

## NEW FOREST NOTES APRIL 2018

### Forest grazing stock numbers

At this time of year I am always filled with admiration for the work done by the New Forest Commoners' Defence Association, as outlined in its annual report which is presented to the general meeting. The report is packed with good hard information about the tasks undertaken by the committee and officers. This is in marked contrast to the reports of some other groups which seem made up with platitudes and padding. The CDA also has the immense advantage of being able to use the beautiful photographs of Sally Fear in its reports. Perhaps most important of all is the continuation of a system in which the annual report has been a consistent source of statistical information over the decades and especially the yearly figures of animals turned out to graze on the Forest and road accidents involving stock. Of course these figures are obtained from the Verderers, but somehow the Court has never succeeded in publishing them in a durable and consistent form. As a result the CDA reports are always the first source consulted by researchers.

This year's animal statistics are particularly relevant to the address given to the AGM by Michael Lunnis, the Rural Payments Agency's officer in charge of the "Basic Payments Scheme" (BPS), so far as it affects common land in the Forest. His theme was the extraordinary complexity of calculating the amount of money to be paid to New Forest commoners, based on the area of the Open Forest capable of being grazed, and how the results of these calculations are causing more and more animals to be turned out to take advantage of a scheme which (although he did not say this) is proving disastrous for the Forest. If, as seems likely for 2017, the government will pay in the region of £460 for every cow turned out and £276 for every pony, it is no wonder that the whole Forest system is beginning to break down. Every farmer with an elementary understanding of good business is hard at work maximizing (within some rather complex rules) the number of stock he turns out, because all he then needs to do is to present his marking fee receipt to the RPA to secure his subsidy payment. Everyone knows that this is a crazy system leading towards the ruin of the Forest, but nobody is quite sure how to tackle the problem - or perhaps some just lack the determination to do so. Mr. Lunnis said that his agency was extremely anxious to get away from a subsidy system based on marking fees when re-designing the rules in a post-Brexit system of farming support. That was perhaps the most encouraging statement of his talk. Of course the subsidies in respect of the Forest comprise money to which the commoners are both legally and morally entitled and they have the potential to do much good if allocated in the right way. The fatal flaw in the system is to pay simply on the number of stock turned out. There is a host of alternative systems available. Payment can be made for improvements of all sorts. These include farm buildings and general maintenance, livestock-handling equipment and vehicles, fencing and hedge maintenance, higher welfare standards, and improved breeding. Works of community benefit such as Forest drainage and passage maintenance could be financed. But apart from all of these things there needs to be a profit element to individual commoners (not just the owners of large herds), because grazing livestock on the Forest is not, deprived of public support, economically viable.

The statistics in the CDA reports give a very stark picture of what is happening to the Forest. Back in the 1960s, when I first started to keep livestock, the total of grazing animals was fairly constant at about an average of 4,500 head. That was at a time before the Forest was fenced and gridded, when vast areas of lush roadside grazing were available to animals, in the parishes around the Forest, so that far less than the quoted figure was actually *within* the perambulation and on the Forest grazing land at any one time. By the 1970s, the total had risen to between five and six thousand annually and the Forest was fully gridded, effectively producing a substantial increase in grazing pressure. These figures give a more accurate representation of actual stocking because animals from the Adjacent Commons were being included for the first time.

Into the 1990s, stock numbers steadily crept up to close on 6,000 and there were already fears that the grazing pressure could eventually become intolerable. It was then commonly said that 7,000 was the absolute maximum the Forest could sustain without significant damage. In fact, in the year 2000, that figure was exceeded for the first time, but only by a small margin. Following foot-and-mouth disease the total fell back for a year or so. Then, in 2012, the explosion happened as the subsidy system went mad. The figures rose to just short of 9,000. By last year the total had jumped again, this time by a massive 37% to 12,400. This cannot be allowed to go on. The Verderers, the CDA and the RPA all know that this is absolutely unsustainable, but there is still far too much hand-wringing and classifying the problem as “too difficult” or “perhaps Brexit will sort it out in the long term”.

