

## **New Forest Notes – April 1998**

### **FOREST PONY & CATTLE NUMBERS**

Early in every year, the Verderers issue statistics showing the numbers of stock depastured in the New Forest for which marking fees have been paid in the previous season. Almost by tradition, the figures are first published by the Commoners Defence Association in its annual report. Normally they appear simply as unadorned tables, but this year they are accompanied by some illuminating comments from the Association's retiring chairman, Capt. Tim Moore. His observations throw some light on an apparent contradiction in that while market prices are extremely low, stocking densities are not far below record levels.

Conventional wisdom in the Forest is that the commoners respond to rising livestock prices by increasing the size of their herds and vice versa. A great deal of learned historical research has been based upon this theory, but the end of the 20th Century seems to have turned this unquestioned law on its head. Taking pony levels first of all, it must be said that, like many statistics, the published figures have to be treated with caution, especially when attempting to assess the actual number of mouths grazing the Forest. To the nominal figure of 3461 (for 1997) must be added perhaps 150 stallions for which no marking fees are paid, making 3611. Then, during the winter months, there may be far less ponies on the Forest than this total would suggest. Many are removed by their owners, either voluntarily on order from the Verderers. In summer, on the other hand, the actual number of equine mouths greatly exceeds the recorded total. There may be between one and two thousand foals (not liable to fees), there are ponies belonging to people who refuse to pay their marking fees and ponies whose owners are allegedly evading marking fee payment. The extent of evasion is a matter of dispute. My own view is that in these days of subsidies, premiums and a larger agister force, it is much less than in the 1970s. Then there are ponies on Minstead Manor which are not liable to marking fees. The true total is thus very difficult to assess, but five thousand is probably not an unreasonable guess at a summer total.

This brings us back to the question as to why the commoners have not responded to a collapsing market in the traditional way by reducing their stock numbers. The simple answer is that they cannot do so. They cannot sell (at a sensible price) and they cannot cull because of the excessive costs involved. Continued high numbers of ponies on the Forest is the inevitable result. It is true that the figures show a marginal falling off since the 1994 peak of 4112, but after adjusting for some of the distorting factors described above, any real fall is likely to be insignificant. Capt. Moore says that the Forest can stand 6000 head of stock (ponies and cattle) in summer, but probably only about one fifth of that number in the spring before the grass has come.

Cattle figures present other difficulties. Here, allowing for the "distortions" mentioned above (although evasion of cow marking fees is not really an option if the agisters are alert), the actual figures are within a couple of hundred of their recent peak. Rather higher levels were recorded in the 1960s when Arthur Dalgety was ranching the New Forest. Capt. Moore speculates on the influence of cattle subsidies, combined with the relatively modest net marking fee of £6 after prompt payment discount and a Verderers\Forestry Commission subsidy of £9 per head.

Cattle subsidies are an obscure and probably uninteresting subject for those not in receipt of comforting MAFF cheques at regular intervals. Provided that an owner of suckler (breeding beef ) cows has sufficient quota (an allowance of a number of animals in respect of which a claim may be made), he will receive a payment of about £117 per head per annum. If he has a small number of animals in relation to the area of his land, he will receive a further payment of either £29 or £42 per head per annum, depending upon his stocking density. This makes a total of £159 per cow where the higher rate is payable. The low stocking or "extensification" grant is made to discourage over intense grazing. However, in the New Forest commoners turning out cows are effectively deemed to have holdings enlarged in proportion to the number of cattle they depasture. A subsidy designed to discourage high stocking levels in fact works in reverse here ! Even more confusing, some of the cattle actually marked and paid for never make an appearance on the Forest at all. Their owners are simply, and perfectly properly, collecting extensification payments by exploiting the Ministry's stupidity. Altogether it is an extremely odd system, but one which presumably appeals to MAFF. From all this it will be seen that a large operator with, say, one hundred suckler cows running on the Forest will be collecting subsidies in the region of £16,000 each year.

There are, of course, additional subsidies payable on steers - expected to be about £84 per head this year. These may be claimed twice in the lifetime of the animal.

