

NEW FOREST NOTES NOVEMBER 2018

Verderers' Election 2018

On 30th of this month there is likely to be an election of Verderers if Forest rumour is correct. Two members of the Court are due to retire and are likely to stand for re-election. It is said that there will be one or more additional candidates, although it is customary for such challenging Verderers to remain extremely cagey about their intentions until the last minute early in November. I am not exactly sure why this should be the case. I should have thought that the earlier publicity starts, the better chance it has of succeeding. Still, a contested election does show a degree of interest in the Court's work, or perhaps just dissatisfaction with its activities. This interest does not, however, appear to extend to the electorate. They seem to share the views on elections of the famous Brenda of Bristol – "Not another one. Oh for God's sake – I can't stand this". Only 526 electors have bothered to register their right to vote, out of a potential total likely to be many times this figure, but I can remember the days when registers in excess of a thousand voters were not uncommon. This year's miserable total is despite the best efforts of the Verderers' Office to encourage registration, with 1329 forms being sent out to potential voters. A few recipients of these forms may no longer be qualified, but the return rate is still exceptionally poor. This is very disappointing for the staff who put a lot of effort into the registration process.

The qualification for an elector is a rather strange one. It comprises the occupation (not necessarily ownership) of at least one acre of land to which rights of common over the Forest are attached. This means that a large landowner like Lord Montagu has exactly the same voting power as one of his neighbours who simply rents an acre of orchard in which to keep a child's pony. To that extent it is thoroughly democratic. On the other hand, someone who is passionately interested in the Forest and perhaps does much voluntary work to protect it has no vote if his garden is less than one acre, even though it possesses Forest rights. I think this restrictive arrangement was actually the intention of the legislators who reconstituted the Court in 1949. They disposed of the old voting system which allowed any parliamentary elector of a parish wholly or partially in the Forest or any registered commoner a right to vote and replaced it with the present very limited electorate. I presume that in the years following 1877 there was nothing so radical as to allow women to vote. Before 1949 there were six elected Verderers and one appointed member - the chairman or Official Verderer. After 1949 there were (and still are) five elected and five appointed members, with the chairman having a casting vote. The interests of Forest residents were therefore, at least nominally, strongly represented by the appointees while the agricultural interests were supposedly protected by the new restricted electorate based on common rights. I don't think parliament fully achieved either of its objectives. Local residents are certainly not necessarily represented by the appointed Verderers and there are a great many nominal commoners occupying one acre who are not in the least interested in agriculture, but who are very concerned with the Forest itself. A few years ago there was actually a princess on the register of commoner voters and I doubt if she kept many pigs or cattle.

Altogether the electoral system is a rather ramshackle affair, but (apathy among the electorate excepted) it works well enough. Practising commoners, if they bother to seek registration at all, are by their occupation of farmland almost assured of a vote. On the other hand those deeply involved in Forest affairs who are not technically commoner voters because their garden is too small, can usually rent, for a small sum, a piece woodland or scrub with rights in order to secure a vote.

Perhaps I should explain why it is that only two of the five elected seats may be contested at an election this month. Verderers are elected for six years and there is an election every three years. In other words, two members of the Court will be chosen in 2018 and three in 2021. This is a sensible provision ensuring that there is a degree of continuity in the Court's work and that new members can (if they choose) learn something from those who have already served a little while on the Court. The rules governing the Forest are fairly straightforward compared to the huge volume of legislation affecting local government, but councillors have teams of officers to educate and advise them. The Verderers must work things out for themselves, however knowledgeable a long-serving clerk may be and leaving aside the recent trend towards the choice of chairmen who are legally qualified.

The forthcoming election could well establish one remarkable record. The retiring verderers are Mr. Dave Readhead and Miss Dionis Macnair. If the latter stands and is elected, and if she subsequently completes her new six year term, she will probably become the longest serving member of the court since it was established in 1877. Miss Macnair was first elected in 1973, along with the late Maldwin Drummond and me. Leaving out a three year period when she retired from the court, she has served continuously ever since. That would give her a total of forty eight years' service, exceeding even the forty five years of the famous 19th century verderer, Briscoe Eyre.

