

NEW FOREST NOTES JUNE 2013

Last New Forest Notes

This month's Notes will be the last – at least from me. Other responsibilities make it necessary for me to give up my seat on the Verderers' Court after forty years. Because "New Forest Notes" has been designed in part to explain what the Verderers do and how the Forest is managed, the Notes also must come to an end. It is a sad time for me on both counts.

Many years ago my late father, H.C.Pasmore, wrote a regular column for the local papers entitled "A New Forest Commoner's Notebook". I don't know exactly when the Notebook started and finished, but it appeared for eighteen years and was much missed when my father eventually had to give up, some time in the 1980s. The Notebook was full of stories about animals and birds and about my parents' experience of the Forest. It was not designed to explain the management of the Forest, but actually achieved quite a lot towards that end. When the Notebook ceased it left quite a gap in the flow of information on the Forest and that was recognized by the New Forest Association of which I was then (and for twenty five years in total) a council member. Desultory discussions took place over quite a long time to see if some regular column explaining the Forest, especially to newcomers, could be organized. There were, not unexpectedly, no volunteers. The late Mr. David Stagg was particularly keen to see some sort of replacement for the Notebook and in the spring of 1990 I agreed to have a go at writing something each month under the auspices of the Association.

The first "New Forest Notes" appeared in May 1990, dealing with the annoyance to farmers being caused by a large herd of sheep on the Forest at Godshill, the adjacent commons and a new scheme to provide housing for commoners. The idea was that the Notes, unlike their predecessor, should specifically try to explain the sometimes complex, but always fascinating, way in which the New Forest works.

To start with things seemed to go well. The Notes were distributed each month to all the local newspapers from Salisbury to the coast and from Southampton to Bournemouth. Then there arose a problem. Something that I wrote (I forget what) was deemed by the nervous birds of the NFA council to be "controversial". That would clearly not do at all. The Association must at all costs avoid controversy, but the solution was fortunately obvious to the council. It would establish a sub-committee of two or three to which the Notes would be submitted each month for consideration and amendment as necessary. I think they were a little surprised and hurt that I did not see this as an ideal method of proceeding! Anyhow, my refusal to submit to censorship resulted in the Notes becoming entirely my own responsibility, divorced from the NFA and any other outside influence. So they have remained for twenty three years, two hundred and seventy six editions and a total of nearly 500,000 words.

After a few months I found that the papers were chopping up the Notes unmercifully. Crucial elements of necessarily complicated explanations were being eliminated so that the resulting abridged version was often complete nonsense. Nobody can describe the constitution of the Verderers' Court or the origins and purpose of pony drifts in a headline and a couple of sentences. The one honourable exception to this mangling process was the New

Milton Advertiser and Lymington Times which has never, in those twenty three years, cut out anything - at least that I have spotted.

Since New Forest Notes depended upon appearance intact if they were not to be meaningless, I simply stopped sending copies to papers other than the Lymington Times. After a few months, the paper introduced the stag's head logo and things settled down into a regular pattern. Once, many years ago, the paper asked me to re-word one paragraph because I had, quite inadvertently, implied that a particular forest officer was "devious". Actually he almost certainly was devious, but it had not been my intention to say so ! That, and one other similar instance, to the best of my memory, were the only times that any amendment was made. Still, behind the scenes there has been a long-running, but always unspoken, battle between me and the paper over the vexed subject of capital letters. I have always maintained that the Court of Verderers of the New Forest, as a unique body corporate established by statute, was entitled to capital letters – even when shortened to the "Verderers" or the "Court". The paper thinks otherwise and always removed the capitals and even downgraded the Forestry Commission to "commission" !

From about 1992 until the July of 2001, in the years before most of us had heard of the internet, the Notes also appeared (after publication in the paper) on the website of Southampton University's Geodata Institute. Unfortunately it became increasingly difficult to ensure regular updating, so that in July 2002 they were transferred to Graham Cooper's excellent New Forest site http://www.newforest.hampshire.org.uk/forest_notes/notes.html where they have appeared ever since.

