

## **NEW FOREST NOTES MAY 2011**

### **Retirement of the Official Verderer**

The 20<sup>th</sup> April, date of last month's Verderers' Court, was one of those rare occasions when most of the Forest community seemed to be entirely of one mind. The so-called Nolan Rules on public appointments had required the resignation of Oliver Crosthwaite Eyre from the position of Official Verderer of the New Forest and chairman of the Court after a period of nine years. There was wide agreement that this was a bad day for the Forest. The departing chairman had joined the Court in 2002 as the youngest Verderer and was leaving in 2011 with the potential for many more years of valuable service, but bureaucracy had intervened. He leaves behind a court greatly strengthened with, for the first time I can remember, proper respect for its byelaws and a consistently high standard of animal welfare. As to the flood of demands for more recreational development, the Verderers are now recognized as the principal and best defence that the Forest possesses.

Of course all these advances are not the work of one man alone. The Verderers Court works as a team, ably supported by its staff, but without knowledgeable and determined leadership, even the best team is likely to falter. That leadership was exactly what Oliver Crosthwaite Eyre gave to the Verderers.

The Court had faced numerous problems in 2002. Money was very tight and there was a constant worry that staff would have to be made redundant. That in itself was extremely distressing for all concerned, but a smaller workforce would also have made a decline in animal welfare standards inevitable. Gradually a firm financial footing for the Court was established and by 2010 the Verderers possessed undreamt-of luxuries such as Land Rovers for all the agisters, stock trailers and all the equipment necessary for efficient regulation of a herd of seven thousand stock running on the Forest.

Next there was the question of the Court's byelaws, widely laughed-at when the late Official Verderer assumed his position. Various people, for one reason or another, had decided that they would not pay marking fees for their animals or were otherwise exempt from the health and welfare regulations which the Verderers' byelaws impose. This infuriated the majority of law-abiding commoners and made a nonsense of the Forest's management. Oliver Crosthwaite Eyre made it clear from the start that order had to be restored and in one court case after another, sometimes including appeals, he steadily broke down resistance. The cost in time and money was great, but it is a valuable legacy to the Forest.

Finally the Official Verderer understood that fundamental truth which seems invisible to the National Park and irritating to the Forestry Commission, that you cannot go on forever cramming in to the New Forest more and more recreation, just because there is a public demand for it. If you try to do that, you will simply degrade the area to the status and quality of an urban fun park. The arguments of "only a few more essential mountain bike routes" or "just another small camp site extension" are recipes for the utter destruction of the New Forest as many of us have known it. The "Verderers Policies" issued in 2007 are largely the

gift of Oliver Crosthwaite Eyre and stand as perhaps the only real bulwark against such insidious erosion of the Forest's character.

History is the ultimate judge of any individual's work for the New Forest and that needs arm's length assessment perhaps years from now. My own feeling is that when such a judgement is made, the last nine years will be seen as a period of achievement for the Court, due in large part to the contribution of its chairman.

### **The fires of 1976**

As week after week passes with bone dry conditions prevailing throughout the New Forest, some uncomfortable memories of the great drought of 1976 have been reviving. Feed shortages (chiefly off the common land) were a concern over many months. Great tracts of ancient beech woodland were wiped out through lack of water to the shallow roots of that tree, although the full effects were not apparent until the following season. I remember the dismal lines of skeleton trees which dominated such formerly beautiful old woods as Gritnam. Recovery has commenced in the intervening thirty five years, but the fine old trees were lost forever.

Best remembered of all perhaps were the fires. Whether they were caused by carelessness or vandalism, I do not know, but they raged across (chiefly) the southern parts of the Forest over many weeks. The areas destroyed may not have been large, but the intensity of the burning was exceptional. They were not ordinary forest fires such as we see in average summer months. Their story is preserved in some strange sinuous earthwork enclosures which may be seen at Pigbush and Woodfidley north of Beaulieu. I was reminded of their origin by the local keeper, Graham Wilson, who remembers those days very well. The ground was so dry that even in normally waterlogged areas the peat caught fire, smouldering underground and reigniting fires on the surface many days after they had appeared to be extinguished. At last the Forestry Commission resorted to the desperate remedy of digging the fires out. Bulldozers were sent in to cut right through the peat into the underlying non-combustible mineral soil. As they went, the machines threw up great banks and a few of these banks can still be seen today. Most, such as the earthwork surrounding the huge fire west of Ipley, were restored in succeeding years, but others survive to this day. I suppose one could say that they have become part of the Forest's history.

