

Pie Poudre And Leet To Lose Powers

By R. H. GREENFIELD

THE English legal scene is about to become a duller if more dependable field, • As part of the latest effort 'to simplify some of the charming but Often confusing anachronisms of English law the Administration of Justice' Bill is 'about to " curtail the jurisdiction of certain ancient court's".

No longer will it be possible for enterprising litigants to demand the arraignment of a short-changing barrow boy before a Court of Pie Poudre, or reconvene some forgotten Court Leet to try the next-door neighbour for dishonestly handling a lawnmower.

There are; It seems, hundreds of ancient courts in England and Wales, some dating from the time of the Norman Conquest. Though long superseded 'by magistrates or County courts, and forgotten by all but local historians, they have still been capable of revival the results could be chaotic, as local officials sought to identify the present lord of some ancient manor to preside, of the freemen to sit with him, And hunted through dusty tomes for the proper court procedures.

In 1836 a writ of mandamus was issued to compel the holding of a court at Wells, even though it had not sat for 200 years; there were no funds to pay for it, and no one could. remember how it was run.

And as late as 1955 Manchester Corporation successfully revived the Court of Chivalry, to stop a palace of varieties profaning the city's august coat of arms.

Many of 'these ancient courts are interwoven in the tapestry of England's history, Courts of Pie Poudre take their name from the Norman-French "pied poudrés" or "dusty feet," Court for the dusty-footed people who attended markets, they were ancestors of the modern small claims court.

Views of Fränkplëdge .go back to the Conquest courts to over see the .chillingly Kremlinesque system grouping all men into sets of ten, and binding each man surety for the good behaviour of- the others.

No one :appears to know the exact numbers óf such ancient courts since most were forgotten until Someone sought to exhume them. Now it will no longer be possible to cause legal mayhem with such picturesque but •inconvenient revivals, since the Bill deprives almost all of them of any remaining judicial functions.

Docked of their powers (what ever they were} are the Coventry Court of Orphans, the King's Lynn -Court of Tolbooth and the Ripon Court Military.

The Chancellors' Court, at Oxford and Cambridge Universities loose their powers to try cases between Town and Crown, but retain their to discipline, undergraduates.

But with a refreshing display of historical sensitivity the Bill refrains . from abolishing them completely, and allows them to continue certain customary business.

Haywards and Reeves

Thus the Bucklebury Court Baron may continue the appointment of tythingmen and haywards, and the. talking of presentments with respect to matters. of local

concern. The Ancient Court Leet and Court Baron the Manor of Bromsgrove, may appoint bailiff and reeve, annually proclaim its charter of 1199, and observe the ancient custom of the Midsummer Fair.

Some ancient courts indeed have been found `so useful that they are left untouched the Court of Chivalry, the Barmote Courts High Peak and the New Forest Court Swainmote and Abtachment.

The Estray Court of the Lordship of Denbeigh may continue to appoint three judges expert in the earmarking of sheep the Court Leet for the Manor of Luxton is admitted to be the only body competent to administer the last surviving example of the mediaeval three field agricultural system

So do not despair you haywards, pasture masters, portreeves ,.añd tythingmen. Takeup your ancient stalls of office you may no longer be able to put vagabonds in the pillory, but Parliament believes that even in this age of atom bombs and astronauts Britain still has a part for you to play.,