

## NEW FOREST NOTES DECEMBER 2019

### Christmas holly in crisis

“Of all the trees that are in the wood, the holly bears the crown”, but in the New Forest this cheerful seasonal message has been shattered by a very depressing piece of science which has just been released. It records the work of a Bournemouth University researcher on a fungal disease which is devastating large areas of holly woodland throughout the Forest, but particularly in the central areas. The author says that New Forest hollies are under widespread attack and that this is the first landscape-scale emergence of pathogenic *Neonectria ditissima* in British holly trees. The research seems to have concentrated on infection occurring since 2017, but to anyone who has been observing the decline of the old holly woods or “holms”, it seems likely that the disease has been going on much longer than that. In September of 2002 I wrote in these notes about the disturbing decline of holly and even at that time the Forestry Commission’s officers suspected the involvement of some then unidentified fungus, especially in isolated woods like Cockley Bushes near Godshill. At that time I suggested that the picture was not entirely bleak and that pollarding affected trees seemed to have the ability to rejuvenate them. That has since proved to be over-optimistic. In those days it seemed likely that the die-back of holly was largely a physical process of destruction caused by large herbivores (particularly ponies) stripping off the bark wholesale and thus leading directly to the death of the trees. Now it is apparent that although this remains the cause of death in many cases there is the added complication that the wounds created by teeth allow spores of the fungus to enter damaged trees. Holly pollarding and the Commission’s lucrative sales of berried Christmas holly may well be helping the fungus to spread. Saw cuts produce wounds in just the same way as teeth and may indicate the need for a change in management practices. Moreover, the researchers point out the danger of infected material being spread about the country through the Christmas berry trade.

The report makes it clear that there are many unknown factors affecting the spread of the disease in the Forest, but a very depressing map shows huge numbers of trees affected, particularly around the centre of the Forest. Users of the road from Lyndhurst to Linwood will have seen the decline of the holly wood adjoining Highland Water Inclosure just north of Bolderwood Green. This is now almost completely dead and that is probably the result of combined bark stripping and fungal infection.

About one and a half miles to the north west of this site, on the road from Linwood to Fritham is an interesting case study. Here there is a rare named clump of hollies - Seven Holms. Since the name appears on a map of about 1855, the clump has clearly been well established for nearly two hundred years. About twenty five years ago it was showing marked signs of decline and the Forestry Commission then pollarded the worst affected trees. Some died immediately, but most responded with vigorous new growth which survived for a decade or so. I referred to it in my optimistic assessment of 2002, but I wrote too soon. Most of this rejuvenation has faded out and Seven Holms may soon be no more. This is very sad as it was a notable landscape feature. Of course how far this is the result of barking and how much, if at all, the result of infection is not known. In addition, some



*Seven Holms – a dying New Forest landmark near Linwood*

of the Commission's experimental plots which are attempting to promote new growth through coppicing or pollarding are showing similar good initial responses, but may be destined to follow the same path. Work above Whiteshoot on Fritham Plain west looks particularly flourishing at the moment, but is this merely a temporary reprieve for an ultimately doomed wood ?

I hope that somehow the holly woods will be able to hold on in the New Forest, particularly if management policies are able to limit the spread of the disease. If not, and following the now inevitable destruction of most of our ash trees, the woods will be very much poorer places in landscape terms and for wildlife in future. Perhaps one spark of hope is that the researchers found far less infection where holly comprises the understorey in conifer woods. I had not noticed this before, but it is certainly very apparent once one knows what to look for.

### **John Burry**

Last month saw the death of Mr. John Burry who from 1993 to 1999 was chairman of the Verderers' Court. The Court is often described (quite wrongly), in poorly researched guide books and in the press, as a relic of mediaeval Forest Law. In fact it is, in Forest terms, a fairly modern institution established in 1877 and deriving most of its powers from post-war Acts of Parliament. There have been only seventeen chairmen in its lifetime and, together with my colleague Dionis Macnair, I have had the privilege of serving with eight of them. The Court's founding legislation gives the chairman the rather curious title of Official Verderer. That is something which clearly dates from a time when officials were generally respected citizens by reason of the posts they held, instead of today's common perception of them as functionaries to be derided. Those eight most recent Official Verderers varied very greatly in their understanding of the Forest and its needs. Some have been outstanding and others rather less than mediocre, but I don't propose to suggest into which category each fell. John Burry, however, was something of a mould-breaker when he was appointed to the Court. He was, for example, only the second Official Verderer not to have a title or to come from one

of the big landowning families of the Forest. As a prominent local businessman he brought to the Verderers managerial skills which had not always been possessed by his predecessors, although those skills did not necessarily sit easily with the traditions and constitution of the Court. I suspect he was more used to issuing instructions which he expected to be carried out than listening to nine often conflicting views of his fellow Verderers. I have to say, however, that he was always scrupulously courteous in his dealings with the Court, although he had some sharp conflicts with several individual members.

John became Official Verderer at a time when the Court was riding high following its notable victory over Hampshire County Council and in defence of the Forest in the matter of the Lyndhurst Bypass Bill. By the time he left six years later the great battles over the establishment of a national park were just beginning. In that conflict many people believed that both the Forest and the influence of the Verderers were decidedly the losers, but that was a testing ground for his successors. His own trial of strength came over the second modern wave of recreational pressure and for that both the chairman and the Court were largely unprepared and generally outwitted by the Forestry Commission.

Within weeks of his arrival the Verderers were plunged into a fierce but purely domestic quarrel over an application for an exchange of land. A Bramshaw couple, Mr. & Mrs. Wilcox, owned a farm in the village and also a former encroachment cottage adjoining it which lacked any garden and which accordingly depended upon a licence from the Forestry Commission for the use of a small patch of Forest land. Mr. & Mrs. Wilcox applied to exchange the licenced land (which they wished to possess) for a paddock at Bramshaw Telegraph which was to be put into the Forest. Probably the application would have been approved with little trouble if Mrs. Wilcox had not been a well-known TV personality whose professional name is Esther Rantzen. Another resident of the village and some of his followers took exception to the application and so began a three year conflict in which the Verderers and particularly their chairman were caught in the middle. In one presentment to the Court, a former clerk to the parish council told the Verderers: "This business is spoiling life in Bramshaw with vicious quarrelling and jealousy. On behalf of the people who live in Bramshaw, please clear up this beastly squabble and get back to sanity".

The battle raged on for many months until the Verderers were finally able to approve the exchange, but that was not before the Court, the applicants' lawyers and the Forestry Commission's officers had been accused of all sorts of evils and malpractice. John Burry must have wondered what he had got himself into.

The other great controversy of John Burry's reign still dogs the Forest today and that was the subject of uncontrolled abuse of the Forest by mountain bikers. Early in John's time the Commission issued a mountain bike route map, without any consultation and acting, as the New Forest Association was advised, completely illegally. Over the map the Commission was eventually forced to back down, but the replacement map and the lack of controls over trespass were fought over almost until the day John retired and remain the bane of the Forest even today.

In his last year the looming threat of the national park began to overshadow the Forest, although at that stage in the less precise form of proposals to give statutory powers to an amorphous and toothless body called the New Forest Committee. John was spared the heat of this fight which proceeded to develop over the next six years and embroiled his successors.

The next two Official Verderers were a reversion to the more familiar members of the leading landowning families of the Forest, but perhaps a pattern had been established into which Dominic May fitted more than a decade later.

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