

NEW FOREST NOTES APRIL 2003

Government Support for Forest Grazing

After years of frustrating pleading with successive governments, it seems that at last the service to the nation provided by the New Forest Commoners' animals is to receive some tangible recognition. It is long overdue but very welcome news. At the Commoners' Defence Association annual general meeting at the end of March, the chairman (Richard Manley) and Miss Emma Rigglesworth gave the first public announcement of the scheme which will offset by subsidy the loss at present being endured by most owners of New Forest ponies. If we are particularly fortunate, it may even restore a small element of profit to Forest livestock keeping. The support will comprise a production-based subsidy paid on a per head basis, but I have not yet found anyone bold enough to speculate in public on the level of payment. Since an ADAS survey several years ago showed a staggering loss of between £60 and £70 per head on ponies, the payments will need to be substantial if they are to make much difference. I have long thought that a payment in the region of £100 per head per annum would be about right, but it remains to be seen if that is now a possibility.

Miss Rigglesworth told the meeting that before Christmas DEFRA had indicated that a subsidy programme of this nature would be likely to receive favourable consideration under the umbrella of the Countryside Stewardship Scheme and that full proposals would be submitted to the government during April. Countryside Stewardship is not noted for its generosity and normally comprises little more than a contribution towards the cost of unprofitable conservation work undertaken by farmers. It is liberal only in the length of red tape attached to it. In this case, peculiar to the New Forest, however, there seems to be a real chance of something better, and there can be no doubt that such support is well deserved. Without the grazing and browsing of the Commoners' stock, there would simply be no New Forest. If the detailed scheme receives approval this month, we were told that the cash could begin to flow in the autumn.

The local administration (and to a large extent the design) of the scheme is to be in the hands of the Verderers' Court. That in itself is a considerable advance because until very recently, government legal advisers were telling the Forestry Commission that it was beyond the Verderers' powers to administer subsidy schemes. Now it seems that advice has been withdrawn and the Court is free to take on the not inconsiderable work involved. Fortunately that additional work will be financed from within the scheme.

As to the actual design of the scheme, there will certainly be difficulties to overcome, but they should not prove insuperable with the Court and the Commoners working together. I am told that scheme objectives will include regulating the overall stocking density of the Forest and securing improvement of damaged habitats due, for example, to local overgrazing. This immediately introduces a complex geographical element into the design. Moreover, the problem with all production based subsidies is that stocking levels respond rapidly to reflect the money paid out. That may be regulated in one or all of a number of ways. The first is a

simple relationship of the number of eligible animals to the overall carrying capacity of the common – in this case the New Forest. A desirable stocking density is fixed and the subsidy is increased or decreased as the actual levels of stocking fall short of or exceed the target. Next, the number of eligible animals on which a commoner may claim may be related to the area of his land which carries common rights. Finally, (and this a method much used in the allocation of subsidies at a national level) the average number of stock on which a commoner has actually paid marking fees over a fixed period can be used to determine or influence the number on which subsidy may be claimed. All these mechanisms probably have a part to play, but drawing up a watertight contract is going to be a very difficult task. Conditions which are more straightforward and essential prerequisites of participation include strict observance of the byelaws and a high standard of animal welfare.

Once the design process is complete, it will be necessary to determine how the project will be policed. I have an existing Countryside Stewardship agreement. I was required to sign a lengthy and complicated contract which required my acceptance of all sorts of conservation-related restraints on my management of the subject land. From time to time an inspector arrives from London to make sure that I am not doing anything that DEFRA would not like ! This is the downside of receiving even miniscule amounts of public money and the CDA chairman made it very clear to the meeting that the subsidy scheme will be entirely voluntary. No commoner will be compelled to apply for the money, nor will rights of common be in any way affected. If you do not like the scheme, no-one will pressure you to join. On the other hand, it was also made clear that if the application to DEFRA is to be successful, a substantial proportion of the Forest's Commoners will need to be involved. If the subsidy level approaches my target figure of £100 per head, I have no doubt that such support will be forthcoming. At £10 per head it might be a very different matter.

