

## **NEW FOREST NOTES NOVEMBER 2010**

### **Spending the Forest's Stewardship money**

In a year of huge cuts in government spending, it seems strange that New Forest life is now dominated by the large sums of European money being poured in for a wide variety of projects. Some of this money will inevitably be frittered away on things which will be of no lasting value to the Forest, but there are also real opportunities for providing major long-term benefits. The funding is, on the face of it, available for ten years, but there is a break clause at the half way point, so planning over the full term is difficult and probably unwise. There is actually no indication that the provisions for breaking the contract after five years will be implemented. We are even told that such a break is unlikely, but the national state of financial instability has made everyone rather nervous.

The way in which all this money is administered is fiendishly complicated and the two "stewardship managers" (Colin Draper for the Verderers and Chris Caswell for the remainder) have done a remarkable job in setting up, in only a few months, the mushrooming committees and mind-numbing paper trails. Probably only two such ex-military gentlemen could have tackled the task so efficiently. I have long since given up trying to understand the details of the administration, but the actual projects proposed and the way they are judged are more straightforward and certainly a great deal more interesting.

The Verderers have exclusive control over their share of the money, subject only to its being spent in accordance with the objectives of the scheme. There is a small management committee of Verderers which reports to the full Court. It takes advice (but not instructions) from an advisory committee of outside people. The management chain is therefore reasonably short and clear cut. It seems to be working well as the gleaming fleet of new cattle trailers for the agisters (shortly to be followed by new land rovers) testifies. Microchipping of ponies and the related equipment has been provided for use at Beaulieu Road, while a water supply for the saleyard, a massive undertaking involving a pipeline from Longdown, are just two of the wider community projects. Even more important is the security for the livestock related payments made to commoners in the stewardship scheme, which helps to keep a tottering pony breeding industry from total collapse. In short, this side of things seems to be satisfactory.

The remainder (and larger part) of the scheme is more complex and is presenting some problems, although I hope that some of them are short term in nature. Two committees have been established to filter proposals for spending. Those schemes which pass through the filter are then judged by a "board" comprising a representative of the Verderers, the Deputy Surveyor and the head officer of the National Park Authority. The first committee is concerned with biodiversity and landscape. In a New Forest context, "biodiversity" is dominated by stream filling and diversion projects (they call it "restoration") and by filling the drainage which was provided to improve lawns as recently as thirty years ago. As a sweetener to the commoners, some scrub clearance is also undertaken. Such projects are

controversial in that they can cause damage to prized grazing areas. They are also damaging and putting at risk the historic and archaeological sites of the Forest at a frightening rate. The New Forest Commoners Defence Association has asked for a meeting with the Forestry Commission, specifically to consider the conflicts with grazing, while the New Forest History group is continuing to pursue its efforts to secure proper protection for the Forest's historic sites. The CDA meeting will take place later this month.

The second committee deals with such matters as access, natural resources, and protection of Forest's historic environment. At this committee a severe problem was revealed at the first meeting. It is the job of the committee to provide an initial assessment of proposals for expenditure and to approve or reject them. Those approved go forward to a later stage and are ultimately judged by the board. Last month the committee met at Lymington and, if my notes are correct, the voting strength comprised ten National Park employees, two Forestry Commission and one access supporter, as against (for the Forest), two from the New Forest Association, one Commoners' Defence and one Verderer. In other words, a proposal for damaging recreational development (for example) could be pushed through by thirteen votes to four. Similarly, any pro-Forest measures which might be suggested by, say, the New Forest Association, could be blocked at the first stage. Such a system was patently unfair and the Official Verderer told the Verderers at their Court on 20<sup>th</sup> October that in future voting would be confined to one vote from each of the Commission, the Park and the Verderers.

At the moment the proposals before the second of the two committees are reasonably uncontroversial, including a lidar survey of the Forest (a special sort of aerial photography which records landform below the vegetation), restoration of some small buildings and monuments, data collection exercises and maintenance of the car free zones of the Forest.

