

## **NEW FOREST NOTES APRIL 2010**

### **Natural England's Verderer**

The rules which govern membership of public bodies limit the time during which any individual appointed (not elected) to the Verderers' Court may serve. Natural England's Verderer, Peter Frost, has now completed the maximum term allowed and is in the process of being replaced. Perhaps these rules are very sound in the case of paid public appointments, but they are rather unhelpful, to say the least, in an organization such as the Verderers where experience and continuity count for a great deal. The Court may be lucky and receive a highly competent and knowledgeable successor, but such people are thin on the ground. The Verderers can ill afford to take on a member who knows nothing of the Forest.

Natural England's appointment was formerly known as the "amenity Verderer" in the days when he was chosen by the CPRE and later on by the Countryside Commission. Some of Peter Frost's predecessors took the job seriously, but others were little better than passengers who contributed very little. Such cases were particularly unfortunate because the constitution of the Court makes it potentially weak in the area of understanding and appreciating natural beauty and tranquillity, which are both key elements of the New Forest. Land management, farming and forestry are all well served by highly experienced people, but protecting the less practical values of the Forest depends more or less on chance. If one or two of the elected members and a similar number of appointed Verderers have an interest in the subject there is no problem, but if not the amenity Verderer may be a lone voice. If that voice is a weak one, the Forest is in trouble.

Over the last few years, the Verderers have been fortunate. In addition to the crucial expertise in commoning matters provided by the elected element, the majority of the Court has been very interested in protecting the character of the New Forest. In this, Peter Frost with his New Forest Association background, has played a key role, but that is a balance which could very easily be lost. At times in the past the Verderers have retreated into a sort of agricultural bunker and I would be sorry to see them return to it.

It is difficult to have any confidence in Natural England as an appointing body. I know that, nominally, it encompasses the former work of the Countryside Agency, but its staff seem singularly ill-equipped and professionally disinclined to pay any attention to landscape matters. Tranquillity seems to be quite beyond its comprehension. We have had a dreadful example of this in the last few months when much of the already poor screening of the A 31 has been obliterated, allegedly at the insistence of Natural England – an organization which seems quite unable to appreciate anything beyond extreme scientific conservation. Trees and bushes within the fenced road reservation have been brutally eliminated because that is thought desirable to achieve some obscure scientific end. The rest of us must reflect national park purposes in the decisions we make : Natural England seems to do as it pleases.

The potential weakness of the Verderers in protecting the landscape of the New Forest is something which really developed only during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, partly because the Court's constitution changed in 1949 so as to give farming a stronger representation. Under

the original 1877 constitution, the Verderers were all great landowners with conventional Victorian educations which almost automatically encompassed an appreciation of landscape. Such appreciation among today's members is very much a matter of chance and that is why the choice of amenity Verderer may have far-reaching consequences for the Forest.

### **The trench on Great Witch**

Last month a tour of the former Ashley Walk bombing range was organized by the New Forest History and Archaeology Group. The fascinating history of the range, established in 1940 and closed in about 1946, was published by Norman Parker some time ago. Its remarkable array of targets and vast number of bomb craters can still be traced, at least in outline, but written records so far discovered are sparse. That means that certain features of the range have remained entirely unexplained and not least among these are some strange earthworks which appear on wartime air photos of a hill near Hasley which has the name Great Witch. The name distinguishes it from its smaller neighbour to the east which is called Little Witch. Anyhow, the earthworks on the photograph comprise an apparent massive bank about one hundred metres long across the top of the hill. It is surrounded by crater-like features, some of which still survive, although the bank has disappeared. None of the structures appeared to be range-related, but fifteen years after Norman Parker's publication, they remained an enigma.

The tour in March finally cracked this long-standing mystery. Among those attending were two elderly gentlemen who, as children, had witnessed the bombing of the range. They identified aircraft, played around the range buildings, collected brass cannon-shell cases, clambered over the targets and generally enjoyed themselves as normal children did in those days amid the detritus of war – enjoyment which would cause apoplexy in any health and safety expert of today, diligently seeking out minor imperfections in public playgrounds.