Finally, if there are any aspiring Verderers out there who are uncertain as to how to proceed, the qualification for election is marginally different from that of an elector. Before 1949 the requirement was the ownership of seventy five acres of land. It was estimated in 1947 that only sixteen people of both sexes were qualified. The Act which followed swept aside this outdated requirement and replaced it with the occupation of one acre to which rights of pasture attached. Note that for some reason common of marl, mast or sheep rights do not count - it must be pasture. Nomination papers (obtainable from the Under Sheriff of Hampshire) need to be in by early next week and we shall know shortly thereafter if there is to be an election.

New books on the Forest

We are fortunate in the New Forest in having ready access to a vast collection of books, maps and documents covering every aspect of the district's history, natural history and administration. This collection is in the Christopher Tower Library at the New Forest Centre which has (so far) largely avoided the dumbing-down of information on the Forest which is so prevalent elsewhere. Even the most precious and rare books are held there for public inspection – under supervision. The collection is growing all the time, but perhaps the average quality of new publications has declined a little in recent times.

This autumn has seen the arrival of three new books, one privately published and two produced by a local charity. The first of these is, somewhat unusually for a book with references to the Forest, an autobiography. It is by Sarah Weston of Woodgreen. I have classified it as a "Forest book" because its final third covers the author's life in and around the Forest when she was practising as a horse trainer. The book deals with her initial years in this profession, including her relationship (not always a comfortable one) with the local farming community, the Forest authorities and her colleagues. While working for her "Logical Horsemanship" qualifications, she even did voluntary work for a time in the Verderers' office.

Much of this account of her activities comprises a series of case studies of the management of individual horses (many of them New Forest ponies) and these are likely to be of most interest to equine specialists. The theme throughout is the author's conviction that there is no place for violence of any sort in the breaking and management of horses.

The beginning of the book deals with Ms Weston's early life in the Midlands and her subsequent years as a barrister working for the magistrates' courts, before her abrupt change of direction about twenty years ago – hence the curious title "From Sober Dress to Stout Boots". The book is available direct from the author or from the Woodgreen Community Shop.

The second book is Chris Read's long awaited "Hillforts of the New Forest National Park", published by the New Forest History & Archaeology Group. It is available either direct from the Group or from the New Forest Centre in Lyndhurst. The book comprises an invaluable field guide to this enigmatic class of Iron Age enclosures, scattered across the Forest from Godshill in the north to Buckland Rings on the coast, many of them accessible to the public. It is the result of two years of careful research by the author and his team and is copiously illustrated with coloured plans and photographs. A helpful introduction sets the Forest's forts in their national context.

The third book records the History Group's most complex survey project to date and is called "Archaeology, Landscape and History of the Latchmore Valley". Latchmore is the area in the north of the Forest traversed by Latchmore Brook – a stream which runs from Bramshaw Telegraph to Hyde Common and eventually to the Avon. The A4 book (228 pages) comprises a reassessment of all the known archaeology in the valley (much of which was incompletely or inaccurately recorded), together with newly found sites from recent fieldwork. There are 87 colour illustrations (including 38 maps) and 27 black and white maps and photos. An introduction is followed by a section giving an overview of the archaeology, one describing previous research and a section on the landscape, history and land use of the valley. A gazetteer comprising 11 chapters deals in detail with all known sites, with each section being preceded by a large scale map. Very complex sites have been resurveyed in detail using a total station. An appendix, with many additional illustrations, contains all the excavation reports relevant to the valley, prepared by the Group and its predecessor - the New Forest Section of the Hampshire Field Club. Another appendix publishes for the first time the results of fieldwork following the great storm of 1990.

The History Group is a small local charity and because of the high cost of production and the need to ensure that all copies found a quick market, the book was offered for sale only to members. It should provide a sound foundation for future research and ensure the protection of the area from forestry damage and attempted development.

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