

NEW FOREST NOTES JUNE 2011

Changes at the Verderers' Court

Last month was a rather unsettled one for the Verderers. Firstly there was the long awaited replacement of the Official Verderer (government appointed) followed by the task of learning to work with the new chairman. An appointment had long been anticipated, but an event completely unexpected was the sudden death of elected Verderer Jeff Kitcher early in the month. There have been so many eloquent tributes to Jeff and his work for the Forest that there is really very little that I can add. Indeed the addresses given at his funeral by both Verderer Richard Deakin and Forest keeper Graham Wilson were among the best of their type I have ever heard. The stories they included helped to lighten the mood of what was inevitably a solemn occasion. All I can contribute is to say that Jeff's death leaves a big hole in the Verderers' organization and the empty chair beside me on the 18th May, which he had occupied for more than twenty years, was a painful reminder of the Forest's loss.

The business of the Court has to continue, however much the loss of an individual is felt, and a start has already been made on reorganizing things. First of all a new elected Verderer had to be chosen. Unlike parliament, the Verderers do not hold by elections. When a serving member of the Court dies or resigns his office, the choice of a replacement is made by the remaining four elected Verderers. The recipient of the post then serves for the outstanding balance of the term which the late member had secured. In the present case, that means that the new Verderer will retire in November 2012, with the option of standing for election at that time. Although the choice is entirely in the hands of the elected Verderers, the full court was consulted on 18th May. It would hardly do for the elected members to choose someone who is repugnant to the remainder of the team. Fortunately a choice was made without any difficulty and with the approval of all those present. No announcement of a name will be made until the Court has received formal acceptance from the appointee, but I don't think I will give away any secrets if I say that he or she will be, like Jeff Kitcher, a "southerner" in Forest terms.

The next job was to find a replacement chairman for the staff committee, a post which Jeff Kitcher had occupied with distinction. Richard Deakin will now do this job for the Court after holding the position on a temporary basis during Jeff's illness.

As to the new Official Verderer, he is well known in the south of the Forest, but in my part of the world Dominic May's name was largely unknown. He was, by coincidence, a close neighbour of Jeff Kitcher's. He has large business interests in Lymington and has held positions on the harbour commission there. As usual (it happened to Oliver Crosthwaite Eyre as well), the government left the announcement of his appointment until the last minute, when a sensible handover would have allowed for at least a month of working in tandem with the outgoing chairman. Despite this things seem to be going smoothly and those who attended the Court on 18th May were no doubt greatly relieved by the chairman's statement that he intends to work for the benefit and preservation of commoning and the conservation of the New Forest's unique landscape and character. A woolly commitment from an indecisive

chairman to providing a Forest which will meet everyone's demands for everything would have been the last thing we needed.

Mr. May is a practising commoner of the New Forest and in that, I think, he breaks new ground. I cannot recall any other Official Verderer who actually took up his position while running animals on the Forest. Such an arrangement would have horrified Crown officials of the old school who saw the correct role of the Official Verderer as being an independent buffer between the Crown and the commoners, assuming that is, he could not be persuaded to give active support to the Crown. The Forest of the 21st century has come a long way from the old certainties of 1877 and is in some respects better for it.

The Verderers now have a geographical distribution which greatly favours the south of the Forest. Three of the elected members and three appointed will come from there – six out of the total of ten. Only one (elected) Verderer will come from the centre of the Forest, while in the north there will be two appointed and one elected. Still, this is not so unbalanced a distribution as when the parish of Bramshaw once supplied almost half the membership of the Court.

Grit bins

There is a tendency among some public authorities to assume that because the New Forest belongs to the state, they can do as they please on Forest land, carrying out operations which on other property would constitute a trespass or encroachment. They are quite wrong. Hampshire County Council as highway authority is a serial offender in such matters. The Verderers and the Forestry Commission are constantly pursuing the county for "stealth widening" of the tarmac roads across the Forest – a flagrant encroachment on the common land. So far the pursuit has yielded very little result, but the Commission's present land agent displays a more tenacious attitude than some of his predecessors, so I have not given up hope.