Before anyone gets the idea that cow farmers in the Forest are coining money, they should realise that there is another side to the picture. Livestock killed in accidents, poisoned, stuck in bogs, harried by visitors' dogs, stolen and so on must all be taken into account. BSE and its associated problems have ruined the market and subsidies are only one element of farming. The small traditional commoner with a couple of dozen cattle is certainly not getting rich. Those able to exploit the economies of scale may be doing rather better.

The Association's chairman considers that pony numbers have crept back up to the levels which gave problems in the mid 1970s, while cow numbers have rocketed. The whole picture is of a system under acute strain with small producers in trouble and the Forest under pressure.

### **New Forest Committee Proposals**

The controversial plans by the New Forest Committee for it to be given statutory powers have now been considered by the major Forest groups. The verdict from all of them is quite clear: the Committee should not have powers over the New Forest. This is the view of the Verderers, the Commoners Defence, the New Forest Pony Breeding and Cattle Society and the New Forest Association. The Forestry Commission is keeping its own council. Opinion is more divided as to whether the committee should have a role outside the Forest lands. There is no doubt what the commoners think. Their committee condemned the proposals and was then supported by an overwhelming vote at last week's AGM. The Pony Breeders are similarly opposed.

The important question now is how the New Forest Committee will represent (I hesitate to say disguise) this solid opposition. Mr. John Broughton, a retired vet and leading commoner, suggested at the CDA general meeting that the numbers game would be played. In other words, equal weight would be given to the East Dorset Society for the Promotion of Outings (if such a body existed) welcoming the Committee's plans, and the Forest Commoners Defence Association opposing them.

The fact that the CDA is a key player in the management and protection of the Forest and the East Dorset Society is not, would be ignored. I expect he is right.

The Countryside Commission is due to "report" to the government on the future of the New Forest , amongst other matters, later this month and the Committee will presumably use its influence to colour that report. It must now, surely, be quite clear that the New Forest Committee is not widely loved among those most intimately concerned with the Forest - even allowing that it has a few enthusiastic supporters. Almost the only compelling argument in its favour I have heard so far is that "You had better agree to what they want or you will have something worse forced on you." That is not a very attractive basis for any sort of management.

### **The Silent Motorway**

Large parts of the New Forest are effectively ruined by noise from the A 31 road. A zone about half a mile wide is so noisy that it is virtually useless for quiet recreation, while noise penetrates into the Forest for at least two or three miles on each side, depending on the wind direction. What makes this so dreadfully sad is that it could be prevented and at relatively modest cost.

I recently spent a rare holiday in Paris. One of my Verderer colleagues was unkind enough to express surprise that I should even have heard of somewhere so remote from the Forest's perambulation, but I went and was duly shown everything which a good tourist should see. One structure stood out among all the palaces , statues and fine avenues and that was a suburban motorway to the north west of the city. It is recently constructed and was built in the teeth of opposition from local residents. The French are evidently just as fearful for their property values as we are. Anyhow, that opposition and the builders' efforts to mollify it has resulted in a road which is virtually invisible and all but silent. Although largely built on an embankment, continuous linear mounding on both sides (grassed and planted) conceals all but the tops of the tallest lorries. Potential weak spots in the sound -proofing, chiefly bridges, have parapets of high panelling which is translucent but presumably of sound-absorbing material. The result is that one field's width away from the motorway there is less noise than from a country side road. Incidentally, part of the construction threatened the Forest of St.Germain en Laye and was simply tunnelled underneath it, but it is the above ground sections and sound proofing which are really impressive.

In the New Forest, the dreadful effects of the A 31 could be removed at a stroke by such imaginative earthwork and sound screening. The cost would be small compared to the vast sums regularly issued by the National Lottery for sport and the arts . This week's grant of ten million pounds for Brighton's West Pier would probably be more than sufficient, especially as large parts of the screening are already in place in the form of cuttings. What a pity that it will not be done. Everyone in the New Forest is far too busy with studies, surveys and visitor counts to take on anything practical. Perhaps the Forest's best hope lies in the ultimate upgrading of the A 31 to motorway status when proper protective measures could be demanded as part of the compensation deal.