

NEW FOREST NOTES DECEMBER 2021

Dibden Inclosure – timber production to walkers' sanctuary

Ranged along the south east boundary of the Forest is a series of timber plantations known as “Verderers’ Inclosures” because its original creation in the 1960s required permission from the Verderers’ Court. The woods comprise, from north to south, Longdown, Ipley, Marchwood, Dibden, Fawley and Hardley Inclosures. They are held by Forestry England under a lease granted in about 1960 for a term of one hundred and fifty years, so that a bit more than half that time remains unexpired. Most of the original fences have now been removed. Large parts of them are being cleared of trees, while the underlying ridge and furrow ploughing is being levelled to restore the original land surface. This process was put in train before the present fashion for tree retention became important and is justified by the assertion that heather moorland will absorb more carbon than trees and that in any case heather is more ecologically important than plantation trees. Despite this felling policy, a significant portion of the woodland remains in places and is much valued by local residents and walkers in an otherwise very exposed part of the Forest. Perhaps equally important, one of the original purposes of this group of inclosures was to provide a living screen of the intensive development of the Waterside area which was taking place in the immediate post-war years. This development had been anticipated as long ago as 1945 when an influential report of the New Forest Advisory Planning Committee specifically recommended the establishment of such a new screen,



citing Busketts Lawn Inclosure as demonstrating the effectiveness of woods for this purpose. In screening the low-rise housing development from Dibden to Hardley, the inclosures have worked remarkably well. In contrast, the mess that is Fawley refinery and the hideous cranes of the waterside facilities further to the north (both of which dominate the Forest) have no adequate protective screens.

The photograph, looking from the south towards the Dibden Purlieu housing and pylons, shows the effectiveness of Dibden Inclosure as a screen.

The value of these woods was recognized, partly due to pressure from local residents, when the Forestry Commission's "design plans" for the Forest's plantations were drawn up. The so-called "200-year vision" shows the group of Waterside plantations being retained in large part as mixed woodland. Of course, this will exceed the commercial lifespan of the present conifer crops and, indeed, of the lease itself. Some re-negotiation is likely to be required.

In the much shorter term, a disagreement has arisen over Dibden Inclosure. This plantation is, at over 300 acres, the largest Verderers' Inclosure in the entire New Forest. It stretches from the Applemore roundabout on the A326 road to that at Dibden Purlieu. As I recorded in these Notes in January 2020, a proposal was made that Dibden Inclosure should be re-fenced, thus excluding the commoners' grazing animals once again. The idea originated after a year (2019) when there were many reported conflicts between walkers, especially those with dogs, and the entirely legitimate presence of ponies and cattle grazing the area. The intention was to create a secure, sheltered walking area in an intensively-used part of the Forest where the interaction between livestock and recreation could be largely eliminated. Many Forest people were not entirely happy about this, but they saw it as the only possible solution to a growing problem likely to result eventually in serious personal injury if nothing was done. The pill was made less hard to swallow because the Dibden tree cover is still extensive and the grazing value was consequently low.

Over the last two years, despite the burgeoning pressure of public recreation during lockdowns, the very desultory discussions have, it appears, made no progress. Natural England was lukewarm about the plans from the start and now, it seems, has adopted a harder line, especially in relation to the strip of re-seeded grazing beside the Hythe bypass. Natural England's predecessors raged against the making of such reseeded areas, but now it appears that they have become regarded as valuable ecological resources. Since this strip must be crossed by anyone walking from Dibden Purlieu, it is difficult to see how it can remain open and still achieve the objective of a stock free zone abutting on the Waterside. It seems that this is one more in a long series of conflicts between the demands of recreation, grazing and technical conservation.

The Verderers and social media

Last month the Verderers agreed to establish a Facebook page to be operated under strict rules drafted by the Court's chairman and maintained by members of staff. It is, like the Twitter page set up a couple of years ago, to be used only for public information such as announcing the dates of courts and the location and times of pony drifts and any consequent temporary closure of nearby car parks. It will not be used to promote or discuss controversial proposals like the closure of camp sites or the filling-in of Forest streams. Similarly, no public comment on the Court's posting will be permitted. Such comment, of course, may be dealt with by individuals on their own pages.

I have been looking back through the Twitter content so far and I think the rules have been well followed to date. The announcements are inevitably very repetitive, but their purpose is to inform and not to entertain. Of course, rules such as the Verderers have laid down for themselves are quite at variance with the material on Forestry England and national park pages, but they seem more appropriate to a body like the Court in which party politics and commercial ambitions have no place.

Like many people of my generation, I have never quite understood the overwhelming fascination of social media or the need to be glued to a smart phone at all hours of the day and night. It seems to me extraordinary that people go out into the beautiful surroundings of the Forest and walk with eyes fixed on a small screen or with phones clamped to their ears, chattering incessantly to their friends. They completely miss the voice of a skylark high overhead, the tinkle of a small stream or a glimpse of a fallow buck disappearing into the undergrowth.

Verderers' election

I am writing this on 27th November, the day after this year's election which was the first to be contested for some years. It proved to be a rather strange event in some respects. For a start, the count and announcement of results took place as usual in the Queen's House and for some, like me, it was the first time since the outbreak of covid that we had been in the building - an absence of over two years. I, and I am sure the other successful candidates, would like to thank all those who supported us and the staff who managed to make things go reasonably smoothly. A radical re-thinking of the electoral registration process, however, is clearly a nettle the Court will have to grasp, but we have a short breathing space before that business again becomes pressing.

Over the years, various little traditions have built up around election night. The Clerk, other members of staff and retiring verderers seeking re-election used to meet up for a meal in a local pub prior to the count, instead of hanging about in a cold Verderers' Hall. Covid has put a stop to that. On a more exalted plane, the Court's chairman always, by custom, entertained the High Sherriff to dinner in Lyndhurst. This time the Official Verderer was unwell and the Sherriff, in his impressive livery, with sandwich in hand, wandered amongst the election officials, Verderers' staff and candidates who had been provided with a buffet supper in the courtroom.

One tradition which did not fail this year was the delayed arrival of one of the ballot boxes, leading to a very late start of the count of votes. It was nearly midnight before I crept very slowly homewards. On such occasions I am always conscious of the unfortunate example of one of my predecessors, Sir Oliver Crosthwaite Eyre. He had the misfortune to kill a pony one election night, although it has to be said that was in a parliamentary election and not one of the times when he was returned as senior elected member of the court.



This has very probably been my last election. My first attendance at the count in the same room on election night, forty-eight years ago, seems a very distant memory. A few years back, an unkind Official Verderer managed to dig up this photograph of that occasion. It shows a remarkably youthful-looking Maldwin Drummond (he always topped the poll), an elegant young lady - my recently-retired colleague Dionis Macnair - now more than matching me in age, and me with a full head of hair and encased in a large duffle coat. Late November nights in those old pre-climate change days tended to be cold and the Verderers' courtroom was always badly heated.

So now we all start again, for my part saddened by the retirement of Jim Greenwood who did not seek re-election, but with new younger blood to replace him. I think that all candidates agreed that the pressures on the Forest are a major issue for the future, so the Court's tasks over the coming years are not likely to become any easier.

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