

21st May 2021

Dean Forest to wit

Before

At a Special Court of Attachment
Of our Sovereign Lady the Queen at
The Speech House on the twenty first
day of May in the Sixty Ninth 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
Twenty One

R.W. Jenkins Esq., J.P.
I.J. Standing Esq., BDS, M.A. MUSMS Dip.
R.G. Daniels Esq., MBE.

K.G. Stannard Esq., Deputy Surveyor,
Forestry England.
D.L. Howell Esq., CSM, IMMM, Deputy
Gaveller, Forestry England.
K.P. Griffin B.A. Solicitor, Steward to the Court.

APOLOGIES

Received from Maurice Bent who was unable to attend the Court.

MINUTES

Approved and signed.

MATTERS ARISING

Nothing to discuss as due to Covid, the previous Court had sat in January 2020.

IMPORTANT NEW MATTERS

Wild Cycling

Mr Daniels advised he had received correspondence expressing concern at the lack of control over cycling in the Forest and the subsequent damage to the natural environment, with cyclists under the impression they are free to roam wherever they wish in the Dean.

The Deputy Surveyor referred to Forestry England's Wild Cycling Guidance on Unauthorised Routes and commented that during Covid, it had become very apparent that there was huge pressure nationally on green spaces but with very little provision for cyclists. Visitors to some Forestry England sites had increased by well over 100% and with the Forest being in the top five areas for downhill cycling, problems had arisen.

He explained that cyclists are welcome to use authorised and marked trails as well as hard surfaced areas. There are also other areas where cycling is tolerated, but not where structures are unofficially constructed by cyclists or if the site is of a sensitive nature. There

is a cycling manager who travels through the Forest and who will close trails if dangerous or in an unacceptable location. He added that two additional members of staff had been taken on to deal with cycling issues and to promote responsible cycling. He also explained that social media is being used to try to get the message over that cyclists are welcome but must act responsibly and avoid damage to the natural environment. It had been found that many of the cyclists are locals who are bored with using existing trails and hence try to open new ones, regardless of the damage caused. It is hoped there will be less problems when the covid pandemic is over.

Mr Standing commented that pedestrians should not have to get out of the way of cyclists and the Deputy Surveyor agreed they should have priority, but some cyclist take no notice of this in spite of signage to remind them.

Mr Daniels enquired if the Byelaws could be used to prosecute irresponsible individuals, but the Deputy Surveyor responded to advise of the extreme difficulty in getting sufficient evidence to support a prosecution. He added that new signage contained the Byelaws to ensure the public are aware of them, but more signs would do nothing to control the irresponsible cyclists.

DEVELOPMENTS AFFECTING THE STATUTORY FOREST

There was nothing to report and due to the Covid pandemic, no progress on the Dilke site.

COMMONING

The Court heard there had been no meetings of the Sheep Liaison Group for over a year, and none planned unfortunately. The Senior Verderer asked about sheep numbers and was advised the exact figure is not known but certainly less than 200.

The Steward referred to a query by one Michaela Bowen who had asked about the ownership of sheep in the Lambsquay area as her property boundaries had been damaged by roaming sheep. The Deputy Surveyor responded that he was aware of the issue, but the sheep in question are unmarked and ownership unknown.

DEER AND BOAR

The Deputy Surveyor advised there had been no thermal imaging survey in 2020, but one was currently being undertaken. He believed boar numbers could be anything between 1,000 and 2,000 in spite of a very successful culling operation.

With regard to deer, the target number is 800 but at the last census, numbers had been estimated at 1,200 and there are probably about 1,500 at present. Muntjac are an increasing problem and are shot on sight. Mr Daniels congratulated Forestry England for the deer collar strategy to prevent injury due to fencing of the conservation grazing areas.

The Deputy Surveyor advised that if a dead boar is found and cause of death is not apparent, samples are taken for analysis. In five cases, cause of death was unexplained

and the carcass was stopped from entering the human food chain. One case was due to suspected poisoning but no common poison had been found and possibly due to bracken poisoning. There is also a campaign to ensure the authorities are advised if third parties such as farmers find a dead boar, due to the fear of an outbreak of African Swine Flu.

