

NEW FOREST NOTES DECEMBER 2024

The Verderers' Election

By the time these notes appear, the Verderers' election (26th November) will be long past and the two successful candidates (Ms A. Tilbury and Ms K. Harrison) will be settling in to their six years of work for the Forest. Even before the votes were cast and counted, it was clear that this election would mark something of a milestone, with the first female member of the court to be elected for more than half a century. With two vacancies to be filled from three female and one male candidates, that result was inevitable. With two of the ladies actually elected and one female councillor already a member, the appearance of the court will be much changed. The only other lady to be elected since the court was reconstituted in 1949 was Miss Dionis Macnair. She joined, together with me, in 1973 and at the same election Maldwin Drummond was re-elected. Dionis retired several years ago. Of course, for many years past women have regularly been appointed as verderers for the central and local government bodies who hold the majority voting strength on the court. The picture below shows the candidates on the Verderers' bench at the announcement of the result.



Prior to 1949, at which date the court was reconstituted, only one woman served as a verderer in the years after 1877. She was Mrs. D.M. Crosthwaite-Eyre, daughter of one of the court's founders, Briscoe Eyre. In those days the qualification for verderers was the ownership of seventy-five acres of land with common rights. Today it is the occupation of a mere single acre with rights of pasture.

The vanished mansion

For many years past I have spent much of the winter months working with a team from the New Forest History and Archaeology Group searching different parts of the Forest for unrecorded archaeological sites and making accurate plans of those already known. It has been hard and often uncomfortable work involving hours of tramping through freezing heathland or rain-sodden woods. This is not the treasure hunting so often seen on television. Nothing is dug up and nothing is

collected except photographs and plans, but it can be very rewarding and has added immeasurably to our knowledge of the Forest's past. For each day's work in the field, a couple more are needed in writing up the fieldwork in preparation for eventual publication.

Over the last three winters, the work has been concentrated on a triangle between Lyndhurst, Ashurst and Cadnam and most of this is fairly dense woodland. The results have made all the effort worthwhile. Of nearly 2,000 acres of survey area, we now know that at least a quarter was once farmland. Where ancient oaks and beeches now stand, once thought to be remnants of primeval forest, farmers grew arable crops or worked small pasture fields just as they do today in the Forest's villages. It was an entirely different world from the Forest which now exists. No doubt the finds are of more interest to specialists than to the average Forest visitor or resident, but one strange site of more recent date is unique in the district and its story is remarkable. It is the site of a mansion built in the mid-18th century and which stood for only about fifty years before being demolished, but not simply knocked-down. Almost every trace of it was removed and the site and its grounds were then immediately planted with trees and forgotten.

There are in the New Forest traces of a great many buildings which have disappeared over the ages. Most of them, like the great palace at Bolderwood, have left surviving traces such as foundations or landscaped grounds. More humble dwellings like keepers' cottages were sometimes burnt down, leaving only mounds and hollows, while 20th century military buildings are usually evidenced by wide scatters of concrete and even intact floor slabs. The vanished mansion is quite different.

The great house was built deep in the woods east of Lyndhurst for the master keeper of Ironhill Walk. Walks were administrative divisions of the Forest and master keepers were, by the 18th century, holders of sinecures granted by the crown. The house was erected at great public expense. It must have been an imposing structure on its isolated hilltop position and it possessed extensive outbuildings including a coach house surmounted by a clock tower. So far as I know, no pictures of the house survive, but it seems to have been built of brick and was roofed largely with slate which was presumably brought by sea to Eling or Southampton. It had a troubled history, changing hands on several occasions and with huge repair bills run up within a few years of building. Eventually, about the end of the century, it was turned over to accommodate French prisoners of war, presumably on a semi-parole basis as this can hardly have been a high security prison. Then, after the end of the war, the crown decided that the building was an unwarranted expense and the entire site was cleared, even to the extent of digging out of most of the foundations and probably recovering the surfacing materials from the drives and farmyards. Materials such as hoggin were scarce and expensive in this part of the Forest and nothing was to be wasted. Finally, the silviculturalists moved in and the site was quickly planted over with oak and sweet chestnut.

