

New Forest Notes – March 1999

Will the Verderers now support the National Park?

The appointment of Maldwin Drummond as Official Verderer (chairman of the Verderers' Court) raises the interesting possibility that the Verderers might, like turkeys voting for Christmas, change course and support the tailor-made national park which the New Forest Committee has been demanding. At the moment it is no more than a possibility. The Verderers' new chairman has given no clue as to what he intends to do, beyond stating that he intends to promote the Court's interests. Despite the voting arithmetic which would allow him to force a change of course, I am far from convinced that he will in fact seek to disrupt the unified front which the Forest has presented to the park threat. On the other hand, if he were to do so, his actions would be welcomed in every council chamber around the Forest. At last the influence over the Forest of those reactionary Verderers and unelected Forestry Commission officers would be broken. We would have a chance to see what "real democracy" would allow the local councils to do with the Forest. There would be no more nonsense about stopping the building of bypass roads.

The present policy of the Verderers is a compromise because the Court is split down the middle. This compromise was, if I remember correctly, supported by all Verderers because it represented the only way the Court could have a policy at all. It is to the effect that the Verderers are opposed to any new statutory body with powers over the Forest (as defined by the Acts), but that the New Forest Committee is welcome to do as it pleases (or rather as Parliament determines) within the fringe areas which surround the Forest. The New Forest Association and Hampshire Field Club share this view of the matter. The Pony Breeders and Commoners Defence want no new body at all. The important thing is that the entire Forest community is opposed to any interference with the present administration of the Forest by the establishment of a new statutory management or co-ordinating agency. That, together with the views of the Forest's two MPs who have considerable reservations about park proposals, is a formidable opposition which the councils, through the New Forest Committee, have not yet succeeded in breaking.

My estimate of probable voting intentions within the Court is that there are four elected and one appointed Verderers opposed to the New Forest Committee's ambitions and (now) four appointed and one elected Verderers in favour. It is thus, in theory, open to the new Official Verderer to defeat opposition to the national park by using his casting vote. I say in theory, because I am not sure that he would do so. To start with, that would fly in the face of convention which dictates that the chairman's casting vote supports the status quo. The status quo is in opposition to the park. Secondly, the bitterness that such an action would promote within the Forest would go very deep and would go far towards wrecking the Verderers, irrespective of what the park legislation itself would do to them. Maldwin

Drummond knows very well (he was an elected Verderer for years) the depth of feeling against the tailor-made national park expressed in two general meetings of the Commoners Defence Association. Whatever his personal views of the matter, I imagine he would think long and carefully before forcing the Verderers to oppose these clearly expressed views of the Commoners. I always find it remarkable that the New Forest Committee never ceases to proclaim how crucial is the commoners' community to the future of the Forest, while completely disregarding its wishes on management.

If it were not for this one dark shadow hanging over the future of the Court, the appointment of the new Official Verderer would probably have received an unequivocal welcome. He is the first "Forest trained" chairman to have been appointed for a great many years. His recent predecessors have had to learn on the job.

Shortly after leaving school, I remember attending a meeting in the Crown at Lyndhurst in which the then youngest-ever Verderer, Maldwin Drummond, addressed an extremely hostile audience of local traders on the subject of the 1963 New Forest Bill, then before Parliament. It was a masterly exposition which quite obliterated the opposition from that source. Thereafter he served with distinction for many years until seduced by the delights of the Heritage Area Committee, the New Forest Consultative Panel and finally the New Forest Committee's ambitions for the tailor-made national park. Now as impartial chairman of the Court he has to face the greatest challenge to his diplomatic skills.

The internet Forest

Compared to other so-called wilderness areas, the New Forest seems poorly represented on the internet. If you want to know about Dartmoor for example, you will be confronted with a mass of information, much of it of high quality, coming from a variety of sources including the Dartmoor Preservation Association and the National Park Authority. Here it is a very different story. There are the usual local council and commercial web sites, many of them vigorously promoting tourism, but the Forest authorities (Forestry Commission and Verderers) are absent from the field. It is true that the Forestry Commission has a huge site, but that is national and not specific to the New Forest. The Countryside Commission manages a very poor half page on the Forest and that is about all except for private enterprise. For example, a Mr. Graham Cooper maintains a series of first class pages on the Forest (including his own stunning photographs, regularly updated), but we really ought not to have to rely on individuals to create a public face for the Forest. With tens of thousands of pounds of European grant money washing through the Forest at present, it ought not to be impossible to find the odd hundred pounds for the Verderers and Forestry Commission to establish their own web site. Of course advertising for yet more tourists is the last thing the Forest needs, but accurate factual information is another matter. It might go some way towards dispelling the endless silly stories about "the ancient mediaeval Court of Verderers" and the "wild New Forest ponies". So far my suggestions along these lines have been met with rather less than

