

## **NEW FOREST NOTES JUNE 2012**

### **How to run a Verderers' election**

Last month the Official Verderer reminded the public that this is an election year for the Verderers' Court. Two serving verderers reach the end of their term and may offer themselves for re-election at the end of November. Verderers' elections are usually vigorously contested and there is no reason to suppose that the election of 2012 will be any different. That is no doubt good for democracy, ensuring that the Forest community has a choice of candidates, but it does have one very serious disadvantage. Contested elections are extremely expensive for the Court and the cost of them is borne by those who turn out ponies and cattle to graze the Forest. If there is no contest, the only expense is that of updating the electoral register and that is a cost which the Forestry Commission is required to pay. At the last election there were 833 electoral registration forms returned to the Verderers' office, although many more were sent out and not returned. The cost of updating the register was a very modest £453. However, the cost of the actual contested election was £12,600 or in other words, every elector on the roll cost the Verderers over £15. I forget what was the actual turn-out at the election (it is usually much better than local government elections), but it was probably something over 50%. That means that each voter who actually turned up at the polling stations probably cost the equivalent of one and a half marking fees (payments made per head of stock turned out to graze).

Old habits of economy are difficult to change and despite the liberal flow of Higher Level Stewardship money into the Forest community, the Verderers have been examining ways in which the cost of elections might be reduced. The entire expenditure on a contested election comprises charges made by the Under Sheriff's office (the High Sheriff of Hampshire is the returning officer). There seem to be several methods by which this might be reduced, although whether their introduction is desirable is another matter. The ideal would be to put the conduct of the election into the hands of a less expensive specialist company – Electoral Reform Services - which is an offshoot of the Electoral Reform Society and which was formed in 1988. That might require amendment of the Verderers' Electoral Regulations, a cumbersome but not impossible route to follow. As an alternative (or in addition), the number of polling stations might be reduced. At present commoners go to Lyndhurst, Lymington, Ringwood or Fordingbridge to vote. There is next the much more contentious idea of scrapping polling stations altogether or in part and at the same time adopting a postal vote, either wholly or on request. The Court has been advised that the government would expect the objective of increased turn-out to be equally important to cost saving in any changes.

Whatever happens, if anything, it will not affect the 2012 elections because the wheels of DEFRA turn extremely slowly. If amendment of the regulations is necessary, the Court is told that it will have a low priority. In the longer term a decision will have to be made as to the way forward, but at the moment I detect a reluctance to interfere too much with tradition. New Forest commoners dislike paperwork in any form. Theoretically a postal vote might seem straightforward and easier than a trip to the polling station. In fact I can see voting papers becoming buried in piles of ministry forms and being consigned to the traditional filing cabinet behind the clock on the mantelpiece, until the election is long

past. That is what happens to a good many electoral registration forms, despite return postage being paid.

There is one item of expenditure which I think unlikely to be changed and which will not unduly worry the commoners. By tradition the Official Verderer entertains the High Sheriff to dinner in Lyndhurst on election night at his own expense.

Verderers' elections, however conducted, are very much an internal matter for the Forest community and the methods to be adopted are for that community to decide. Before I am told that this is anti-democratic, I should emphasize that the elected Verderers are in a theoretical minority on the Court, with representatives of public bodies such as Natural England and the planning authority having the whip hand.

### **Verderers' office on the move**

For the fifth time in my memory, the office of the Clerk to the Verderers' is on the move. When I joined the Court, the clerk was a solicitor, Mr. John Scott, whose assistant, Mr. Selby, undertook most of the day-to-day work. The operation was run out of an office in Lymington. Thereafter the Court worked at various times from a redundant school in Emery Down and a surplus room in the Queen's House. In those years the business was undertaken by Mrs. Shirley Blick. Then, as the work expanded, the clerk's position became full-time and the number of office staff eventually reached its present level of three, the Verderers moved to part of the old falconry (otherwise Gardener's Cottage) across the yard from the Queen's House. Now the three rooms are bursting at the seams. Piles of paper cover every available surface and at busy times it can be near enough impossible to get in the door because of the clutter of muddy-booted verderers, agisters, dogs and computers.

