

New Forest Notes – September 1994

Barbara de Seyssel

THIRTY years ago this summer, the fences and cattle grids which define the boundary of the New Forest were completed and the first of the main roads (the A31) was fenced to prevent accidents to commonable animals. These two schemes, which time has proved outstandingly successful, were completed in the teeth of near hysterical anti-commoner agitation. The fences it was said, would spoil the Forest, the grids would never work - people claimed to have seen ponies walking them, rolling over them and even dragging their foals across by the ears. The whole thing was a shocking waste of public funds designed to put extra profits into the hands of greedy commoners.

Through the turbulent years which led up to these fencing schemes and through all the public raging against the Forest and its system of farming, a remarkable woman, Barbara de Seyssel devoted hours of every day to driving animals from the verges of the A31 and to clearing ponies from the Marchwood by-pass and the outskirts of Totton. How many lives she saved, animal and perhaps human, can only be guessed at, but her battered green van, red flags and motley collection of helpers became a familiar sight in and around the Forest during the early 1960s. The extraordinary dangers of driving stock through fast main road traffic, especially the A31, is frightening to think back on, but the "Pony Patrol" somehow avoided disaster. She would collect me after work in the summer months and, on a good night we would drive Ponies from Calmore to Cadnam in twenty minutes and then manage two sweeps of the A31 (Cadnam to Ringwood and back) before dusk.

Once the New Forest Act of 1964 was safely through Parliament and the first fencing schemes were completed, the Pony Patrol eventually ended, but Barbara remained in the Forest and followed a remarkable early life by becoming perhaps the most colourful and best loved character the Forest has known in recent times. After living in a caravan at Lyndhurst for a time she eventually rented Holmhill Cottage from the Forestry Commission, perhaps the most remote primitive and delightful dwelling in the Forest at that time. The cottage, its stables, outbuildings and paddocks occupied a sandy hill deep inside the immense block of woodland which lies between Minsted and Burley. It had no water (except for a shallow well which was for ever silting up), no electricity, no telephone, no sanitation and barely an access track. Barbara eventually succeeded in securing a telephone line, but that was the extent of her seduction by modern conveniences. At Holmhill from late middle age she lived alone except for her dog, cats, chickens, horses and the deer. Not for nothing was Holmhill described in 1670 as a place "very much delightful for the feeding and harbouring of His Majesties deer".

The garden and paddocks were always spotless and the horses immaculate. The one room of the cottage which she used was by contrast, absolutely chaotic. Box after box of books line the walls and covered the floor. The table was concealed beneath sedimentary layers of unwashed crockery, partly completed manuscripts and a portable typewriter which was never empty. Upstairs, deer skins (legally acquired) were stretched out on the floors curing and the whole building was pervaded by the smell of wood smoke from the kitchen range. But the air of seclusion and isolation was deceptive. Visitors flocked to this strange, calm elderly woman and risked drinking her rather dreadful coffee from a dirty mug for the sheer pleasure of her company. I would ride out from Cadnam most

weekends and we would spend hours wandering the rides and paths from Puckpits to Oakley. Others of her wide circle of friends did much the same, all of us I suppose, seeking refuge from our cluttered daily lives in this utterly uncluttered setting and company.

Barbara de Seyssel was many things - writer, accomplished horsewoman, amateur archaeologist, expert on woodland crafts, hunter, and traveller. She died alone at Holmhill in 1977. Thereafter the Forestry Commission quickly demolished the house and buildings, ploughed up the garden and paddocks and - dreadful insult to the memory of one who loved native trees - planted eucalyptus over the entire site. Obliteration of the holding was total, but this was perhaps not an unfitting end. Barbara herself had ordered the destruction of her horses immediately on her own death to prevent them falling into uncaring hands. Today, nothing but a scatter of daffodils in the spring recalls Holmhill Cottage and its last occupant, but if any part of the New Forest is haunted, it is for me those silent and still relatively undisturbed woods of Holmhill and Highland Water.

Verderers versus Forestry Commission

Last month I evidently confused one or two readers by supporting the joint control of the Forest by Forestry Commission and Verderers and then going on to criticise the Commission for an arbitrary and probably illegal development of recreational facilities. This was not the first mistake the Commission has made and I doubt if it will be the last. That organisation is no more immune to error than the Verderers or any other public authority, but the fact that a mistake has been made does not mean that the whole management structure is defective. Such a judgement might be justified if the Verderers allowed the error to go unchallenged, but at the moment there is absolutely no evidence to suggest that this will happen. If the mountain bike development is illegal, the Court must demand its abatement. If it is legal (but nonetheless damaging to the Forest), public pressure will have to be the means of its removal. Mr. Rudd of Bramshaw raises the interesting question (to which I have given him the answer in private on several occasions) as to whether the Verderers, now largely funded by the Forestry Commission, will be able to withstand pressure from their paymasters. Put crudely, the Deputy Surveyor might say "Give me permission for electric hook ups at the Ashurst camp or I will cut your grant." After twenty years as a Verderer, during most of which time at least some money has come from the Commission, I can say that there has never been the slightest attempt to exert the type of pressure Mr. Rudd fears. Over the last two years, when the bulk of the Verderers' funding has come via Edinburgh, the court has regularly refused permission for cherished Forestry Commission projects, it has challenged the legality of more than one proposed or already undertaken scheme and it has collected back payments of compensation for past transgressions of the rules which have recently come to light. It would have been easy for the Deputy Surveyor to suggest quietly that a rather more acquiescent attitude would ease the passage of the Verderers budget. He has not done so and over the period the amount of the grant has risen substantially. If one leaves aside questions of integrity and fairmindedness in the existing Forestry Commission staff (the existence of which I readily acknowledge), it is not in the Commission's own interest to attempt any such blackmail. If they did try it, the attempt would immediately be made public and the Commission is very vulnerable to adverse publicity as has been demonstrated many times in the past. Perhaps even more important than this, I believe that the Commission has very good reasons for wanting to preserve the Verderers

Court with which it has worked well in recent years. In the Verderers the Commission is dealing with a small highly expert committee with an unrivalled knowledge of the Forest and a good professional background in land management (the present membership includes four chartered surveyors). Such a body while certainly not conceding everything the Commission would like in the way of recreational developments is likely to be a great deal more understanding of its point of view than, say a lumbering national park committee of well meaning but urban minded councillors intent on building roads, sports facilities and street lighting. Of course no Commission officer could say this in public, but an elected Verderer need have no such inhibitions.

Mr. Rudd is also concerned at the "direct connection" with the Forestry Commission of some Verderers, notably the Ministry of Agriculture and Commission appointees and (I presume he means) any elected members who may be employed in the Forest or who may work in timber production. Again in my experience there have seldom been more determined critics of some Commission policies than that authorities own appointed Verderers. The late Mr. George Ryle was the scourge of several Deputy Surveyors. As for my present colleagues, I have never known any of them hold back from telling the Deputy Surveyor exactly what they thought of Commissions actions from the bad hanging of a gate to the Forest wide management of recreation. None has, so far as I know, been threatened with loss of appointment to the Court, employment or contracts. I can see the theoretical basis of Mr. Rudds fears, but they are groundless in practice. He says it will be interesting to see what the Verderers can do about the mountain bike issue without jeopardising their funding. Of course I cannot commit the Court to any particular line of action - the Verderers will all make up their own minds in the light of the evidence and the flood of complaints now streaming in. But if they decide that the Commissions actions have been damaging to the Forest and / or are unauthorised, I have no doubt that they will resist them by every means possible and without regard to any theoretical and improbable financial consequences.