

NEW FOREST NOTES APRIL 2014

New Forest ponies – endangered breed or exploding population ?

The New Forest is full of contradictions and none is greater than the almost simultaneous announcement that the New Forest pony is now officially a “rare breed”, and statistics just published which show that the numbers of ponies depastured in the Forest hit an all time high of 5116 in 2013. Indeed, the number of domestic animals grazing the Forest (including pigs) now stands at the surprising total of 9244 – probably more than double the previous peaks of the last two centuries.

So what exactly is happening and how can these seemingly conflicting statistics be reconciled ? If we look first of all at the newly acquired rare breed status, there is a very informative article on the subject in the 2013 annual report of the New Forest Pony and Cattle Society. It seems that this classification has been triggered by the global registered adult female breeding population (not the same as the number grazing the Forest) falling below a threshold of 3000 animals. Of course there are ponies grazing the Forest that are not registered New Forest stock, and there are registered New Forest ponies that are not breeding females (e.g., geldings). There are also New Forest ponies whose owners have, for one reason or another, decided not to register them. Although the New Forest remains the headquarters of the breed, pure-bred stock is scattered across Britain and beyond, so it is no good trying to tie up the figures for Forest-depastured animals with the 3000 borderline for rare breed status. It is, perhaps unnecessary to go into any detail of the economic and numerical decline of the breed. That is a matter for the Pony Society and is adequately explained in its report. Of far more significance for the New Forest is the remarkable and seemingly inexorable rise in the number of depastured stock and the ability or otherwise of the Forest to tolerate such growing pressure on its relatively fixed resources.

This is a touchy area of local politics and I must first of all make clear that the bare statistics are not all that they seem to be. For a start, not all depastured stock is on the Forest throughout the whole year. Many cattle are removed during the winter and so are some ponies which are taken off for welfare reasons or for the convenience of their owners. There is therefore an argument that the total turned out does not reflect the true grazing pressure, but of course this is a more or less constant factor, at least during the last century, and does not invalidate the figures. Next it is necessary to examine the accuracy of the statistics themselves. Today I think they are probably very good. Cattle numbers have always been easy to check and may be taken as accurate, at least since World War II. The 2013 cattle turn out was 3486 which, like that for ponies is an all time record, leaving aside some rather dubious figures just prior to the Napoleonic Wars when the Forest was in any case vastly bigger than at present. Unlike the market for ponies, that for cattle has been reasonably good in recent years, so the Forest is not a dumping ground for unsaleable bovines. The subsidy payments by the Higher Level Stewardship scheme must have had a material influence on the numbers depastured.

Assessing the accuracy of pony statistics is far harder. Until the introduction of headage subsidies under modern schemes, there was no doubt a good deal of twisting and evasion of pony

marking fees going on. Ponies are difficult to catch and not always easy to identify. Smith might pay marking fees for 20, but who is to say he did not have 30 scattered across the Forest? I should add that the term “headage payments” is frowned upon in subsidy-paying circles, although that is clearly what they are in the New Forest. A smokescreen is applied in the form of “livestock units” delivering a desired level of grazing pressure in return for payment. Today a registered Forest mare is classified as 0.8 of a livestock unit and each unit on Crown land receives £95 subsidy per annum – marginally down on last year. Since the subsidy payment is made against marking fees received, and since the marking fee per pony is £24, it is not very surprising that evasion has been eliminated. It is as though HMRC decided to pay back to each taxpayer three times the amount of any tax paid. In that event there would be a remarkable degree of honesty in the completion of tax returns! Still, even allowing for some under-recording in pre-HLS figures, the trends and record current totals are indisputable.

Historically a number of other factors come into play, such as the incorporation of the Adjacent Commons into the Forest after 1964 with an additional block of livestock then liable to marking fees, but although all these factors have a marginal influence on statistics, there is simply no escaping the fact that grazing pressure in the Forest is spiralling and some might say it is doing so out of control.