The drought was finally broken at the end of August when we had all become used to the constant smell of burning peat throughout the Forest and when huge clouds of smoke on the horizon signalled that yet another area was being devastated. We must pray that thirty five years later we are not about to see a re-run of these events.

### **Defiling the Forest's streams**

Engineering work to fill and/or divert streams in several of the Forest's most beautiful valleys will be starting in the next few weeks. The best known targets are Latchmore Brook near Fordingbridge and Ditchend Brook a little to the north. Work will also be taking place at Fletcher's Water near Brockenhurst and on the upper portions of Linford Brook in Roe Inclosure and on an un-named tributary which flows out of Buckherd Bottom. The work is, in

itself, highly controversial with much protest about the extensive felling of trees at Latchmore. I have long held the view that it is being taken to extremes and in many cases will be damaging to the Forest in both the long and short term, but the relevant consultation processes have determined that it should go ahead and the Forest must be assumed to be happy with the results. Millions of pounds are flooding into the Forest for this work so the public as a whole is presumably content with such expenditure. Anyhow, perhaps my friends in the Forestry Commission will be happy to know that my immediate concerns are with other aspects of the way in which these streams are treated. In connection with the Commission's plans for the work, I have recently examined every detail of the watercourses, revealing some truly revolting conditions.

I suppose Ditchend Brook is one of the most beautiful and apparently least spoilt streams of the New Forest, but appearances can be deceptive. The curlew and lapwings which dominated the area when I was a child are now absent or almost so. They have been replaced by the all-dominating dog running, but the landscape remains unaltered. It is when one takes a closer look that the really shocking state of the valley is revealed. From Snake Road to Must Thorns Bottom the stream margins are lined with gorse bushes which provide feed and shelter for the livestock, but they also create an ideal secluded linear latrine for the visitors. Every few yards along this length I encountered little heaps of stained lavatory paper secreted amongst the gorse clumps. The low water level has also allowed visitors to gain access to the stream itself, so that excrement is spread in the bed of the watercourse as well as in the bushes beside it. At the end of April conditions were, and no doubt remain, perfectly vile. This is a stream from which ponies and cattle drink and where children play in the ford below Godshill Cricket Pitch. It waters private fields lower down the valley. Turning it into a virtual sewer is mediaeval in its barbarity. We are told to welcome visitors to the New Forest and to encourage their enjoyment of its secret places, but I for one have nothing but contempt for people who treat the Forest in this way.

Sickened by what I had seen, I set off southwards to Latchmore (where conditions are only a little better). For good measure the margins of the Snake Road up Cockley Hill were decorated with little plastic bags full of dog mess which have been hung from the gorse. This is apparently a longstanding activity in Ditchend, because I have seen similar delights at this point over the last year or so.

So what is the reason for the misuse of so beautiful a valley ? Apart from defective human nature, it is simply and solely the fact that a large car park exists on its margins in an area totally unsuitable for such a facility, drawing hundreds of people into a piece of the Forest which is incapable of withstanding the pressure.

### **The pigmy in the pond**

Many of the ponds in the New Forest are infested with a pest called *Crassula helmsii* or the New Zealand pigmy weed. Last month's Open Forest Advisory Committee was told that a new phase of the Forestry Commission's war on this invader is about to begin. Several rather unpleasant-sounding treatments are to be tried – all of which the committee was

assured are entirely harmless to livestock and the environment. Perhaps the most dramatic of these will be the pouring of a blue dye into affected ponds. This is apparently a non-toxic vegetable based material whose effect will be to block out light preventing photosynthesis and thus eliminate the weed. It will also eliminate native plants, but it is assumed that these will recolonize in due course. The Forest may not possess a Blue Lagoon, but it is certainly going to acquire some very blue ponds.

Anthony Pasmore