

## **NEW FOREST NOTES MARCH 2006**

### **Verderers' Election 2006**

In the autumn of this year there will be the usual triennial Verderers' election, although this year things are likely to be rather different from on previous occasions. As the Official Verderer announced in the February Court, preparations are starting early, with electoral registration forms being available from this month and with a member of the Verderers' staff, Colin Draper, given the task of overseeing the run-up to the election. The Verderers have always believed that as many commoners as possible should be included on the electoral register and this year there is a real chance of securing record numbers. As it is an election in which I am not personally involved, it may be worth recording just how onerous the job of elected Verderer has become and how much effort and knowledge will be required of the successful candidates in November. National park members may come to their work knowing nothing of the Forest but representing all sorts of outside interests. They subsequently receive "training" in how to run the place. Verderers are chosen by the electorate because of their expertise and unequivocal commitment to the New Forest alone.

There are five elected Verderers on the Court, each serving for a period of six years. Two are chosen at one election and three at the next. The qualification for a candidate is the occupation (not necessarily ownership) of one acre of land to which rights of pasture over the New Forest are attached. For electors, the qualification is similar – the occupation of one acre with any right of common over the Forest. Nobody has any idea how many potential voters there are, but I imagine it probably runs into many thousands. There are supposed to be sixty five thousand acres with rights over the Crown Forest and additional land with rights over the Adjacent Commons.

When I first joined the Court in the 1970s, the Verderers had a relatively simple task, much of it centred on livestock management. Little was demanded of individual members. The Court had only just relinquished its long run of legally-qualified clerks and in those days the clerk was looked on as a sort of god who took a lot of the decisions. The great explosion of recreation and public demands upon the Forest was only just commencing, standards of animal welfare were low, the Forestry Commission was preoccupied with timber production, the prospect of a national park was almost unheard-of and there was altogether little outside interference with the running of the Forest. Then everything began to change rapidly. More main roads were fenced, the "Conservation Report" was implemented resulting in the building of many car parks and camp sites, public authorities demanded more and more land for development and the idea was born that the New Forest is a "national playground". Verderers who, ten years before, needed to know little beyond how to manage ponies and cattle and who simply turned up on Court days once a month, now found themselves having to understand complex legislation, both national and local. They had to spend many days every month in the Forest and to judge questions from other points of view than how much grass a proposal would create or destroy. In those days too, the Verderers' staff comprised

only a part-time clerk, three agisters and a steward. Today there is a full-time clerk, an assistant clerk, a stewardship manager and a team of five agisters.

As the years went by, the work expected of an elected Verderer became even greater. An understanding of animal husbandry remains essential for any elected member of the Court, but today I estimate that only a third of the Verderers' business is directly animal-related. In the January Court of 2006, for example, sixty one separate items were dealt with. Of these, eighteen concerned commoners' stock, but forty three dealt with other matters – mostly of an estate management nature and a good many involving extremely complex legal questions. There was a time when Verderers could get by with a knowledge of the New Forest Acts alone: now there is a considerable body of EU regulations to contend with, to say nothing of the new burden of national park law.

It has always been the case that the Verderers' Court relies heavily upon different members possessing different skills and different areas of expertise. That has been a great strength of the Court, but there is one qualification which I believe is essential in every elected Verderer and that is a thorough knowledge of all parts of the Forest on the ground. Obviously a Verderer from Blackfield may not know Hyde Common quite as well as a colleague from that area, but all must have a working knowledge of every part of what is an admittedly vast territory. Another essential is the availability of time. Formal meetings may occupy no more than four or five days a month, but there is always that alleged encroachment, mischievous pony, damaged fence or dump of garden refuse to be checked on. Altogether, November's successful candidates must be ready for a fascinating if tough term of office, but perhaps only the retiring members will have any idea of exactly how tough.

Elected Verderers make up only half the membership of the Court and it would be wrong not to acknowledge the contribution made by their appointed colleagues – sent to us by DEFRA, the Forestry Commission, the Crown, the Countryside Agency, and the planning authority. Some serve for years, while others disappear overnight. When the Court is fortunate, the appointed Verderers can be hardworking and knowledgeable – sometimes even outstanding. At other times they can be altogether less satisfactory, but I suppose that applies to almost any branch of public administration.