As long ago as 2005, the lately retired Stewardship Manager, Colin Draper, wrote that the predecessor to HLS was in jeopardy if stock numbers remained above 7000. That magic figure of 7000 was formerly considered by the relevant officials to be the maximum grazing pressure the Forest could take without damage, but it has since been quietly abandoned. Natural England cannot afford to upset the commoners by setting stock limits if it is to secure its stream filling and drainage disruption programme in peace and quiet. It needs them to keep taking the money and to keep quiet. Today we are 25% above the formerly stated maximum and there are no signs of effective brakes being applied. It needs to be said that with the exception of the National Trust’s commons at Bramshaw and West Wellow Common, where the landscape is being decimated by excess stock, the Forest is not yet overgrazed. There are minor exceptions to this, chiefly along the eastern margin, but we are rapidly approaching a tipping point over much larger areas. If numbers continue to rise things could quickly get out of control. The Forest’s capacity to support grazing is not limitless any more than is its ability to take ever-increasing recreational pressure.

The Verderers (administrators of HLS) are riding a tiger trying to prop up an economically moribund system of pony keeping – on which the Forest depends. At the same time they must try not to wreck the Forest by allowing uncontrolled growth in stock numbers. It is an unenviable task.

The Verderers and the Great War – 1914

We are all going to hear a great deal about WW1 over the next few years – perhaps more than most of us will find entirely comfortable. There is a limit to the stories of cruelty and suffering that one wants to absorb. I was therefore a little uncertain as to whether an account of the Forest throughout the period would be worth including in New Forest Notes. Even casual watchers of the

“New Forest Remembers WW2” event, will by now have become heartily sick of photographs of pieces of broken concrete and rusty metal surviving from that later conflict, proving that one can have too much of a good thing. But the story of the Verderers and the Great War in the Forest is of a very different nature. Little active fighting took place from Forest bases, there were few great physical developments of Forest land and, Beaulieu Aerodrome excepted, the great machines of war were far less conspicuous than when it all had to be done again twenty years later. It is instead the story of a patriotic group of country gentlemen, some with military connections, trying to balance the demands of the emergency with the interests of the great national property which they were charged with protecting. I therefore think it is a story which ought to be told and from time to time I will include brief details of what was going on here one hundred years ago.

From the start of 1914 the minds of the Verderers were deeply occupied with military matters, just as they had been for many years past.. It was not that they were contemplating war, at least in a physical sense, but they were locked in seemingly unending conflict with the Office of Woods over the extent to which the Forest might be used for military manoeuvres and the application of conditions to such activities. In those days, of course, manoeuvres largely involved cavalry, to the great disturbance of stock grazing the Forest. Finally, in the early summer of that year, both sides seemed exhausted by the conflict and a comprehensive agreement on manoeuvres was finally reached. The Court settled back to its more mundane business of road accidents involving stock, burning, litter, broken bridges etc. In fact the record of a 1914 Court might be incorporated in the minutes of 2014 without anybody noticing. Little changes in the Forest – at least for the better. War notwithstanding, the greatest savagery the Court had to consider was a complaint from the RSPCA about groups of youths hunting, maiming and killing squirrels. The Verderers were asked for their support in ending this practice, but they simply noted the complaint. No doubt by the end of the year many of the same youths were engaged in hunting of a less frivolous nature.

In 1914 the Verderers did not meet between July and November and by the latter date the Forest was in the thick of wartime events. Immediately war was declared both the Verderers and the Office of Woods agreed to tear up their hard fought agreement on manoeuvres and to co-operate with the military authorities “without restriction or limit”. By November a hospital for wounded Indian troops had been established on Balmer Lawn absorbing ten acres of Forest. On the Sunday before the Court the press of four hundred sightseers at the Lawn was so great that sentries had to be posted. The hospital was enclosed with barbed wire, but the Verderers raised no objection. Meanwhile a crematorium for the hospital was established in Perrywood.

These events at Brockenhurst were something of a side show, the real action occurring at Lyndhurst with the arrival of the 7th Division on 1st September through to the 1st October. The list of troops and equipment is far too long for inclusion here, but 20,000 soldiers were camped on the Forest for the period, together with 4,000 horses, and vast amounts of artillery and equipment. The camps occupied Lyndhurst Racecourse, Dunces Arch and below the old police station. Gun pits and trenches were dug all over the place and remained open (to be filled by Crown labour) when the troops departed. Manoeuvres were carried out, mostly across the north of the Forest, with the

agisters acting as guides for the officers. Even after the main force had departed for the continent, 600 territorials arrived and occupied some of the camps. By November, however, things had quietened down and the Verderers were able once again to concentrate on their usual tasks – this time pollution from the Fritham House sewage works and an inadequately buried gipsy pony at Crook Hill near Ashurst.

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