Today all that remains is a large hole left when the walls of the wine cellar were salvaged and a strange sinuous ride which is probably of the same date as the house. The ride is now almost wholly destroyed or abandoned, but fragments of it can still be traced (see photo). It is easy to



imagine Georgian ladies and gentlemen enjoying this “pleasure ride” on a summer’s evening. It could quite well have served as a model for Kipling’s “Way through the Woods” – “shut seventy years ago”.

You will hear the beat of a horse’s feet,
 And the swish of a skirt in the dew,
 Steadily cantering through
 The misty solitudes,
 As though they perfectly knew
 The old lost road through the woods.
 But there is no road through the woods.

Today only the distant roar of traffic on the nearby A 337 and A 35 roads shatters this vision.

Aggressive cows ?

The November Verderers’ Court was dominated by presentments about cycling on the Forest, so that a long and heartfelt complaint from a lady dog-walker about being repeatedly chased by a cow was in danger of being sidelined. The complainant believed that the pursuing cow probably had a young calf nearby, but I am not sure that a calf was actually seen. In summary, her request was that for “a few short weeks” just before and after calving, cattle should be excluded from the Forest. Her presentment followed the tragic events in which, she said, an elderly lady had been killed by cattle at Godshill. The death of that lady was certainly a very serious and troubling matter for all concerned with the Forest, but before the result of an inquest (and perhaps not even then) it is difficult to know exactly what happened. Was she actually attacked by cattle or did she collapse and then become

surrounded by cows? Cattle can be inquisitive and are quite likely to investigate someone lying on the ground.

The Verderers' Court, as an institution, has remained tight-lipped about the Godshill incident, beyond an initial brief statement, so I can only speak from my own experience of running cattle on the Forest. The Commoners' Defence chairman, on the other hand, gave a useful and informative television interview immediately afterwards.

Before I retired some years ago, I had kept livestock on the Forest for the best part of sixty years. For the latter half of that time, my late wife and I ran a small herd of beef cattle in the north of the Forest. Only once in all those years did I experience or hear of any violence to humans within the herd. That exception was when we were struck by BSE (mad cow disease) which was spread through contaminated cattle feed. No cow could possibly be blamed for that. My mother was attacked (not on the Forest) and the unfortunate perpetrator was shot the same day. In fact, our cattle spent many of their mornings happily sleeping on the village green, surrounded by the small children of the primary school who used the green as a playground. Violence amongst Forest cattle is exceptionally rare and when it does occur, it is almost always defensive and related to actual or perceived threats from dogs.

As to the suggestion that cows with young calves should not be permitted on the Forest, it is extremely questionable as to whether the Verderers have the power to make such a rule. Cattle are not vicious by nature and they are certainly not acting un-naturally in seeking to defend their young. Moreover, it is not just a question of banning them for the few short weeks suggested. Strong maternal instincts can persist for many months and a ban of all animals with calves would effectively destroy the present system of Forest farming.

Everyday life is full of risks. Each time we drive on the roads, such risk is accepted and anyone walking in the Forest's woods clearly accepts the risk of a tree branch falling upon them. That risk can be avoided by keeping out of woods and any very remote danger from cows can similarly be escaped by keeping away from anywhere that they might be encountered. There are great tracts of cattle-free walking country close to the Forest. At Redlynch the Woodland Trust has a large block of forest, west of Ringwood is a huge area of Forestry England land and at Nomansland the RSPB has miles of public footpaths on its Franchise estate. All of this is freely available to any nervous or elderly dog walker who would prefer not to encounter cattle and ponies. The survival of the Forest is entirely dependant on the grazing animals. With this, as with so many recreational pressures, management should not sacrifice the special qualities of the area to meet burgeoning public demands.

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