Last winter the county council embarked on a new form of trespass, placing on the common land a large number of plastic grit bins without the consent of the landowner or of the commoners as represented by the Verderers' Court. The purpose of the bins was apparently so that aspiring members of the Big Society could arm themselves with shovels and become volunteer roadmen, gritting dangerous stretches of road in times of need. I did actually see one resident of my village doing this during the snow, although I believe that more found the bin a convenient source of material for use on driveways and back door steps. My cows also found it interesting because of the salt it exuded into the surroundings.

Clearly the objective of this provision was laudable, but to install the bins without consent was quite wrong. Moreover, after the end of the winter the rather unsightly containers remained firmly in place rather than being collected. Some have been adopted as litter bins, while others (I am told) have been removed by public-spirited people who have found themselves in need of a large and good quality bin for cattle or horse feed, but whose primary motive was naturally to abate an encroachment.

The Verderers have become tired of waiting for the county council to deal with this problem and have asked the Forestry Commission to issue an ultimatum. Unless the matter is resolved to the Court's satisfaction at the next meeting, all bins must be removed from the Forest without further delay. The objective is not to prevent volunteer winter gritting, but to ensure the Forest is not cluttered during the remaining three quarters of the year. As it was pointed out at the Court, the Forestry Commission is required to remove its many plastic litter bins from the camp sites in the winter and the county council should do the same in reverse order of seasons.

Two more steps for urban mankind

One of my colleagues on the Verderers' Court, Pat Thorne, brought to the May Court a problem which is symptomatic of the growing urbanisation of the New Forest. She lives at Linwood, one of the more remote and undeveloped of Forest villages where one might reasonably expect that the traditional character of the landscape and the historical countryside "infrastructure" would be maintained, national park notwithstanding. Not a bit of it! It appears that an authority, whether county council or national park I do not know, is seeking to install one or more modern metal kissing gates on a public footpath in the village which is at present equipped with stiles. Wiltshire council tried this on me a few years back, sending me lovely pictures of gleaming galvanized iron cages of which they were immensely proud. I made such a fuss that they backed off. Quite apart from the inappropriateness of these structures in such an environment as Linwood, one might have thought that in a time of financial restraint, something better might have been found on which to spend our money.

Not only do such structures look out of place in a New Forest context, but they are quite unsuitable where small farm animals are present. Lambs, calves and piglets are all at risk of getting trapped in or escaping through the gate. Whatever the landowner's stock may be, the Forest land abounds in piglets in autumn and calves at most times of the year. In addition, another Verderer, Dionis Macnair, told the Court how a roe deer had been trapped and had died in one of these things at Burley.

The story I was given in the proposal for my own land was that stiles are no longer considered user friendly and that kissing gates would allow the rapid passage of the elderly and infirm. I certainly fall into the first and probably second category also, but I don't want to see the Forest moulded and adapted out of its present character to suit my condition. When I can no longer climb over stiles, I shall wander happily across Boltons Bench or Stoney Cross Aerodrome and leave the more adventurous routes to younger people. Stiles have given good service to generations of our agricultural ancestors and their livestock. They should not be allowed to fall victim to national park political correctness. If they get away with kissing gates it will of course be necessary to lay tarmac surfaces to the paths themselves so that mud is kept off the users' shoes.

Another example of urban nonsense I encountered in Lyndhurst last week. Parts of the once picturesque village are now a mess of signs and other clutter, but one place in particular is offensive. Between the New Forest Centre and the High Street is an untidy fence

of sheet panels covered in fly posting. I did not count the number of posters, but there must have been at least sixty or seventy in various stages of decay. All manner of events and products are advertised there, but at least six (perhaps 10% of the total) bear the logo of the New Forest National Park. How can one criticise a small trader for fly posting, when the Forest's own "authority" indulges in the practice in such a blatant manner ?

Anthony Pasmore