of industry.

For some years now the Court has been represented at the New Forest show and this month the stand will contain a number of new features including a quiz and new displays. It is hoped that the best New Forest mare under the "Life Project" premium scheme will be at the show so that the trophy can be presented to the owner. There will, of course, be the usual microfilm copy of the Atlas of Common Rights - available for inspection free of charge. The Verderers' stand is to be found tucked away in a leafy corner of the Forestry Commission's enclosure. Cynics might suggest (without a shred of justification in my view) that this is symbolic of the relationship between the Commission and the Court. It is probably the most pleasant spot on the showground on a hot day, but I have always felt a more prominent site, in the "New Forest Corner", would be more effective in making contact with the public. All the Forest societies and some statutory bodies are to be found there. However, I have been told severely that this is not an acceptable option!

Finally, the Verderers are to have their own website - provided, that is, that the necessary finance can be found. This will be rather different from the other publicity measures. It will enable the office to distribute information such as byelaws, premium information, Court

regulations, meeting dates and so on. It may also allow rapid deflection of enquiries which at present flood in to the Verderers and which are more properly the business of the Pony Breeding Society, the New Forest Museum or the Forestry Commission.

"Outrageous behaviour" over Forest Seminar.

Last month I attended the second of the New Forest Committee's seminars on the future management of the Forest. It was rather less tedious and woolly than its predecessor in November of last year. This was largely due to the fact that the attendance list this time included quite a number of people who actually knew something about the New Forest and its administration. There were also some who had volunteered to attend rather than being resentful pressed representatives of groups with no interest in the Forest and who would much rather have been out shopping.

As last time, the seminar was broken up into working groups. In my own group, for example, there were four people who knew the Forest well and two intelligent newcomers who were keen to learn. We spent a not unpleasant day chewing over the rival bids for power over the Forest from "national parkers" and "tailor-made national parkers". After the recent television repeat of "Gulliver's Travels", I kept thinking of "big and little enders" and there were a few other similarities with Swift's satire.

The outcome of the discussions (if it can be called an outcome) was such a diverse collection of conflicting views that anyone could make exactly what they pleased of it. For the New Forest Committee this should have the undoubted advantage that they will, if they choose, have no difficulty in "discovering" an encouraging trend towards support for a tailor-made national park!

The Committee deserves credit for making strenuous efforts to secure the attendance of several practising commoners who, in return, were unkind enough to reiterate their community's steadfast opposition to a park. It was good to see them there and hear their views expressed in no uncertain terms. This was in marked contrast to the New Forest Association which is supposed to be campaigning against statutory powers for the New Forest Committee over the Forest and which (if the attendance list is to be believed) did not send a representative.

This seminar was notable for the absence of many Forest dignitaries who had graced the earlier event. No doubt they had decided that the sacrifice of one complete Saturday was quite enough. However, there was one absence which could not be accounted for in this way and that was of Dr. Julian Lewis who is member of parliament for the area. He the New Forest Committee had banned from attending. That extraordinary event was certainly the most significant aspect of the day.

It appears that Dr.Lewis received an invitation to the seminar several weeks before and at that time already had commitments for part of the day in his constituency and elsewhere. The Committee's representative therefore told him that unless he was prepared to give up the whole day to the seminar, he would not be allowed to attend at all. Dr.Lewis was not best pleased at this response.

I suppose that when you are bidding for powers over the New Forest by means of special legislation (as the New Forest Committed is doing), it is inevitable that you will need to tread on some toes. You may, for example, decide to ignore the views of one of your key constituent bodies (the New Forest Verderers); you may brush aside the opposition of most of the Forest societies and you may even disregard the collective will of the commoners' community whose interests you claim to champion. The New Forest Committee has done all these things in seeking powers over the New Forest. But the one thing you really ought not to do is to antagonise your local member of parliament. It is he who would be your guide and mentor as your bill stumbles through the Westminster labyrinth. It is a brave (or foolish) Committee that is prepared to jeopardise such guidance.

Years ago I had the privilege of watching Sir Oliver Crosthwaite Eyre at work as he piloted another New Forest Bill through parliament. Sir Oliver was not a great performer on the floor of the Commons, but he was a good constituency MP and possessed an excellent knowledge of the workings of parliament. For him, Erskine May's great book on Parliamentary Procedures was virtually a second Bible. Time and again that Bill almost ended on the rocks and only Sir Oliver's skill and cross-party friendships and contacts in both Houses pulled it off again. Without his wholehearted backing, the New Forest Act of 1964 would never have reached the statute book.

One might have supposed that the New Forest Committee would have learned the lesson of all this. It would have cost them nothing to say to Dr.Lewis that they regretted he would not be present for the whole day, but that he was of course welcome to attend any part of the seminar that his other commitments allowed. Other people came and went as they pleased and the smooth running of the day was not disrupted. One lady in my study group left at lunchtime and the roof did not fall in. Instead of this reasonable approach they decided to ban the MP. Dr.Lewis called it "outrageous and arrogant behaviour" and a deliberate attempt to silence him. Even the most generous interpretation of events must be that it was extremely stupid. One way or another it does not matter very much what the reason was. Those of us who believe that the New Forest Committee's proposals are deeply damaging to the New Forest should certainly not complain if the crew of the Committee's ship is busily engaged in drilling holes through the hull below the waterline.

Silence at Holly Hatch.

The house with the most beautiful and remote setting in the New Forest is undoubtedly Holly Hatch Cottage. It lies in Dockens Water Valley midway between the villages of Linwood and Fritham, approached only by gravel roads (closed to public vehicles) leading eventually to those villages. Since it was built in the early 19th Century it has housed forest staff and is now the home of the local keeper. Seventy five years ago, the antiquarian Heywood Sumner wrote that Holly Hatch bore "lonely credit to Crown and keeper alike". In recent years the Crown's share of that credit has been somewhat dissipated. Its catalogue of misdeeds included the construction of a "deer larder" adjoining the cottage, in which the carcasses of culled New Forest deer are stored. That work was almost certainly illegal. It established an appallingly damaging cycle route past the cottage, which resulted in this tranquil corner of the Forest being invaded by huge numbers of bikers. Finally, Holly Hatch Cottage was provided with a very noisy and smelly generator, with no attempt at noise screening, so that the racket from it dominated the valley. The virtual ruin of this pastoral idyll was completed by a scattering of vehicles all round the Cottage and the deer larder which, on occasions, gives it the appearance of a small car park.

That was the sorry state of Holly Hatch eighteen months ago, but the pendulum has now begun a reverse swing. The cycle route has been closed down, freeing (despite some continued trespass) Dockens Water and Old Sloden of the worst intrusion. The deer larder and the informal car park remain, but at the June Verderers' Court, approval was given for an underground electricity supply which will come from Linwood, connect Broomy Lodge and continue on to Holly Hatch. Then, at last, the hateful generator will presumably go. It would be nice to think that the Forestry Commission had the improvement of the Forest environment as a primary objective, but I expect it was just the utilitarian (but laudable) motive of providing for their keeper's convenience. It is at least one piece of development which can receive a universal welcome.