### **Dog attack**

I have mentioned before in these notes that the New Forest is perhaps the only large area of common land in Southern England where dogs may legally be allowed to roam free (off leads) in the vicinity of livestock. The consequences of this are inevitable and horrible, as in the case of an attack on a donkey, where the dog owner was actually caught, announced by the Official Verderer in the October Court. The commoners, of course, know perfectly well that many unexplained mutilations or disappearances of their livestock are the results of dog attacks, but actually witnessing the atrocity is another matter. I remember many years ago, one of my Verderer colleagues, Mr. Len Mansbridge, recounting how he could not comply with the Ministry's ear-tagging regulations because the ear of one of his best cows had been torn off by dogs.

Last month I was in Pitts Wood near Fordingbridge on a Sunday morning. I had noticed a man with two dogs running loose entering the wood in front of me, but there was nothing unusual in that. Shortly afterwards the peace was broken by the most terrible screams, shouting and crashing in the undergrowth. The dogs had set about a group of

young pigs engaged in their lawful and inoffensive business of collecting acorns. My mare, despite being a not over-intelligent thoroughbred, is reasonably pig-tolerant, but the sight of a small pig screaming in fear and pain, with a dog hanging from its neck and rushing towards her through the undergrowth, was enough to test the equanimity of any horse. Anyhow, she held her ground and the dog runner eventually beat off his pet. I told him in, I hope, not too immoderate a manner, exactly what I thought of such behaviour. If I had not been more than a mile from the nearest road, I would certainly have called the police, but as it was there was little more that I could do. Demanding a name and address would, of course, have revealed that he was Joseph Smith of 13, Fictitious Street, Notown. If I had not been present, no doubt a little pink carcass would have been quietly concealed in a holly bush, while the dog runner cheerfully continued his stroll though the National Park. I say that because one cross caller to the Verderers' office a year or so ago demanded "What right do they have to turn out pigs in *our* park ?"

### **The end of the wells ?**

Back in 1992 I wrote in these notes about the numerous tiny wells located on the Open Forest, usually only two or three feet deep, which once served communities of cottagers living adjacent to the heath. Some are brick lined, but others (as on my own holding) are formed of rough-hewn slabs of oak which survive for generations underwater. In 1992, the local craftsman, Mr. Peter Brown, was equipping many of the wells with new oak covers and sometimes with surrounding rails. His employment was one of the more enlightened actions of the Forestry Commission at the period. Now, I hear, there is a proposal that these interesting echoes of the past are to be filled-in because they constitute an affront to health and safety requirements. A greater piece of nonsense is difficult to imagine. If visitors are determined to fall into something, they have a vast choice of timber extraction ruts (often deeper than the wells), streams, holes dug by badgers, vandals etc and open manholes which exist in large numbers on Beaulieu Aerodrome.

One of the nearest wells to my home is at Bramshaw Telegraph and that probably served the tiny community there until after the last war. It causes no trouble to anyone. In the next valley the Commission has just filled a stream, creating holes full of clay slurry deep enough to trap a powerful horse, while the ford they have formed is of liquid hoggin which easily overtops even the longest wellington boots of a casual walker. The New Forest really is run on the basis of a very twisted set of values.

### **Funding the Verderers**

Last year the Verderers spent, in round figures, £355,000 and their income was £373,000. Rather more than one third of the income came from marking fees (payments in respect of stock turned out on the Forest) and a little more than that in the form of grants from the Forestry Commission. The stewardship funds subsidised the Court to the extent of £40,000 and there are a number of lesser sources of income. From this it will be seen that the future of the Forestry Commission grants is crucial to the financial planning of the Court. The Commission has survived the government's cuts as an entity, but how far its money will

be reduced remains unclear – as does the knock-on effects of any cuts upon the money for the Court. A pessimist might conclude that the Court's financial future is on a knife edge, although historically there is nothing new in that. Certainly the Verderers have little scope for making economies, because their expenditure is almost wholly on wages and equipment for the staff. We may know more by the time of the November Court at which, by tradition, the level of marking fees for the coming year is determined and often announced.

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