One of these eye-witnesses remembered the Great Witch earthworks in detail. The bank, it seems, was not the purpose of the operations there – rather it was the trench from which the bank was derived. This, he said, was 20ft deep, dug into the well-drained sand of the hill. A huge excavator was kept nearby to maintain it. At regular intervals an army lorry would rattle its way up the hill laden with unexploded ordnance collected from the surrounding country. "Then", he said, "we knew there was going to be a big bang". The bombs were lowered into the trench and detonated there. Presumably the crater-like features had a related purpose.

Our informant recalled that the trench was crossed by a huge beam from which he assumes the bombs were lowered. One day he decided to crawl across it but, as he moved forward, it occurred to him that if he fell off he would never be able to get out, so he carefully retreated. Remarkably, a close study of a 1947 RAF air photo shows a thin white line across the trench, giving graphic confirmation of the remembered beam. Today Great Witch is again a tranquil heather-covered hillock overlooking Latchmore, its present character silent as to its violent past.

### **How offensive is the Rufus Stone ?**

A Scottish friend recently sent me a cutting from "The Orcadian" dated 11<sup>th</sup> March, in which it is reported that the government has undertaken an assessment of two Neolithic monuments (the Ring of Brodgar and the Stones of Stennes) to ascertain whether or not there are "equality issues" surrounding them. The government is obliged to ensure that the monuments and their management do not impact adversely on gay people and ethnic minorities. The cost of the assessment is said to be £10,500. The stones apparently passed the test.

All this set me wondering about the Rufus Stone. The law on equality issues is not something I know much about and what applies in Scotland is not necessarily relevant here. On the other hand, if England does have similar obligations, the Rufus Stone ought to be a prime suspect. William II was condemned by the church for his alleged sodomy. One chronicler of the period is said to have written: "All things that are loathsome to God and to earnest men were customary in this land in his time". Moreover, William's cruelty to the English must surely rank high on the scale of persecution of an ethnic underclass. In the light of the recent debates on slavery, we may well be due a public apology from president Sarkozy on this score, but that is another matter.

The probability is that William's death was murder, accomplished by a covert alliance of church and state, but whether at Canterton or Beaulieu is probably of interest only to the landowners concerned. His memorial then must have considerable potential for offence – whether that offence arises from the murder or from the commemoration of the man.

If it costs Scotland £10,500 to gender and ethnic-assess some harmless prehistoric stones, I suppose we must be looking to a bill in the region of £15,000 to £20,000 for a much more controversial 19<sup>th</sup> Century monument. There is also the thorny question as to where responsibility for an assessment might lie. Rufus Stone was erected by the Lord Warden, William Sturgess Bourne in 1841. His department was swept away ten years later. The Office of Woods inherited its surviving powers and perhaps the Forestry Commission in turn acquired them in 1923. Still, neither the Commission, nor the Verderers, seem ideally suited to assess the offensive implications of the Stone. Both lack the necessary cosmopolitan perspective. My own view is that this task should properly fall within the realm of the National Park Authority, although whether the costs are recoverable from the education and information funds of the new Higher Level Stewardship scheme remains to be seen.

### **Cleaning a filthy Forest**

Last month I sat in my car in a car park near Godshill and watched a volunteer with a sack diligently clearing up the rubbish left by visitors in the surrounding bushes. I complimented her on the work she was doing (as part of the annual Forest cleanup week) and remarked on what an unpleasant task it must be. She said she was enjoying it and was pleased to be able to help. That demonstrates how public-spirited some of our Forest residents are, but is it really appropriate for the Forestry Commission to exploit people's good nature in this way? Some months ago the Deputy Surveyor told the Verderers how many

thousands of pounds he was spending annually on litter clearance. I think the Court was supposed to be impressed, but I at least was not. The Commission opens the Forest to visitors and the Park encourages them to come. Every year the depths of the Forest become more and more litter strewn and no attempt is made to clear more than the road and recreations site margins. Spending £50,000 a year on collections may sound impressive, but this is a battle we are losing. If the Commission and Park exploit the Forest as a cheap and increasingly sordid recreation ground, they have an obligation to ensure that the damage is kept to a minimum. If that means spending half a million pounds a year cleaning up after the visitors, instead of a few tens of thousands, they should do it. It would be better by far than pouring £800,000 a year into stream-filling projects.

The sad sequel to this story is that I attended a meeting at the same car park three weeks later. The bushes which the lady had scoured so assiduously were once more reverting to their normal rubbish strewn state.

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