

## **NEW FOREST NOTES OCTOBER 2008**

### **A new society for the New Forest**

It is remarkable that an area such as the Forest which is steeped in history and which possesses such a wealth of archaeological sites should, until now, have lacked its own society dedicated to historical and archaeological research. Since 1959, that gap has been filled by the New Forest Section of the Hampshire Field Club, whose work has transformed the New Forest from what was believed to be something of an archaeological desert, to what we now know to be one of the richest areas in Southern England. The records show a total of over two thousand sites on the commonable lands alone and there is probably a good deal more to be found. As to the historical side of things, one has only to consider the immense flow of publications from writers like Richard Reeves and Peter Roberts to see how much is now being discovered about the Forest's records.

I suppose that any society, like a business, which ceases to develop and adapt is likely to end up as history itself so in recent years the New Forest Section of the Field Club expanded its work to include large-scale field surveys, a regular programme of excavation and much individual research and record-keeping. Now, in order to allow greater flexibility for such work, more financial stability and a wider membership, an entirely new society has been founded to take over from the New Forest Section. The Section will cease to exist from 31<sup>st</sup> December.

The new society, called the New Forest History and Archaeology Group, is to be inaugurated at a meeting in the New Forest Museum in Lyndhurst on 21<sup>st</sup> November at 7.30 pm, when potential new members will be very welcome. The meeting will be addressed by the National Park's archaeologist, Mr. Frank Green, on the future of archaeology in the New Forest. The Group will be primarily concerned to foster practical fieldwork and research, with particular emphasis on providing advice and training for people of all ages and abilities who are interested in the Forest, but who may have been somewhat reticent about joining more traditional and formal antiquarian organizations. The New Forest Section has always sought to attract a wide range of members. The present excavating team, for example, has within its membership both school-leavers and pensioners, the latter being kept busy with surveying and photography when they can be induced to relinquish heavy shovels.

Full details of the New Forest History and Archaeology Group can be found on the website: <http://www.nfhistoryandarchaeology.hampshire.org.uk/>

Subject to Forestry Commission approval, the first excavation under the auspices of the new group is likely to be on a prehistoric site near Fritham in the summer of next year.

### **Stormy Bushes**

At my request, various senior residents of Burley have been testing their memories of the wartime years in the village to try to solve a small mystery at Stormy (or Storm) Bushes near Woods Corner. An historical survey of Oakley Inclosure area is currently underway for the National Park and these days even fairly modern remains are covered by such work.

Adjoining the Inclosure is a small sandy hill which was once probably covered in hollies, of which a few decayed specimens remain. Wartime air photographs show a clear feature on the hill comprising a straight path from Forest Road leading to an enclosure about ten yards square near the top of the hill. The photographs are not sufficiently detailed to show what was contained within the enclosure.

So far all enquiries about this site have drawn a blank. None of those I have spoken to can remember what this was or, indeed, have any memories of wartime use of the hill. At one stage there was supposed to have been a hockey pitch here, but such use seems unlikely to have any connection with the marks on the air photographs. Suggestions as to possible uses include a weather station or a transmitter mast. I am told by a local military historian that use by the Royal Observer Corps is not a possibility as their sites are all known. Certainly this is not a question of misinterpretation of the photographs. Both the path and the enclosure can still be traced on the ground to this day, the latter as a level rectangular platform. Any information on this site would be much appreciated by those conducting the survey.

#### **Diana Halford**

The National Park's appointed Verderer, Diana Halford, died in the middle of last month after a long illness. She had served on the Court for a little over one year, succeeding Kathy Heron in the post. During that time she secured the respect of all her colleagues, through a firm commitment to protecting the Forest against development and over-use. I suppose that, inevitably, there was an initial fear that with her Park connections she might have held a rather different view of the Forest, but the worries were unfounded. To the extent that her poor health allowed, she was a staunch supporter of the Court and what it is trying to achieve. Her background in Burley and long family connection with the Forest and its protection had laid good foundations.

