

# NEW FOREST NOTES OCTOBER 2014

## A new man at the top

This month a new Deputy Surveyor of the New Forest will take up his post at the Queen's House and that will be a very important event for the Forest. The Deputy Surveyor is, arguably, the most important officer in the local administration with powers, or at the very least influence, exceeding those of the Official Verderer, the Verderers' Court or anyone in the local authority hierarchy. Actually the extent to which he (it has always been a "he") controls local Forestry Commission policy is not entirely clear. In recent decades few retired Deputy Surveyors have spoken out about their former roles, quite unlike the Hon. Gerald Lascelles who, in 1915, published an entire book on the subject, a good deal of which concentrated on his very low opinion of the Verderers' Court. Certainly the Queen's House follows national policy, but I am inclined to think the Deputy Surveyor still has fairly wide discretion in how strictly local matters are decided.

Newcomers to the Forest find the title *Deputy Surveyor* confusing. It implies an inferior officer taking orders from an unseen "Surveyor" in London or elsewhere. In fact it is simply an historical survival dating from the time when the royal forests as a whole fell under the control of a Surveyor General of Woods and Forests who appointed deputies in such places as the New Forest and the Forest of Dean. The Surveyor General's post disappeared two hundred years ago, but here at least the chief officer of the Forestry Commission retains his ancient title. I doubt if it has much relevance to the modern structure of the Forestry Commission, but it is a comforting piece of continuity appreciated by the local community. There was nearly an outbreak of rioting in 1968 when the then Deputy Surveyor, Arthur Cadman resigned because the Commission intended to do away with the independence of the New Forest and to make it merely a sub-division of the South east conservancy. We lost a highly respected chief officer, but the Commission's proposals were eventually withdrawn.

The present Deputy Surveyor of the New Forest is Mike Seddon, who has held the office since 2003. At the time of his appointment he was already well known here through his work in the recreation department – public recreation being the Commission's most prized and intensively marketed product in the New Forest. In his former job he had earned a reputation as a tough advocate of Forestry Commission policies and ambitions and as an equally determined, but always courteous, negotiator on the Commission's behalf. I think it is fair to say that this is a reputation which he has maintained throughout his time as Deputy Surveyor, if tempered by the good sense to back off when it became clear that the local community was prepared to go to war rather than accept some particularly controversial proposal. Such cases included the attempted expansion of Roundhill camp site into Stockley Inclosure, the further development of Hollands Wood and some particularly extreme proposals for more cycle routes. Still, if an impartial umpire had been keeping a record over the years, I think the Forestry Commission would have come out comfortably ahead on points in its dealings with the Forest people. It is no doubt these qualities of the Deputy Surveyor and his achievements on behalf of the Commission that have led to his promotion to higher things at Bristol.

We are now faced with the prospect of getting to know and (for those in management) of working with a new Deputy Surveyor – Bruce Rothnie. In fact he also is no stranger to the New Forest, having worked here in various roles until quite recently. Whether or not he will regard it as a

compliment, I don't know, but I have yet to meet anyone with a bad word to say about his appointment. Perhaps this is due less to anticipation of what he will achieve in the post than to relief that one or two rumoured candidates who would not have been palatable to the Forest did not get the job. There are a few observers about who even suspect that some strings of New Forest management may still be pulled from Bristol by the departing Deputy Surveyor.

Deputy Surveyors of modern times have all started out with an inbuilt advantage in dealing with the Verderers' Court in that the Commission controls a considerable element of the Court's funding. Of course they have all been too polite to mention this during any difficult negotiations, but both sides are well aware of the potential force of this purse-strings argument. More recently, and as the Forest has become more and more hooked on subsidies, the HLS funding has assumed rather more importance than forestry money, subjecting the Court to pressure from other sources. Still, I think the Commission would be hard pressed to deal with the fractious local population without the Court as intermediary and it remains in the interests of both sides to work together as well as they can.

### **Money for Forest research**

I don't suppose that the New Forest is unusual in having small not-for-profit groups which have found the years of recession financially uncomfortable. We have our own big and very wealthy charities like the New Forest Association and more commercial groups like the New Forest Pony Breeding and Cattle Society, but at the other end of the financial scale is the New Forest History and Archaeology Group with a small but extremely active membership and very little money. In pre-recession days money flowed freely to such groups, especially from organizations like "Leader". Leader financed archaeological survey projects and provided invaluable equipment which would otherwise have been beyond the reach of a voluntary society. Even the national park, when first set up, provided generous support and equipment, with its then conservation director, Stephen Trotter, being particularly helpful. Eventually the park established its own archaeological department and the support ceased.

Today the History Group continues its research, although on a shoe-string budget. Small private grants and donations are received, but the costs of publication are considerable and even volunteers cannot be expected to travel hundreds of miles around the Forest without some expenses payments. The news last month of a substantial windfall for the Group was thus particularly welcome. It will allow the results of a three year study of the archaeology of Beaulieu Heath west to be published some time in 2015.

The windfall came from the New Forest Research and Publications Trust, a registered charity, which is to close after twenty years, with all its assets being transferred to the History Group as soon as the latter's registration as a charity is complete. This was decided at a meeting of the trustees in early September. The Trust was established in 1994 as a result of the work of the late Mrs. Jean Cobb. She had raised money for research into the New Forest and at that time the fund was held by the local branch of the Hampshire Field Club. There were then fears that it might be appropriated for use outside the Forest, contrary to the donors' wishes. In order to ensure that it would continue to be used for the intended purpose, the Trust was established. Over the years it has made small grants

and has published such valuable booklets as Jude James's History of East Boldre and Norman Parker's account of the Ashley Walk bombing range. Now, with the objectives of the Trust and of the History Group being almost identical, it has been decided that running two separate charities would be a waste of resources and that the two should effectively be amalgamated. I am sure that Jean Cobb would have thoroughly approved and it is fitting that the first new publication after the merger should deal with her own corner of the Forest. She lived for many years near Roydon, just off the western edge of Beaulieu Heath, and assisted with many excavation and surveying projects in the area.

### **Fear of distant traffic**

Traffic is the bane of the New Forest, whether it results in the killing of livestock, the leaving of ribbons of discarded rubbish beside the roads or a wrecking of the tranquillity of large areas bordering the A and B class routes. It is also a potential source of terror to ridden horses, so that those not trained at an early age to tolerate it are not likely to have much of a future. The fear of a young horse confronted by a huge lorry at close quarters is understandable, but I have recently encountered two instances of a rare and bizarre form of vehicle phobia – a fear of distant traffic.

My old thoroughbred mare died in the spring and for all her faults, she was prepared to put up with most man-made annoyances, including traffic. Since then I have had two very beautiful and generally well-trained arabs for a trial period. For fifteen years I had such a horse (she is still with me in retirement) who carried me all over the West Country and from one end of the Forest to the other, so that I have always had a soft spot for the breed. These two, however, while tolerant of refuse trucks, skip lorries and military vehicles at close quarters both displayed absolute terror at the sight of traffic in the distance – sweating, shaking and in one case running backwards uncontrollably. I think this must be a particular problem of the northern Forest where the Fordingbridge road dominates the horizon when viewed from half a mile distant to either the north or south. What it is in the equine mind that causes such fear is quite beyond me and I am well past the age when I want to face the challenge of a training programme with uncertain prospects of success.

I will now have to look for an elderly, weight-carrying and sane New Forest pony who regards traffic in all its manifestations as simply part of the natural environment. That is what I started riding sixty years ago and it seems a good way in which to finish also, but while the raw product (foals) directly off the Forest can scarcely be given away, such elder statesmen of the horse world seem rather difficult to come by.

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