

High Sheriff, Ladies and Gentlemen

Good Morning and thank you every for coming today. It is heartening that so many are willing to travel to Gloucester for the sake of the Forest of Dean – the place where many of us live and where we feel we belong .

I fell in love with the Forest when I was a boy and that is why I have lived and worked in Dean for most of my adult life. And although my first calling was to look after for Forest dentitions, forest history had fascinated me since my schooldays.

That interest grew to a point where I was publishing my own research and contributing to larger works such as the Victoria County History and some of Cyril Hart's books. My MA research was on the 17th century landscape of the Forest. These things led to a busy involvement with local and county societies and requests to read papers at regional meetings and to national audiences of historians and forestry professionals. My research and interests also led me to become curator and director at Dean Heritage Museum and to help with preserving the Forest's local history.

My museum work and my survey of veteran trees led to close ties with the Forestry Commission. Together, we began to safeguard the Forest's industrial heritage and archaeological sites and we founded the very first of the Commission's Archaeology Panels. Another task among many that I undertook for the Commission was to join the project team that established the Family Cycling Trail.

In 1993-4 we had to overcome the second attempt to privatise the public forests, and since November last year, it has been a privilege to have been Secretary to the Hands Off Our Forest Campaign. The public care deeply for their forests.

In January, I was a member of the District Council's delegation to the House of Lords where I spoke on behalf of the Council in opposition to the Government's proposals for forestry. In June, many of us met with the Independent Forestry Panel. In September, I was invited to Defra's London HQ to assist the Panel in developing its understanding of the social and cultural aspects of forests.

Turning now to the Forest: It was, as you know, gifted to the Nation by King George V and it is by far the best of the English Forests. Its woodland landscapes its people, rich history and traditions place it in a class of its own. Today, it is a complicated, multi-purpose forest managed by the Forestry Commission. With the knowledge and skills built up since 1924, Commission staff manage timber production and wild life conservation. They liaise with the community and they serve a host of visitors and interests.- from motor sport to butterfly conservation

So what is the role of the Verderers in the 21st century?

Some traditional duties continue. They concern the vert and the venison which means the woods, the green spaces and wildlife of the Forest. The Verderers receive regular reports from the Forestry Commission and they have a hand in the Forest Bye Laws. They act with Enclosure Commissioners and they will have an understanding of commoning and pannage. In times past they would have advised on forestry and timber.

For centuries they acted for the Monarch who owned the Forest. But the Royal ownership ended in 1924. This year, the public halted attempts to transfer ownership to other parties. This is a new situation.

The long succession of the Dean Verderers is unique – a fine tradition and well worth preserving, as long as the Verderers evolve and keep pace with external change.

Dr Hart has stated that the Verderers advise the Commission on matters affecting the Forest. We should note that in one of his books, he urges Verderers to consider relevant topics ---and this is the important bit –to join in the debates. They must, of course, be independent of political and other influences.

Today, the Forest faces various challenges. Among them is the pressure that causes the loss of open forest land to development and the loss of outlying woods through sales. Each time these things happen, the Forest gets smaller, and the fragmentation increases. The underlying causes are complex but unless we find ways to solve them, the pressure will continue and the Forest will diminish.

Our Forest needs a vision that reflects the public's will to protect and preserve it; a vision that recognises the fragility of what we have, and a vision that will secure its future.

There is a role here for the Verderers to embrace at this critical point in the Forest's history.

If you, the electors would like me to serve, I will bring my independent commitment, knowledge and experience to assist the Verderers with the tasks that lie ahead.

Thank you once again for being here this morning.