Fortunately the reorganization of the Forestry Commission has provided an opportunity to overcome these difficulties. A couple of years ago the national park relinquished its last toe-hold in the Forest's administrative centre and then its former offices in the other half of the falconry lay empty. Now the Forestry Commission is repairing them and the Verderers will move in later this month or early in July. The old offices will accommodate Commission staff. The new premises will be at least a little more spacious and a good deal more convenient.

For those who enjoy symbolism, the Clerk's office window will look out on Lyndhurst church and the Grazing Scheme manager's will look across the yard to the Queen's House. The Verderers will thus be sandwiched between God and Mammon. With the current dominance of HLS money in Forest affairs, I fear the Court's leaning will remain very much towards the latter.

### **The Roman New Forest**

Anyone who understands our local history will know that there can be no such thing as a "Roman New Forest". Our forest law dates from six hundred years or so after the departure of the Romans, the traditional date for the Forest's foundation being 1079. But the area now occupied by the New Forest was not a blank canvas prior to the Norman invasion. Bronze Age and Iron Age earthworks are widespread. Roman occupation of the Forest, on the other hand, seems to have been relatively sparse. The rich coastal fringe was used and pottery was manufactured around Fordingbridge. Several Roman roads crossed the Forest, but known settlements are very few in number. There are several in the Cadnam area, and a few more at Burley. There is at least one near Brockenhurst, but the

absence, until now, of any significant finds near the present-day capital of Lyndhurst has been notable. There is one vague reference to a 19<sup>th</sup> century find of Roman coins at Lyndhurst and a few pieces of Roman material were found on a largely Iron Age and Saxon site near Minstead in 2007. This paucity of evidence makes last month's discovery of a Roman settlement west of Lyndhurst particularly interesting.

The limited evidence so far available does not indicate a spectacular "Time Team" type of occupation, but probably just a cluster of huts on a south-facing hillside. The pottery found is a coarse grey "kitchen" ware of almost any date between the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries. Still, this does focus attention on a previously blank area of the Forest and other discoveries may follow.

There was one rather curious twist to this discovery. About one hundred and fifty years ago, the antiquarian and writer about the New Forest, John Wise, described how he used the presence of stinging nettles to locate archaeological sites in the New Forest. I don't know what chemical nutrient the nettles seek, but presumably something related to sewage. Anyhow, this guide has since become almost worthless as the Forest has become more and more contaminated throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Every septic tank overflow in the Forest discharges ultimately to Forest streams. Army huts, sawmills, camp sites, airfields and rubbish dumps have all added to the mess, so that nettles are now to be found almost everywhere. Only very occasionally and in the remotest and least soiled parts can nettles still reliably indicate ancient occupation. The Lyndhurst site is one of these. Although pottery was located first, nettles were then found growing about the site – a plant growth which has continued undisturbed on this spot for nearly two thousand years.

#### **Ponies who leave litter**

New Forest livestock is traditionally the victim of litter which the visitors throw about. Jagged cans are found jammed over the feet of foals, broken glass lacerates the hoofs of ponies and cattle choke on plastic. Every year the Forest becomes more and more filthy as no attempt is made to clear up anything but the immediate vicinity of car parks. Nowhere is exempt. Last week I encountered heaps of rubbish strewn through Rhinefield Sandys Inclosure, immediately behind the Rhinefield hotel. Now even the ponies themselves have, unwittingly, begun to contribute to the problem.

If you walk for a couple of hours almost anywhere on the Open Forest before the April growth of bracken (and assuming you are reasonably observant), you will come across at least one abandoned reflective collar. These collars are put round ponies' necks to reflect the headlights of cars in the hope of preventing road accidents. From the litter point of view the problem is that they are deliberately designed to break or to be pulled off in the event of an emergency such as the collar being caught on a branch or fence. The unfortunate pony is entirely blameless.

Reflective collars are not cheap. They cost about £7 apiece because they have to be carefully sewn and they incorporate a large piece of elastic. That is half as much as many foals are worth and only grant money makes their use possible. Many are useless after lying subjected to the weather, but as numbers of collars increase, salvageable examples are becoming more common. Last week I put one through the washing machine and the result was a good as new. It is now back in the Verderers' office. Perhaps this a new and particularly worthwhile form of recycling.

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