

## New Forest Notes – March 1992

### ILLINGWORTH AND BEYOND

During the last few weeks, the Forest has had its collective nose buried deeply in the Illingworth report, with committees and sub-committees studying it far into the night. The Illingworth committee was an expert body set up by the Ministry of Agriculture to advise on the future of New Forest Farming and on the financing of the Verderers Court. Its report was made public at the end of January. It is perhaps a measure of the authors success, that in so suspicious a place as the New Forest, a large part of their recommendations has received cautious approval.

Some few suggestions have been generally regarded as impractical, but the main thrust of the report emphasising the importance of common rights and the work of the Verderers Court has been welcomed in Forest circles. If one criticism has to be made however, is that the recommendations are not specific as to the source of public funding for the Verderers which Mr. Illingworth and his team regard as crucial. Since publication the Verderers have had a meeting with the Illingworth Committee in which the latter's intentions have been clarified. They see funding coming direct from the Forestry Commission to the Court and for the Verderers also this is the preferred route.

Over the years, the relationship between the Verderers and the Forestry Commission has not always been easy and the Commission has a reputation for tight fistedness, especially in relation to the present small grant which it makes to the Court. On the other hand, there is a strong determination in the Forest that the financing of the Verderers should be, as far as possible, free of pressures which might be applied to weaken the Courts protective role. With the Commissions former aggressive commercial timber production objectives now much modified and with most of its recreational objectives achieved, it is seen as the most impartial source of finance likely to be forthcoming. Illingworth rightly points out that no grant source is ever entirely free from strings and pressures.

An alternative source of money which has been suggested to the Verderers is the embryo national park authority (the New Forest Committee) which derives its funds chiefly from an amalgam of local authority and national recreational bodies. It is seen in the Forest as holding a veritable cobweb of strings which could be pulled to the detriment of both the Court and the Commoners. I suspect that the emphatic rejection of this source has been aided by the extraordinary snub to the Verderers which arose out of the recent announcement of the proposed national park. Whatever the merits or otherwise of this new administration, it is remarkable that the Verderers received no prior consultation about the government announcement and, indeed, most members of the Court first learned of the proposals from the television or Sunday newspapers. Of course it can be argued that the Court is represented on the New Forest Committee and therefore Knew of the lobbying for park status and powers, but that does not alter the fact that for the first time in post war years the government has embarked on a major alteration of the Forests management without any prior approach to the

Verderers. As a colleague ruefully remarked last week, at this rate the Verderers are likely to end up as an animal welfare sub-committee of the national park.

The next move must presumably come from the Minister of Agriculture in the form of a response to Illingworth and so far as the Verderers are concerned, it cannot come too soon. Their accounts for 1991, published this week, show a deficit of nearly nine thousand pounds, rapidly increasing costs and falling reserves.

### **Vietnamese Privilege**

The labyrinthine byways of the Forests administration contain a charmingly named custom known as the Breeding Sows Privilege. Its origins are obscure, but its effect is to allow Commoners to turn out on the Forest their breeding sows beyond the formal autumn pannage season, within which the right of common of mast is exercised. It is not a right of common, but a privilege granted to Commoners by the Crown and is entirely a matter between these two parties. Because it is a privilege and not a right, it can be withdrawn at any time if abused and, in addition, the Forestry Commission attaches to it certain conditions. These are announced each September when the dates of the pannage season are published. Sows taking advantage of the privilege must be in pig and must be inspected, ringed, marked and paid for during the pannage season. They must return to their owners holding each night. No doubt the system evolved to help cottagers who kept one or two pigs only and found it difficult to keep them in the garden. Over the years it has worked reasonably well and given little trouble. Now, however, the residents of Godshill, after several years under siege from sheep, find themselves facing a new menace. Vietnamese pot bellied pigs are causing havoc, apparently under cover of the Breeding Sows Privilege and complaints are beginning to filter through to the Verderers. Since the privilege is strictly a Commission matter, they might be said to have brought their pigs to the wrong market. However, it is hoped that this new upset will not prejudice responsible pig keepers who cause no problem and for whom the Privilege is a valuable concession.

The response of the equine community to these small black squashed faces horrors can be imagined by anyone who rides and who knows the effect of a standard British pink pig emerging from a bush. I have seen one brave riding horse cowering at the top of a steep bank while two of these tiny privileged ladies snuffled along the road beneath.

### **Set Thorns Camp**

Back in the early 1970s when recreational use of the Forest was undergoing great changes, the Forestry Commission established a campsite in Set Thorns Inclosure near Sway. It was, like all the new campsites and car parks, built with the consent of the Verderers, even though it lies within a timber plantation or "Inclosure" as they are called in the Forest. At the time, the Commoners welcomed Set Thorn camp as one of the very few visitor facilities which did not occupy part of their grazing land. However, over the years Set Thorns has become something of a running sore as it has been repeatedly improved and now provides year round camping while many people believe the

Forest should have a complete rest during the winter months. Assurances that it would not be enlarged have been broken and a promised prohibition on long stay permits has been ignored.

Towards the end of 1991 the Commission applied for planning permission to carry out further development of the site, this time without reference to the Verderers. The Court objected, and legal authorities on both sides of the argument are now trying to resolve what is certainly a very obscure point.

Until 1968 the Commission could effectively use its Inclosures only for growing trees. They were then permitted to make campsites and similar facilities throughout the Forest without reference to the Verderers. This loophole in the Forests protection was plugged in 1970 when the Courts control was restored, although how far that control applied to the Inclosures is the point now at issue. Since the Inclosures are only temporarily freed from common rights, it seems that the Courts jurisdiction may well continue to apply, but whatever the legal position, it would be sad if the Commission tries to circumvent the protection which is afforded to the remainder of the Forest.

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