enthusiasm. The internet may still be very much an information medium for the minority, but that is changing rapidly. The Verderers pride themselves on delivering an efficient and up-to-date system of management, but their public relations are not all they might be and the Court is certainly missing an opportunity here.

If the Forest authorities have been slow to take up the challenge, there are signs that others are beginning to see the opportunities provided by the internet. I understand that the New Forest Commoners Defence Association is working on a web site and so are the Hampshire Field Club's New Forest Section and the New Forest Research and Publications Trust. All of them, however, have been beaten to the post by Southampton University's Geodata Institute. Last month it opened to the public much of its New Forest web site (formerly restricted to the University). The public area includes a general background to all aspects of the Forest, based on material by the late Colin Tubbs, some guide book information from the Forestry Commission and a Forest news section which contains a complete set of "New Forest Notes" going back over several years and which will be updated monthly. People who live in the wild northern wastes of the New Forest, beyond civilisation and the circulation area of the Lymington Times, sometimes ask me for copies of individual items from the Notes. They will now have access to them direct, even in these remote regions ! For those interested in seeing the Institute's new site, its address is <http://www.geodata.soton.ac.uk/newforest/public>

Verderers' Inclosures

At their February Court the Verderers received a presentment expressing concern at the possible elimination of visual screening of ugly urban development if Fawley Inclosure should be wholly felled. It was a timely reminder because the Forestry Commission is reviewing the future of all the so-called Verderers Inclosures - plantations made on the Open Forest since the last war and extending to about 2,000 acres. Under today's conservation constraints, permission for such plantations would never be granted, but it was a different story in the immediate post war years when timber shortages were a recent memory, when heathland was considered valueless waste and when the Verderers were extremely short of funds and saw letting land for forestry as a profitable and socially acceptable policy. Today the government is faced with a national target of 6,000 ha (nearly 15,000 acres) of former heathland to be restored by the year 2005 under the Biodiversity Action Plan and a fairly straightforward and cheap first step is the return of the Verderers Inclosures.

The process of restoration is to be a slow one with much of the timber retained until it is at or near economic maturity, but as the plantations are almost exclusively conifer and have been in existence since the 1960s, many people alive today will see the end of the Verderers Inclosures. Without this accelerated clearance the plantations would have survived until 2108 when the lease expires and a total of two or three rotations of timber would have been taken.

The commoners and conservationists will be glad to see the end of the Verderers Inclosures. The former resisted, unsuccessfully, the original grant of land, but it is only in recent years that the full extent of the ecological consequences of the planting have been recognised. There are, however, small parts of the plantations which serve important functions quite apart from timber production or potential conservation. Parts of Fawley and the adjacent Dibden Inclosure are among these. Back in 1939 a planning officers' committee produced a landmark report on the New Forest and recommended the planting of woods to screen out the unsightly development of the Waterside which was then commencing. This argument was taken up by the Forestry Commission in support of its drive to secure new inclosures in the Forest.

From the planning point of view the Inclosures served their purpose well and also provided another form of screening which was not envisaged in 1939: they shielded the Forest from the deafening noise of the A 326 which was built in the early 1960s. If it is now the Commission's intention to eliminate or seriously weaken these screens (auditory and visual) it will be a serious matter. The same problem arises at Markway where the area around Duckhole Bog is a quiet and, in New Forest terms, a relatively unfrequented area. The almost total clearance of Markway, except for a thin line of beeches, would open up this peaceful backwater to the deafening noise of the A 35, which in twenty years time is likely to be as bad as the A 31 is today - whatever pious hopes may exist for the downgrading of this road. Landscape architects seem to have little appreciation of the importance of sound screening.

No-one (not least the gentleman who made the presentment) is asking for wholesale retention of conifer woodland on the Open Forest, but the total elimination of these crucial screens would be little short of vandalism. The plans for all these sites have yet to come before the Verderers for approval.