

17th January 2014

Dean Forest to wit

At a Special Court of Attachment
of our Sovereign Lady the Queen at
The Speech House on the Seventeenth
day of January in the Sixty Second year
of the reign of our Lady Queen Elizabeth
the Second by the Grace of God , etc in
the year of our Lord Two Thousand and
Fourteen

Before

R.W. Jenkins Esq., J.P.
Ray Wright, Esq.
M.V. Bent Esq.
I. J. Standing Esq., BDS, M.A. MUSMS Dip.

K.G.Stannard Esq., Deputy Surveyor
Forestry Commission
Penny Simpson (Mrs) M.R.I.C.S.,
Area Land Agent, Forestry Commission

K. P. Griffin B.A. Solicitor, Steward

Prior to the commencement of the Court, the Senior Verderer welcomed Councillor Norman Stephens, Chairman of the Forest of Dean District Council and thanked him for attending.

APOLOGIES

None

MINUTES

The Minutes of the Court held on the 11th October 2013 were approved and signed.

MATTERS ARISING

Baroness Royall

The Steward confirmed he had not received a response to the Verderers' invitation to attend a future Court, but he would send a reminder.

MINERALS

Mrs Simpson advised the Court that the beam from an engine had been discovered at the New Fancy mine and that this important relic would be put on show. She added there is a possibility of creating a trail to view such items at various old mine sites.

The Court also heard that the Coal Authority had commissioned an aerial survey of the Forest and the new technology to be used can provide thermal imaging as well as radar. It will be trialled on both forested and open areas.

There was also positive news concerning Stowfield Quarry, with increased activity after some years of stagnation due to lack of building activity and so forth.

The Deputy Gaveller, Dan Howell, had been carrying out simulation exercises with Gloucestershire Fire and Rescue Service and had also provided some 21 Mining Reports in 2013 (5 in 2012), showing a considerable increase in housing activity in the area.

The Court also heard that a new office building and improved vehicle turning facilities are planned at the Cannop Stone Firms.

COMMONING

The Deputy Surveyor advised he continued to await approval of the new proposed 'Agreement for Responsible Shepherding' by the Commoners Association. He explained that Mick Holder (Secretary of the Commoners Association) had been ill for some time, but a meeting had been planned involving Mr Holder, Ceri Evans (Chair of the Sheep Liaison Group) and Jim Sauter (Forestry Commission – Head of Land Management) to progress matters and he would report at the next Court.

The Deputy Surveyor also commented that 55 sheep had been lifted from Bream in a Police operation using powers provided by the Highways Act 1980, being the removal of the sheep causing a nuisance or hazard. There had been a considerable Police presence in Bream on the day of the operation. The Deputy Surveyor stressed that this was a specific operation to address a specific long-term problem and should not be seen as the start of more general Police operations against free-roaming sheep in the Forest.

DEER

The Deputy Surveyor had nothing to report on this issue, save that culling to reduce the population to the target of 800 from an estimated 1,000 will take place.

BOAR AND FERAL PIGS

The Deputy Surveyor reminded the Court that the thermal imaging survey carried out in January / February 2013 had indicated a minimum population of 535 animals and that a cull of 135 animals would take place to achieve the target 400 population figure.

The Deputy Surveyor added that the UK Wild Boar Association (formerly known as "Trust" but no longer using this title as not charitable) had since disowned the cull

figure, but a meeting of West Dean Parish Council had agreed to support the Commission's efforts to keep the population under control in the light of the immense amount of damage caused by the animals in the communities.

This decision had led to an irate response from the UK Wild Boar Trust and also an international campaign to stop the boar cull, involving a huge number of emails and including vitriolic attacks on the Deputy Surveyor by individuals from as far away as Massachusetts.

The Deputy Surveyor advised that meetings are planned by Lydbrook, Soudley and Ruspidge Parish Councils to discuss similar resolutions to that passed by West Dean. Such a resolution would be a mandate from elected representatives, thus sanctioning a cull to substantially reduce numbers and to prevent the high level of damage caused by the boar.

He added that a planned thermal imaging survey with high specification equipment is expected to show a greatly increased population.

The Court heard that the present cull had accounted for 108 animals, with 6 weeks available to complete the exercise and to attain 135.

The Verderers were also advised there is a tender for a research project to investigate wild boar. This will involve an economic survey of the benefits of the animals such as increased tourism, meat, etc. versus damage and public safety issues. There is to be a comparison with a high density population location such as Barcelona or Berlin.

An indication of increasing boar numbers is the growing number of RTAs that now exceeds those involving deer.

The Court was advised there is to be a summer forum in July at Whitemead Park and focusing on wild boar for a day. There will be guest speakers from the Animal Health Laboratory, the Police and from Europe, with a planned panel Q and A session in the evening.

