

# NEW FOREST NOTES OCTOBER 2016

## The National Trust and the Forest's landscape

One of the problems which have long bedevilled Forest management is a lack of consistency over time, compounded by inadequate records of past agreements and assurances. On the Crown lands the Forestry Commission is fairly good when it comes to the Inclosures, because the Design Plan system, reviewed every few years, is now well-understood and well-recorded. There remains a commercial element to the Inclosures' management, so precision is presumably regarded as quite important. Even when officers change, the plan remains. It is a different story when it comes to Open Forest management, where record keeping is erratic at best. For example, the holly pollarding programme has been operating for the past twenty five years, but if any records have been kept of the sites treated, the methods used and the dates of each treatment, they have certainly not been made public. A system which seems to be working quite well was recently agreed between the Verderers and the Commission, for ensuring that maintenance operations actually get done rather than being overlooked through forgotten verbal promises. It depends (like so much today) on computer records and loose sheets of paper, so it is doubtful how much of it will still be recoverable in ten years' time.

On the Adjacent Commons (those privately owned commons around the margins of the Forest), things are rather more chaotic. All but small portions of these commons are now owned and managed by the National Trust. The Trust has constantly-changing staff and no apparent overall objectives beyond an almost fanatical desire to cut down trees "for conservation reasons". Now of course the control of scrub is an integral part of good heathland management and this includes limiting the spread of natural regeneration of trees, but a continual erosion of much-valued landscape trees and clumps is an entirely different matter. I am sure the young people employed by the Trust locally are thoroughly educated in ecology, but it is perfectly plain that they lack much understanding of landscape and what elements of it are important to ordinary people who value the Forest for its natural beauty. Their latest plans for removing trees at Hale Purlieu are a very good example of this, although to be fair they have on this occasion undertaken some public consultation before sending in the chain saw gangs. From this it was clear that they had no idea about the (undocumented) assurances given by the Trust during earlier clearance programmes, in respect of landscape, screening of development and roads and so on.

A great "wild" fire severely damaged parts of Hale Purlieu some years after World War II and it was not until 1981-2 that the first tree-clearance programme was instituted. Trees and clumps of landscape importance were then carefully identified and excluded from the work. In those days the Trust still reflected the objectives of its original founders in which landscape was of key importance. Many of the stunted but picturesque Scots pine on the Purlieu are of great age, dating from the time when all of the common was part of the Hale Park Estate and they are thus now more than a century old. Other, younger, trees softened the hard edges of Millersford Plantation, screened inter-war bungalow development or acted as a barrier to traffic noise and visual intrusion. The protection of all was an important contribution to maintaining the character of the common. Moreover, in 2008 the

National Park produced a landscape assessment of all Scots pine across the Crown lands and Adjacent Commons, building on earlier work by John Lavender and the Forestry Commission. That was one of the better things the Park has done, although I don't think there was any consultation on the work and some important omissions and errors escaped notice.

So far as I could gather from talking to the Trust's staff at a recent display of its plans, they were not only quite unaware of these past assurances relating to landscape, but also of the important Park report of 2008.

### **The Verderers' Courtroom**

Not for the first time, the Verderers were ejected from their courtroom in September, to meet in the Lyndhurst community centre. Twice in my lifetime the Queen's House has undergone major restoration works. In the 1960s it was an old people's home before reverting to its former use as the Crown headquarters in the Forest. Then, in 1965, came the first major overhaul when, amongst other works, two Victorian bays adjoining the High Street were demolished. The next and longest closure started in 1979 when the building was classified as unsafe and it remained shut for several years. Although the Edwardian courtroom was unaffected by the works, the Verderers were obliged to move to the more Spartan concrete surroundings of the main hall at the community centre. As the renovations dragged on, the New Forest Association representative noted in a presentment that the community centre scarcely did justice to the dignity of the Court. She remarked that "the Lord Mayor's Banquet would not be the same if held in a Girl Guide hut" ! Eventually the Verderers were allowed to return in June of 1983.

