

NEW FOREST NOTES DECEMBER 2020

Dionis Macnair

At the November meeting of the Verderers the retirement of one of the Court's longest serving members – Dionis Macnair – was announced. She was elected in 1973 and, apart from a three year break some time ago, has served continuously until this year. Such a remarkable period of service is only weeks less than that of the legendary Briscoe Eyre, who was one of the founder members of the Court after its establishment in 1877. She has thus worked for the Forest as an elected verderer for a little short of a third of the Court's existence. Notwithstanding the nonsense often talked about it being an "ancient mediaeval" body, the present Verderers' Court is little older than the County Council.



*Photograph by permission of the
Verderers of the New Forest*

One of the great strengths of the Verderers is that different members have different areas of expertise. One may be an expert on cattle management, while another is an authority on the law. A third may be a specialist in the workings of local government, but Dionis Macnair's passion has always been the breeding of New Forest ponies. For seven years prior to her election she was secretary of the breed society and even before that was on its committee. Her vigorous contributions to the Court's discussions of this subject have always been interesting, sometimes curious, and not infrequently quite controversial.

One essential qualification for any verderer and especially an elected one, is a detailed knowledge of the Forest's geography. Over the years I have had a few colleagues who could at the same time tell you the condition of a bridge at the southern edge of Beaulieu Heath and also of another one at Bruins Purlieu twenty miles away at the opposite end of the Forest. Dionis's knowledge may not be quite so encyclopaedic, but there is not much that goes on in her south

western part of the Forest that she does not know about and especially in her own village of Burley. There the nature of the population there has changed much even in my lifetime. The old hunting community with its retired army and colonial service families has almost vanished, to be replaced by many people with business interests outside the Forest. Dionis Macnair's term of office has spanned this sometimes-uncomfortable transition and she has fascinating stories of the old days. I particularly value one in which she tells how, as a child, she was taken to tea with the famous Forest artist and archaeologist, Heywood Sumner, at Cuckoo Hill. There can be few other people remaining who actually met the great man.

Without her the meetings of the Court are likely to be less colourful in future and I know that my colleagues join me in wishing Dionis a contented and comfortable retirement.

Yellow plastic blocks

Like the toadstools of autumn, yellow plastic blocks have been appearing across my northern part of the Forest and probably elsewhere as well. They are 3" square and about 3" high, secured to the ground with a large metal pin. I immediately started to receive enquiries as to what they are for and, because the Verderers had not been notified of their arrival, even the well-informed office could not initially answer that question. It turns out that they are monitoring points for a long-term vegetation survey being undertaken by Forestry England, the principles of which were approved by the Court last year. This is valuable work as vegetation changes are occurring over vast swathes of the Forest as grazing pressure grows inexorably, year by year, fuelled by an insane headage-based government subsidy system. This year's full marking fee figures will not be available until next month, but they are already at a record level. Of course many commoners need and deserve the money they are paid, but there must be a better system of distributing it.



By providing fixed points it is in theory possible to return year after year for photography and other methods of recording. This will allow trends to be monitored, but there are problems in the way in which some of this work is being undertaken. Firstly, there is the choice of sites, some of which seem to me to be rather pointless. Of the blocks I have seen, many are in stable areas of high grazing pressure where photography at least will show no change in the event of an increase or decrease in the number of

stock. Subtle changes in the grass species could no doubt be identified, but I am not sure how this helps much. It would be far better to position the monitoring points on the boundary between different types of vegetation, for example, where heather is being driven back by dung-enriched poor grassland. It is by this process that the once beautiful Bramshaw commons have been virtually destroyed and such conversion is already well advanced across parts of the eastern side of the

Crown lands. Although some of the monitoring points are well chosen, there has been no discussion with the Verderers as to the precise choice of locations and method of marking.

There is next the problem of the durability of the blocks. The ones I have seen seem too often to present a direct challenge to vandals and I wonder how many will survive for the life of the study. An experimental sharp kick certainly failed to dislodge one block that I tested, but it loosened it. Repeated pounding with a log or heavy boot would probably have achieved a vandal's objective. From the point of view of risk to ridden horses, the blocks have clearly been designed with a measure of safety in mind. They have smooth edges and they are plainly visible for the most part, but I certainly would not like to hit one at speed on a drift or when colt-hunting. Altogether I think it would have been better to provide detectable metal plates just below the turf and whose position is fixed by measured survey or by precise GPS. There is clearly little limit to the money available for such projects as the organizers intend to spend £10,000 to £15,000 in the first year alone. It will be interesting to see how the blocks survive the next lockdown-driven surges in recreation.

Payments for access across Forest land

This vexed subject seems once again to be causing trouble in the Forest and it has been a long-running sore throughout my lifetime. Forestry England is entitled, like every other landowner, to grant or withhold permission for new ways across the Forest from private land to a nearby highway. Such accesses were the subject of a seventy-year battle between the Verderers (who challenged the Crown's right to make such grants without the Court's consent) and forestry officials who regarded it as simply good and profitable estate management. That was a battle in which the Verderers were routed in 1949 when the minister responsible for the Forest was given statutory powers to grant licences for all sorts of purposes. In every type of licence but one, the right to grant was made subject to the Court's veto and that single exception was the making of ways across the Forest.

Naturally the land managers seek to make money out of the issue of such licences. If planning permission is granted for new houses and the building site cannot be accessed without a licence, that licence may reflect a portion of the development value of the land. I don't suppose there are many private landowners who would dispute the justice of such an arrangement – however much the developer might complain. Similarly, if a home owner or farmer wants a new gateway to the Forest on his boundary, he must pay for the privilege, although probably at a lower rate.

Where I think the Forestry Commission has overstepped the mark in the past is in the case of what were called in my youth "ancient accesses". These belong to houses and farms which have existed from long before the New Forest Act of 1949 and depend upon routes over the Forest. Many of the farm gateways have probably been there since before the New Forest was made and have never been the subject of payment or conditions. On occasions, ill-advised land managers have tried to demand a licence application from the owner of such gateways when a property changes hands. That to my mind is absolutely wrong and has always been resisted, at least by those with any

knowledge of the subject. I have heard less complaints about this in the last few years, so perhaps a more reasonable attitude has now been adopted.

Wendy Wiseman

Voluntary societies, with which the New Forest is particularly well provided, depend not so much on the big names who make the newspaper headlines, as upon the grass-roots members who do the hard day-to-day work with little acknowledgement. Such a person was Wendy Wiseman of East End who died last month. Wendy had worked for Natural England in Lyndhurst prior to her retirement and for the past decade or so she was an active member of the New Forest History and Archaeology Group. She organized the labour force for excavation work in the Forest under Professor Tony King, served on the committee and seldom missed lectures and other meetings of the Group, where she often assisted with the catering. My own memories will always be of her contribution to field survey work which of necessity is confined to the winter months in the Forest. Despite her advancing years, she was always happy to force her way through freezing wet undergrowth, clutching the end of a tape or a ranging pole, and without question she was the most cheerful and entertaining member of the team. Aside from the Forest, Wendy was very keen on music and served until her death as local secretary of the Elgar Society.

Anthony Pasmore