One of the delights of writing the Notes has been the letters and emails of support and information I have received – often from people I have never met. Fascinating details of Forest history have been gleaned in this way such as the name and workings of a hydraulic ram ("Billy Bump") on the Lymington River above Brockenhurst, the activities of the Home Guard's secret auxiliary units at Burley, Napoleonic ploughing near Woolfield Hill and the supply of several unrecorded placenames. Of course those who did not like the Notes, including many who saw the New Forest simply as a resource to be exploited, received full opportunity to express their views through the correspondence columns of the paper. It was rather different with public authorities. I think that with the sole exceptions of the lately retired Official Verderer, Oliver Crosthwaite Eyre and his successor Dominic May, other holders of that office at various times tried to suppress, censor or tie up the Notes in disclaimers of one sort or another – all (fortunately in my view) without success. Other authorities like the Park, County Council and Forestry Commission very wisely ignored any little criticisms I may have had of their activities.

Perhaps best of all have been the occasional complete strangers who have come up to me saying "I don't always manage to buy the Lymington Times, but I always make sure I have it on the first Saturday of the month for your Notes." That has made the hard work very worthwhile.

The Verderers' Court

That leaves me, by convention at least (because I normally wrote 1800 words), with seven hundred words, and they cannot be better used than in tribute to the Verderers. The Court is a unique body and without it the Forest as we know it would long since have ceased to exist. Its remnants would have become a sort of tawdry theme park devoted to all forms of extreme countryside recreation and without tranquillity or that essential characteristic which Colin Tubbs described as "wilderness quality".

The Court's powers are clear-cut and remarkable. They can block most forms of development and damaging use of the Forest. They are not subject to endless consultation processes, wordy plans or complicated appeals. The Verderers simply go ahead and do what is best for the Forest, in accordance with four simple pages of "policies" and the New Forest Acts. The electorate, for half the membership of the Court, is nominally commoners, but is in fact all those who live locally, occupy a little bit of land and have most to lose if the Forest is damaged.

The Verderers themselves have an immense collective fund of knowledge and it is a great strength of the institution that any deficiencies in the knowledge of one Verderer are made good through another member of the Court. I, for example, have never been able to understand the technicalities of blood lines in New Forest ponies, but that does not matter because other Verderers understand the subject perfectly. I may know something of the history and law relating to a particular land holding, with which those same Verderers may be unfamiliar. It is a good system.

If there is one weakness in the Verderers' Court, it is that the constitution does not provide for anyone who is qualified to serve by an understanding and appreciation of natural beauty and all the intangible qualities of the Forest which really make it such an exceptional place. Such understanding may or may not be present amongst other Verderers, but it is very much a matter of chance. I accept that someone so qualified might be difficult to find. It is easy to find spokesmen for ecology, forestry, farming and so on, but a deeper understanding of the Forest and a willingness to fight for it is much rarer.

Forty years service on the Court is a good enough innings for anyone and I must frankly admit that over the last few years I have found the domination of Forest administration by money and the pursuit of subsidies by some sections of the local community, increasingly distasteful. When I was young, the commoners' community was a very different place from today. Nobody made much money out of ponies and cattle and what was done was done for the love of it and not just for money. Some successful days colt hunting and a few good foals were regarded as sufficient rewards in themselves. Then commoners fought for the same things that their ancestors had fought for – good drainage of the Open Forest not least amongst them. They may not always have been right, but the fight was a matter of principle and they believed in it. Traditional knowledge of the Forest was handed down as a sort of valued inheritance. Of course these values have not entirely disappeared, but we are in a harder and more commercial Forest these days, where money talks very loud. Still, so long

as we have the Court, and its members can see beyond the next subsidy cheque, I believe the Forest will be in good hands.

Anthony Pasmore