The Verderers now have to await the appointment of the third National Park Verderer in as many years.

#### **More bells**

Last month I wrote about the use of cow bells and since that time many people have told me of the bells they can remember in use in different parts of the Forest, often in locating a wandering house-cow which provided a commoner's family with milk. All this culminated in the appearance of former Verderer, Len Mansbridge, at the September Court, clutching a large plastic bag. From this he produced a variety of iron bells which had been used by his family on Forest stock in former days, including sheep bells. His presentment, accompanied by demonstration chiming, delighted the Verderers and the assembled public. Len tells me that some of the bells were made for his grandfather by a Totton blacksmith and I think that must put their date back near a century.

#### **Public comment invited**

The Verderers have a standard procedure whereby controversial applications for their consent to works on the Forest are not determined at the Court at which they are made, but

are deferred to a subsequent meeting. This gives members of the public the opportunity to make comments in support or opposition, before the Verderers make up their minds. In an unusually busy September Court, two such applications were made to the Verderers by the Forestry Commission.

The first is an application for a new lease of common land to be granted to the Lyndhurst Golf Club, the present lease being about to expire. The use of that golf course has been the subject of much dispute in the past with commoners claiming that grazing livestock is interfered with, drifts impeded and that much machinery and debris has been left about. Whether or not such intensive use of part of the Open Forest is desirable in itself has also been hotly debated.

The second application relates to Roundhill camp site where there have been continuing rows over alleged unauthorised development by Forest Holidays. Now there is an application to build two large underground gas tanks to serve the lavatory blocks on the site. At first sight it is difficult to see how such hidden building works could be a particular problem for the Forest, but it is the wider question of perpetuating the use of such camps which will probably be the more important. The argument goes that if large capital investments are permitted, it will be the more difficult to secure relocation of facilities to less damaging sites off the Forest in years to come. In fact Roundhill is not a primary target of such relocation suggestions. The most damaging sites are generally acknowledged to be those in the ancient woodland such as Hollands Wood, Denny and Long Beech. These sites English Nature (Natural England) long ago classified as needing closure, but it seems now to lack the will to pursue its own policy.

Comments by commoners or members of the public on either the golf course or camp site proposal will be welcomed by the Verderers at their Court on 15<sup>th</sup> October.

### **Marking fees**

It is customary for marking fee levels for the coming year to be announced at either the October or November Verderers' Courts and the level for 2009 was duly fixed at a committee meeting last month. It has been a great many years since there was any increase, but the subject always gives rise to a lively debate and not least this year when the Verderers' accounts show a significant deficit.

The problem with marking fees is that they remain, despite massive changes in the New Forest over the past one hundred and fifty years, a principal source of the Verderers' income. When the four agisters' wages amounted in total to £240 per annum in the early years after 1877, this was not a real problem, but today the wage and expenses bill of the Court is about £200,000. In the 1870s the commoners obtained significant financial benefit from the Forest and were, rightly, expected to pay for the policing of their common rights. Now, in the era of "the people's national park playground" things are very different. It is universally acknowledged that the grazing of the commoners' stock provides an essential service in maintaining the Forest, so is it really appropriate to continue taxing them by means of marking fees? Doctors provide a service in ensuring public health, but we don't expect

them to pay for the privilege. Instead, they receive very adequate salaries. The commoners do now, of course, receive subsidy payments which compensate in some measure for the poor or negative returns from farming the Forest. That seems to me to be an equitable system for regulating stock numbers. If too many animals are turned out, reduce the subsidies; if not enough, then increase the levels of payment, but taxing those who provide a service is a very out-dated and unfair method of financing the Forest. Still, so long as the inequity of the system is not acknowledged by government, the Verderers are left with no option and marking fees will continue to be levied. Those who wish to learn the marking fee rate for 2009 will need to wait for the next Court.

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