At the risk of being tedious, it is necessary to recite all the objections made by the (increasingly small group of) apologists for the present scheme. Not all the animals paid subsidy are actually put on the Forest. Some owners simply pay their fees, receive a marking fee receipt, and collect their subsidy. Their cows go nowhere near the Forest. In a perverse sort of way this actually benefits the Forest, because they don't add to the physical problems. Next, not all the animals are on the Forest all the time. For example some cattle are removed in winter time. Some areas of low grazing value ex-forestry land are being returned to grazing. Some very small commoners cannot claim subsidy. That, to my mind, is wrong because they can be among the most caring owners and are certainly less damaging in their use of the Forest. Then also we had an exceptional growing season last year, with grass lasting well into the late autumn, masking the effects of grazing in the short term. Finally, it is said that marking fee evasion is at an all-time low. In the past it resulted in understatement of the actual numbers present. This certainly does not result from an outbreak of honesty. Why would you not pay your £24 marking fee when it entitles you to a government refund of up to £460?

All of these questionings of the statistics are valid, but they cannot mask the truth of the inexorable and rapid rise in stocking levels, causing huge damage to the fabric of the grazings in places at Ashurst, Bramshaw and Lyndhurst for example, and in suppressing natural regeneration throughout the ancient woodland of the Forest.

### **Money for historical research**

We are told that we live in a time of austerity when public services are underfunded, when poor people depend upon food banks and when the homeless increasingly sleep on the streets, so the rate at which money is poured into the New Forest never ceases to amaze me. Much of it I feel is not very well spent. It is a sort of self-perpetuating merry-go-round. The Park, Forestry Commission and perhaps others secure some huge grant and take on staff as a result. When the money begins to run out the authorities and their staff work furiously to secure another grant to preserve jobs and the process repeats itself. Empire building has something to do with it as well. If you can take on two extra “public engagement officers” or “watercourse interpretation scientists” your organization appears more impressive. I think there is a significant element of this in the HLS scheme and perhaps this will be repeated in the four and a half million pound “Our Past, Our Future Landscape Partnership” supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund. The latter scheme is a curious mixture of such things as the provision of tourist information, promoting “wild play”, supporting the Forest’s landscape and culture “through a wide variety of art forms” and “monitoring behaviour change”. Perhaps not all of us would regard these as priorities in a time of austerity, but they should prove fairly harmless unless used simply to boost tourism to even higher levels.

If the elements of the scheme listed above are the more peculiar ones, there is also a lot of support for historical research which could certainly prove interesting if well managed. One of these projects is called “Through our ancestors’ eyes” and is designed to record the history of farming through the exercise of common rights in the Forest. It is being managed by Richard Reeves, formerly librarian at the Christopher Tower Library, and still usually to be found there, partially buried in a pile of ancient documents. Much of the work will be done by volunteers under his direction. At the moment some early volumes of Verderers’ minutes are being transcribed and I understand that work is being done on the wartime New Forest Pastoral Development Scheme. New Forest papers relating to farming and currently in the Public Record Office will be brought back to the Forest for analysis. Photographs and documents are to be borrowed from commoners’ families and will be copied. The National Park website which describes the project contains some rather strange prescriptions for the work, including the need to contact “42 commoners with the aim of collecting 265 photographs or documents, 145 of which will be scanned”. This seems like nonsense to me. Why not 41 commoners with 267 photographs and a scanning total of 150 ? Perhaps there is some method behind it.

Ultimately an exhibition is to be staged and the results of the research will be held in a “commoning collection” which will be kept up-to-date and maintained in future. In other hands all of this might not achieve a great deal, but Richard has the reputation of being a very competent local historian and of the more than twenty New Forest projects being funded by the Lottery, I think that this is likely to be one of the more successful.

At the CDA general meeting, Richard appealed for copies of pre-war annual reports of the association. I have been interested in the Forest's history for a good while and I have never yet seen one of these reports (I did not know they even existed), so I imagine they are extremely rare. I hope he is successful.

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