The September disruption was caused by works to the courtroom itself, where renovations had been going on throughout the summer, but were still incomplete by the 21<sup>st</sup> of the month. The rather overdue scheme has been possible because grant money became available. The Verderers were later in the day given an opportunity of seeing the progress of the renovations. Overall I think that the Forestry Commission has achieved the delicate balancing act of maintaining the courtroom's original character while carrying out essential repairs and making it more convenient for visitors and for the holding of meetings. Best of all, the rather dreadful pink wall colouring has gone. The crumbling floor has been carefully restored, but in other respects the room looks very much as it has always done. Some unfortunate bits of modern furniture still remain, but there are plans for at least part of this to be replaced.

Over 100 years ago, Deputy Surveyor Gerald Lascelles wrote of the "ancient" court that "a more rank imposture does not exist", because what we see today is in large part a re-modelling of the old courtroom undertaken just before his time in office. Lascelles attempted to make good mid-Victorian works which had resulted in the demolition of the rooms above the court and its re-forming as a barn-like single storey structure. He replaced the original first floor, at the same time reducing the height of the courtroom by 2ft 6inches – "without anyone ever noticing it". One aspect of the Victorian building works that Lascelles particularly deplored was the use of mullioned windows which were a "despicable sham of bricks coated in plaster". The present restoration has involved the

replacement of the west-facing bay of the courtroom which contained just such a window, now replaced with genuine stonework and incorporating the original stained glass. I am sure the great Deputy Surveyor would have approved – even if it has taken 103 years since he wrote of his disgust. With luck the Verderers should be able to return by the time of the October Court.

One of my colleagues on the Court pointed out that whenever renovations have been carried out to the Queen's House in the past, the date of the work has been inscribed on relevant parts of the building. It would be a shame if this is not done in the stonework of the new bay. If this cannot be financed under the present contract, or out of Forestry Commission funds, perhaps some charity like the New Forest Trust would be prepared to pay for it.

### **Mushroom picking ban**

The Forestry Commission's ban on mushroom picking is a sad but unavoidable response to a Forest and its resources under intolerable pressure. Seventy five years ago, before the advent of commercial pickers and mass recreational visits, the arrival of Autumn mushrooms provided a welcome and perfectly harmless harvest for local people, although the more recent "allowance" of 1.5kg for personal consumption always seemed to me to be ridiculously large. I would often fill a pocket with the little brown "forest mushrooms", but I doubt if I look much more than 100 grams, just a fraction of the allowance.

The mushroom ban is just one symptom of the changes being forced on Forest life. When, in 1925, George Tweedie wrote his "Hampshire's Glorious Wilderness" recounting his tours about the Forest on a bicycle, a single cyclist was completely inoffensive and cycling was a method of transport also used by the famous artist and historian Heywood Sumner. Today tens of thousands of cyclists all trying to do the same thing would be ruinous. Similarly, most households would cut a few sprigs of holly in the Forest at Christmas, but if every visitor tried doing that now, the damage would be as great as that resulting from extraction of the Commission's holly sales.

### **Presentments**

Part of the work of the Verderers is to receive comments on or complaints about Forest matters from members of the public. These are called "presentments" and are usually made in the hope that the Court will be able to correct something which has gone wrong. For example, one presentment at the September Court was a complaint about neglected fencing at Dibden Purlieu which is allowing stock to escape onto busy main roads. A second type of presentment is designed principally to gain publicity for some particular point of view. While such presentments are perfectly permissible, they do tend to cause some problems for the Court. At the beginning of proceedings in September, the Official Verderer (chairman of the Court) reminded all those attending that the regulations require that presentments should be brief and relevant. For the Court's purposes, he said, "brief" means not more than five minutes. Clearly his words fell on some deaf ears as the two

opposing sides in the Latchmore Brook debate immediately set about trying to exceed the time limit and both were reluctant to sit down when instructed to do so.

It always amazes me that some of those making presentments have still failed to understand that long rambling and tedious presentments achieve nothing for their cause. They bore and confuse the Court and probably members of the public as well. A clear short statement is far more effective and, if complicated reasoning is thought necessary, this can always be handed to the Clerk in writing with the request that copies are given to each Verderer for consideration later on. In my time on the Court, I think that the award for "best presenter" must undoubtedly go to Mike Cooper in the years when he represented the Commoners Defence Association. He was always clear and to the point, but perhaps that was only to be expected from a retired police officer.

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