

A Past President's memories of meeting HM The Queen 2008 to mark 125 years of the RFS



By John Besent

Afternoon reception in the Savill Building in the presence of HM The Queen and HRH The Duke of Edinburgh on Friday, 7th November 2008 in celebration of the Royal Forestry Society's founding in 1882

The afternoon reception on Friday 7th November 2008 at the Savill Building in the presence of Her Majesty and His Royal Highness The Duke of Edinburgh would not be complete without reference to all that had gone before in terms of planning and a brief mention of my experience of royal visits.

During my superintendency of Epping Forest there were six visits to the Forest by its Ranger, HRH The Duke of Gloucester. Interestingly, an earlier Ranger of Epping Forest, HRH The Duke of Connaught, was the Vice-Patron of the RFS from 1919 to 1942. Each of the six visits required a good deal of planning, organisation and precision timing, but the

visit of Her Majesty to the Savill Building was of a totally different magnitude. Its planning and organisation began more than three years before the event. Many people were involved and there was a plethora of emails, letters and telephone calls. Also several planning and reconnaissance visits to the Savill Building, Windsor Great Park and the Crown Estate Office.

The large cast of players included John Fryer Spedding, Lord Anthony Hamilton, myself, John Jackson, William Hamer, Philip Everett (Deputy Ranger, the Crown Estate's Windsor Great Park, our hosts), Derek Stickler (Chief Forester, Windsor Forest and Great Park), Nicholas Day (Operations Manager, the Savill Building), the Private Secretary to The Queen, the Deputy Master of the Royal Household and The Queen's Equerry, the Assistant Press Officer to The Queen, and The Queen's Protection Officer.

After three years in the making, the big day eventually arrived, having been postponed from October 2007 on account of an outbreak of Foot and Mouth Disease of cattle on the doorstep of the Windsor estate. Everything was in place as planned and organised. Shortly before 4pm when Her Majesty accompanied by The Duke of Edinburgh (the Ranger of Windsor Great Park) were due to arrive, Philip Everett (the Deputy Ranger) and I went outside to the front of the Savill Building where we waited to greet our royal guests. Several members of the public had gathered to one side in the hope of seeing The Queen. A little after 4pm a Rover Defender (I think) driven by the Duke pulled up at building. This was the start of the event so painstakingly planned and organised. I was apprehensive up to the point when The Queen arrived. From that moment on I am certain that I was under the influence of a surge of adrenaline, which was to keep me confident and alert throughout the visit.

Philip Everett greeted The Queen and the Duke and presented me to them. I then escorted The Queen to the nearby Queen's Avenue (an avenue of young Cypress oaks leading up to the front of the building and continuing at its rear). There she admired the tall young tree which had completed the planting of the avenue and which had been gifted to her by the Society. The bronze plaque in front of the tree has the following inscription: "This Cypress Oak *Quercus robur f. fastigiata* 'Koster' was presented to HM The Queen by the Royal Forestry Society to mark the 125th anniversary of its founding in 1882"

I then walked alongside The Queen to the entrance of the building. She asked me if we had had a good day looking at the Windsor Estate's forestry. I said we had and that there could have been no better forest at which to celebrate the Society's centenary. His Royal Highness and Philip Everett walked behind us.

Once inside the building I began the process of presenting to The Queen the Society's senior members and their wives, who had formed a line-up. The first member to be presented was Sir Marcus Worsley, Bt. who was the Society's President 1980-1982 and Deputy President 1982/83 during the first year of the Centenary Presidency of HRH The Prince of Wales. (Sir Marcus was the brother of The Duchess of Kent). There followed in the line-up my wife, Sheila; Lord Anthony Hamilton (Immediate Past President) and his wife; Andrew Woods (Chairman of the Board of Directors) and his wife; Paul Whittle (the Society's Honorary Treasurer and Company Secretary) and his wife; Dr John Jackson (the Society's Chief Executive) and his wife.

Following the line-up presentations, I accompanied Her Majesty into the large dining hall, where the Society's members and some guests were assembled around the room in a kind of horse shoe in groups of 12 or so. There were six groups on the left arm of the horse shoe and six on the right arm. Save for the first group on the left arm, a ballot had been used to determine the arm on which each group would be placed. The Queen, accompanied by me, would meet the groups on the left arm and the Duke, accompanied by Lord Anthony, the groups on the right arm. Each group had a 'leader'. It was the job of Lord Anthony and me to present the leader of each group to The Queen/the Duke and then for the leader to

present members of his group. The group leaders were: The Duke of Somerset, Sir Jack Whitaker, Bt., David Davenport, John Fryer Spedding, Ben Herbert, The Lord Clinton, Paul Whittle, Norman Weiss, Paul Akers, William Hamer, Sir James Scott, Bt., and Andrew Woods. It is clear from the photographs that were taken of the event that both The Queen and the Duke enjoyed meeting and chatting to members. No more than five minutes could be allowed for each group if we were to keep to the 45 minute royal visit agreed by The Queen. Lord Anthony and I and the group leaders did pretty well to keep up to time. When The Queen had seen all her groups and indeed some of the Duke's, she said to me "Has Philip finished?", to which I answered "Yes, Ma'am". I then escorted The Queen back towards the front of the dining hall where her equerry was standing.

A dais had been placed at the front of the dining hall, from which I would give my address of thanks to The Queen and His Royal Highness. I had decided not to read from my text, but to commit it to memory. I had though in my pocket a post card on which I had written a few prompts. My address was going without a hitch, but about two thirds of the way through I had to have a quick look at my prompt card. There could not have been more than a very short pause in my delivery, which otherwise was faultless, thank goodness! At the conclusion of my address I asked the assembled members to show their appreciation and gratitude in the traditional way. They clapped enthusiastically and The Queen was clearly appreciative as she beamed at the members.

The text of my address is given below.

"Your Majesty, Your Royal Highness. Your presence with us this afternoon is a wonderful climax to the excellent meeting we have enjoyed in Windsor Forest and Great Park in celebration of our service to forestry since our founding in 1882.

We have been privileged to have enjoyed the patronage of the Monarch since 1905 and we trust that we have been worthy of it.

This is the third occasion on which you, ma'am have honoured us by joining meetings we have held in Windsor Great Park at the invitation of the Crown Estate Commissioners. The first occasion was in 1968 and the second in 1982 when we celebrated our centenary. Also in 1982, as part of our centenary celebrations, you kindly invited our London Division to visit your gardens at Buckingham Palace and hosted a reception for them. More recently in 2005, during the Society's 5 day meeting in Lincolnshire and Norfolk, you invited the society to visit your woodlands on the Sandringham Estate. I can tell you, ma'am, that there are many members in this room who were on that visit and thoroughly enjoyed it.

We are, ma'am, most appreciative of the kindness and support you have shown us over the years. We thank you, ma'am, and you, Sir, for honouring us with your presence this afternoon and we especially thank you, ma'am, for being our Patron.

Members of the Royal Forestry Society, please join me in showing your appreciation and gratitude in the traditional way."

Philip Everett and I escorted Her Majesty and The Duke of Edinburgh back to their car. Goodbyes were said. The visit was over.

The event at the Savill Building was not the first time I had met The Queen. In July 1982, I was among London Division members who were received by Her Majesty following a tour of the Buckingham Palace Gardens. In July 1996 I was invested by The Queen as an Officer of the Order of the British Empire for services to Epping Forest and the City of London.