STRATEGIC APPROACH

Community consultations have been on hold in relation to Our Shared Forest due to the pandemic but it is hoped these will recommence in the near future when restrictions ease.

With regard to the commitments made, reviews of such issues as quiet areas policy, waymarking and archaeology have all been delayed due to the pandemic, but staff have been reallocated to get things moving again in view of the loss of momentum.

Mr Daniels enquired about the Forest Forum and was advised Covid restrictions have made this very difficult to occur.

DEPUTY SURVEYOR'S REPORT

Diseases

An outbreak of phytophthora has led to further Larch removal, unfortunately. There has been a large amount of roadside tree removal work undertaken due to Ash dieback and Oak decline continues apace. This is very concerning and Forest Research are working to try to slow down the pace of the process.

Surface Water Management

Planning work is almost complete on a joint project with Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust entitled Forest Waters Project. Important ecological changes have been found to have taken place in relation to watercourses leading to the River Severn, with the discovery of various mosses, for example. It is also possible more beaver will be introduced to assist with the management of water in view of increased flooding threat due to climate change, such as the major flooding incident on December 23rd and 24th 2020.

Meetings are planned with the County and District Councils to discuss licensing of woody debris dams to hold back water and to prevent flooding. It is hoped further bio-diversity benefits will arise.

Inclosure Commissioners

The Commissioners met virtually in 2020 in spite of the lockdown restrictions.

England Tree Action Plan

A large fund for tree planting and afforestation has been provided and a very encouraging start has been made in this regard.

Richard Stanford

The new Chief Executive of Forestry England's first engagement was to visit the Forest of Dean.

Wild Camping and Fires

Rangers have been out in force and often with the police during lockdown as the Forest was closed. Campers have been moved on and fines imposed on camper van owners. There is an England-wide ban on barbeques and open fires and the rangers will attend if reported and with the police if necessary.

Mr Daniels stated his concern about fires and was advised to report any incidents, but the Forest is not at risk of widespread fire damage due to the way it has been managed over the last few decades.

Fly Tipping

This increased during lockdown when the official tips were closed. The 2021 Business Plan includes the provision to employ an Estates Officer to police this area and encroachments.

MINERALS

The Deputy Gaveller presented his Report and a copy is appended to these Minutes. Mr Daniels expressed thanks to him and to the Deputy Surveyor for their assistance in ensuring the coal mines in the Forest are exempt from the new Air Quality Regulations.

ANY OTHER BUSINESS

Car Parking

The Forest is very busy all the time and the policy is to make all car parks subject to payment. More people are visiting the Forest by car and parking all over the place and damaging bio-diversity. Stones have been placed at the entrance to Mallards Pike to protect the habitat and not to force people to use the car park.

The Forest needs to be protected and especially the quiet areas, so the use of cars must be reduced. It is clear there should be more green spaces closer to urban areas to reduce the pressure on the Forest as it is a national treasure. There is a new strategy and substantial funding to permit Forestry England to take long leases on land to grow timber and to create a network of green spaces along the length and breadth of the country. The Deputy Surveyor referred to the River Severn Regional Partnership that has been established with a mission statement not only to manage water resources and prevent flooding, but also to "improve and deliver shared natural assets". This includes environmental improvements such as creation of a network of green spaces.

Speed Limits

Messrs Standing and Daniels agreed this debate needed to be rekindled as soon as the relaxation of the Covid restrictions allowed.

Staunton Long Stone

In response to an enquiry from the Senior Verderer, Mr Standing advised this is not the same stone as the Craddock Stone as this particular stone disappeared several centuries ago.

DATES OF THE NEXT COURT SITTINGS

These dates were agreed as the 20th August 2021 and 26th November 2021, both commencing at 2.45pm.

Verderers

Deputy Surveyor

Steward