The departing Deputy Surveyor

When Mr. Donald Thompson first came to the New Forest and had been in the top job of the local Forestry Commission for a few weeks, I asked one of his subordinates what he thought of the new Deputy Surveyor. There was a bit of a pause before I received the reply: " He's a difficult man to assess – I can't get the measure of him ". Five years later, as he hands over to his successor, I am not sure that this fairly general and early Forest assessment of the retiring Deputy Surveyor has progressed very far. He has remained something of an enigma, invariably courteous and good humoured in meetings, but giving little away as to his true feelings about such potential adversaries as the Commoners and the Verderers' Court. From those in the know, there have sometimes been dark comments that behind the scenes Donald Thompson has not always been the best of friends to the local community, but then the Forest loves its underground mutterings and they are not always renowned for their accuracy. It is true that there was almost open warfare when the Commission insisted on opening-up the Forest to recreation prematurely (in the view of those most affected) as the foot and mouth outbreak started to decline. How far that was a decision of the Deputy Surveyor rather than of government I do not know.

As to achievements, Donald Thompson presided over the New Forest Design Forum which revolutionized the future management of the Inclosures and saved an immense area of the Forest's most beautiful woodland from imminent destruction. That also may have been a decision dictated from above, but I am sure that it was at least influenced locally. It was generally acknowledged as the most profound and positive change in forestry policy for thirty years and that is a very creditable testimonial for any Deputy Surveyor to take with him into retirement. Mr. Thompson leaves the Forest without having made any implacable enemies that I can discover and having established a good deal of personal respect within the community. On a less exalted level, he will probably be remembered from his distinctive (if not eccentric) hats which made him instantly identifiable at long distance in the Forest !

Waste Wood

The Forestry Commission has become the most appalling waster of wood. Windfall trees are often left to rot, whether they are of timber quality or not and whether they are on the Open Forest or in the Inclosures. Often when they fall across rides they simply remain there unless it happens to be a route along which a keeper drives. Piles of neatly stacked cordwood are left rotting at the roadsides for year after year. Abandoned and presumably unsold or uncollected stacks of conifer logs litter the Forest and are eventually thrown about by trippers so as to make an even worse mess. Holly pollarding logs (a superb fuel when dry) remain where they fall in many cases. In short, the Forest's woodlands are in a real mess before one even starts to consider the litter left by visitors. This state of affairs would have been unthinkable a few years ago and no doubt in part reflects the present low value of timber. I am also told that the Commission now charges such high prices for firewood that no-one wants to buy it. As to the softwood logs, there is presumably a widespread failure to enforce contracts or perhaps to draw up watertight contracts in the first place. It would avoid some of this tragic waste if firewood could be made available to local people at modest prices, although the prohibition on the use of chain saws by people without a safety certificate makes collection difficult,

A unique photo opportunity

Four thousand years ago, our predecessors in what was to become the New Forest were much preoccupied with building burial mounds – the round barrows (tumuli on older maps) which are scattered across the heaths. When first built, these mounds would have stood out as gleaming white mounds of gravel or spectacular heaps of coloured subsoil. As time went by they wasted away and became covered in vegetation so that many are now difficult to locate. They have suffered widespread robbing by 19th Century collectors of antiquities and by more modern treasure hunters, both of which groups were probably equally disappointed as our barrows contain nothing but the occasional decaying clay urn. Despite this, most are “protected” as scheduled ancient monuments – a form of guardianship which practically confers little protection beyond warning off reputable archaeologists. However, it has led recently to a Forestry Commission programme of scrub clearance from these barrows, so that many of them can now be seen to better advantage than perhaps at any time

since the Bronze Age. I am told that the Commission has now completed this work throughout the south of the Forest, providing an opportunity for photography which is unlikely to occur again. By May the bracken will be up, blurring the barrows' outlines, while enthusiasm for spending money and time on such clearance work will soon be exhausted and may never return. It is a now or never chance for Forest photographers.

Anthony Pasmore