### **The Forest in the Seventeenth Century**

This month sees the launch of an ambitious publishing project which will make widely available in printed form a range of New Forest documents housed in the Public Record Office, covering a period from the Sixteenth to Eighteenth Centuries. The first volume in the series, edited by Richard Reeves who is deputy librarian at the New Forest Museum, has the somewhat abstruse title "Use and Abuse of a Forest Resource, New Forest Documents 1632 – 1700". It has to be said that this is a scholarly work intended for specialists and not for the casual reader of New Forest books, but it does give a remarkable picture of how the Forest was managed (or more usually mis-managed) just at the time when our most venerable oaks and beeches were still saplings. For me, such documents are brought to life by the little personal details they contain. In my own village for example, evidence was given to an

enquiry of 1677 by Nicholas Lawse. He tells of the abuse of Godshill Wood by a number of criminals and how the crooked keeper of Ashley Walk, John Saunders, waylaid the Regarder (forest officer), “carried him in and kept him drinking while the carts (of thieves) were loaded and gone”. Today, three hundred and thirty years later, a presumed descendent of Nicholas Lawse still lives in a tiny cottage within reach of a falling branch in Godshill Wood, but on the best of terms with his neighbour, the present Forest keeper.

I sometimes think that the New Forest of today has more than its share of rogues, but on the evidence of this book it is clear that our modern villains are rather poor amateurs compared with their ancestors. The quantities of timber recorded as stolen or destroyed are quite remarkable.

The publication project is being part financed by the EU’s “Leader Plus” scheme. This is a source of money which has been tapped in the New Forest for everything from this important research to the building of pony pounds. I have yet to meet anyone who has experience of Leader Plus who has not complained bitterly about the amount of red-tape involved with these grants, yet the Forest has benefited greatly from its generosity. The relevant staff of the New Forest District Council and the former New Forest Committee have done an excellent job guiding lost applicants through the jungle of forms.

Richard Reeves’s new book is available from the New Forest Museum in Lyndhurst at a price of £15.

### **Foxbury**

Members of the National Trust will have seen from the current local newsletter that the Trust has purchased Foxbury Plantation and the adjoining woods on the north east fringe of the Forest. This area of once beautiful deciduous woodland, heath and 18<sup>th</sup> Century landscape gardening based on Paultons Park is now a depressing jungle of conifer, rhododendron and the extraordinarily widespread rubbish left about by a commercial shoot. It presents a huge challenge to any management and it remains to be seen how the Trust responds. The problems of restoration are so great that a considerable fortune could be used up in clearing rhododendron alone. I understand that the restoration will include grazing of the former heathland, but that the land will be kept separate from the adjoining Forest. The newsletter says that the public will be allowed access in due course.

### **Continuing saga of the Forest campsite plans**

The months slip by and so far as the outside world is concerned, no progress seems to be made on resolving the dispute over works proposed at Hollands Wood and Roundhill. In fact things have been moving, if slowly, behind the scenes. The Verderers and the Forestry Commission are engaged in a process called “appropriate assessment” under which the two bodies sit in judgement (on proposals made by one of them) on certain very restricted and technical conservation questions. English Nature advises them on what “mitigation” is required by the Forestry Commission to make its proposals acceptable and the Commission then tries to meet those requirements. If and when all the requirements have been met to the satisfaction of the judges, that is not an end of the matter or even of specifically conservation

issues. There is simply a move to another stage. It is a convoluted and, to my mind, a ridiculous process. However, at a fairly late stage the Verderers and Forestry Commission have just received a comprehensive technical criticism of the Commission's latest mitigation proposals, in a report from Hampshire Wildlife Trust in conjunction with the New Forest Association. This report has been widely distributed to conservation bodies and calls into question much of the proffered justification for the proposed development. The report authors conclude that the assessments "contain deficiencies in both the interpretation and application of the Habitats Regulations and an inadequate assessment of the likely impacts arising from recreational pressures . . ." This report might, on the face of things, throw even the first stage judgement back into the melting pot and will require the most careful consideration by both the Commission and the Verderers. Even the end of the beginning is not yet in sight.

Anthony Pasmore