In addition, the Deputy Surveyor is to meet with the Director of the Deer Initiative. This body has a deer management group for landowners and is working to establish a boar management group with a list of experts to assist private landowners with culls.

The Senior Verderer commented that the Court was pleased some action is being taken as the population in the various communities in the Forest have been seriously affected by the damage to property. He invited Mr Stephens to address the Court.

The Chairman of Forest of Dean District Council commented that there had been a Council meeting on the 23rd December due to the increasing number of complaints from members of the public and demands for action. He added that there had been complaints not only about the damage caused, but also from dog walkers and bird watchers. He advised the Court there will be a debate on the 27th February and he could not foretell the outcome as views differ in the Council, but he considered a resolution similar to that of West Dean Parish Council is likely, with a stronger cull required to keep numbers in check.

He commented that he had a major concern, being the risk of a further Foot and Mouth outbreak in the Forest. The two previous outbreaks had started in pigs and he was worried the animals are feeding on rubbish.

He asked about the season for culling boar and the Deputy Surveyor commented there is no closed season as the boar can breed all year round, but there is a voluntary arrangement in place for animal welfare reasons and to try to ensure there are no orphaned piglets. He added that there is funding for an additional ranger and the voluntary ban on night shooting may be reviewed.

The Senior Verderer asked if the three year agreement to cull to a population of 400 is still valid in the light of the fact the UK Wild Boar Trust is no longer in existence and the Steward commented that the boar are seen as “venison” to be protected on behalf of Her Majesty, but the Verderers must rely on the Commission to provide the necessary information to decide on the management of the population.

Mr Bent commented that the Government should be required to pay for the animals to be enclosed in an area of the Forest as DEFRA had been very slow in reaching a decision on the status of the animals, thus permitting numbers to get out of control.

CINDERFORD REGENERATION

Mrs Simpson advised that the ground investigation work had been completed to enable the planning application for the site to proceed, possibly in March. She added that the public consultation process by the HCA had been very successful.

The Deputy Surveyor commented that the land exchange package had not been finalised, but the District Council is seeking Cabinet approval for exchange land. He added that the Commission is portrayed as “greedy” in seeking almost four times the amount of land by way of exchange, but this must be seen in the light of the financial cost of taking on the liability to maintain the land under negotiation as well as the requirement not to lose any forestry and grazing land.

Mr Standing commented that the public is concerned about the amount of land to be developed and reported as Commission property. Mrs Simpson responded that these reports are incorrect as only 7.9 hectares is to be “lost” and the additional land is in the ownership of the Council and the HCA.

The Senior Verderer expressed his concern that the present College site is now seen as defunct, yet forestry land had been taken only fifty years ago to build what was then a state of the art campus.

After some discussion, the Court agreed the process had taken over ten years to reach the planning stage and at great cost, so the development would take place in spite of all reservations the Verderers may have in this regard.

DEPUTY SURVEYOR'S REPORT

Tree Diseases

The Deputy Surveyor mentioned there had been no further phytophthora outbreaks during 2013 and so it was hoped that the 2012 felling operation had been successful. However, he added that there are areas where the oak trees are badly affected by disease. For example, Chestnuts Wood is particularly badly affected by oak decline as evidenced by a shockingly widespread honey fungus on oaks throughout the wood this autumn.

Heritage Lottery Funding

It had been decided by the Community Stakeholders Group to resubmit a revised bid following the unsuccessful landscape bid in 2013. The revised bid would be worked up during the spring to be submitted at the end of May 2014.

Storm Damage

The Court heard that there had been damage costing up to £200,000 due to washing away of works, paths and so forth. The dams had held, but the Lower Soudley dam remains a concern as far more water is entering the outfall pipe than coming out the other side!. Councillor Stephens commented he would mention this matter to the County Council as it is partly responsible for the dam.

There are outline plans to construct attenuation ponds above Lydbrook to stop the flooding of the community there, but a full archaeological / ecological survey and detailed designs will be required.

Brian Mahony MBE

The Court was delighted to hear that the former Deputy Surveyor had been honoured in the New Year's List.

ANY OTHER BUSINESS

Court Minutes

The Steward advised the Minutes of the various Courts in 2013 had been bound up and submitted to the Archivist at Gloucestershire County Council

Contract

The Steward and the Commission had finalised a formal agreement for the Steward's duties.

DATES OF NEXT TWO COURT SITTINGS

The date for the next two Courts will be Friday the 25th April 2014 and Friday the 4th July 2014.

The Senior Verderer thanked Councillor Stephens for attending the Court and for enlightening them on the District Council's discussions concerning the boar issue.

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Verderers

Deputy Surveyor
Forestry Commission

Steward