

## **NEW FOREST NOTES DECEMBER 2010**

### **The marking fee increases**

Marking fees are the payments made by those who graze animals in the New Forest. They help pay for the supervision provided by the agisters, and agisters are the men who check on the health and welfare of Forest animals and ensure that the byelaws are observed. For example, if a pony is run down by a motorist and is dying in a ditch on a wet night in November, it is the agister who will attend very quickly and put the animal out of its misery.

The marking fees have not increased for sixteen years because the economic state of New Forest livestock rearing has been so bad that government grants and subsidies have been deemed necessary in order to prevent a collapse of the industry. Part of this support is an annual grant from the Forestry Commission (part of DEFRA) which is about £130,000. That is now being cut in line with most other government expenditure and accordingly the shortfall has to be replaced if the Verderers are to maintain present staffing levels. In announcing the increases in marking fees last month, the Official Verderer warned that they will probably not be the last, because further cuts are to be imposed on the grant funding. In 2011 the grant will reduce by 7% and then by a further 6% in each of the three succeeding years. In addition, the 10% discount for prompt payment of marking fees on ponies will be discontinued after this year.

Those who are actively involved in farming the Forest will have understood the implications of the Official Verderer's announcement, but to non-commoners the significance of his carefully worded statement may not be obvious. The marking fee increase will, for example, take no additional money from the pockets of most commoners, because the Verderers have undertaken that, for as long as they are permitted to do so, they will match the increase by an equivalent rise in the Higher Level Stewardship subsidy payment direct to the commoners. I say that "most" commoners will be exempt from real loss because there are exceptions. Those farmers who chose not to join the predecessor of the HLS subsidy scheme when it was first set up (and there were not very many of them), will face a real increase in costs of £2 per head. There is also a fairly small number of new commoners who have had no opportunity to join the scheme because it closed to new entrants some time ago. They are excluded by the rules and not by their own choice, so that the burden of increase will fall disproportionately on them. They receive no subsidy at all, let alone an increased subsidy to offset the marking fee increase..

Of far more importance to most commoners than the paper transaction of increasing both marking fee and subsidy, is the loss of the prompt payment discount which most pony keepers collected. This will equate in hard cash to an increase of £2 per head and that will not be offset by an increase in subsidy. For non-members of the HLS support scheme, this is yet another blow.

If we look at the medium term consequences of the government cuts, and assuming that HLS support continues, a cushioning of marking fee increases seems likely in proportion to the decline of government grants to the Verderers, but HLS is not everlasting. It will finish

in 2020 if not scrapped five years earlier by operation of a break clause in the agreement. As I wrote in last month's notes, we are told that such an early termination is unlikely, but even European money may eventually cease to flow as freely as it does at present. Marking fees can rise to £35 per head under the Verderers' byelaws, although at present the new figure of £22 is offset about three times over by HLS money. If fees were to rise to say £26 per head during the life of the present support scheme, a net income of over £50 per head could, overnight, become a loss of £26 per head in 2021 when HLS ends. That, of course, is on top of the ordinary trading losses which make life so difficult for many commoners. Such an increased burden would be catastrophic for the New Forest and it is difficult to believe that the government would not step in with fresh support at that stage.

Worrying as the marking fee situation is, the real and largely unspoken fear in the Forest is in relation to the future of the single farm payment scheme which supports many commoners to the extent of about £200 per hectare of their land holdings, including a notional allocation of the Forest land itself to each individual. If that (also European) money were to be withdrawn after the review date of 2012, speculation as to long term marking fees becomes irrelevant because collapse of the system would then be imminent. It really is time that the government admitted that the maintenance of the New Forest by the commoners' animals is too important to be allowed to fail and that long term support, by one means or another, must be guaranteed.

### **Pig nesting**

By the time of the November Verderers' Court, the number of pony and cattle deaths from acorn poisoning had risen to about thirty. Although most of the acorns have now been eaten, deaths from the after effects of excessive consumption are likely to continue for some time. A fairly short extension to the pannage season (until 5<sup>th</sup> December) has been approved by the Forestry Commission after consultation with the Verderers.

After a slow start, the number of pigs turned out to eat the acorns rose to around 450, encouraged no doubt by the subsidy offered. However, the head agister told the Court that his team had been experiencing a lot of difficulty from pigs entering private land (usually through failure of the landowner to erect proper fencing) and generally touring about the Forest causing upsets. Part of these difficulties seems to arise from a decline in pig husbandry in recent times. Many years ago, but certainly until after the last war, the older commoners practised what was called "nesting" of their pigs. Instead of (as today) opening up a livestock trailer and tipping out a gang of troublesome raw recruits to Forest life, the foundations of pannage exercise were carefully laid. Most commoners in those days had only a handful of sows. An owner would choose a comfortable base for his sow in some bush, equipped with plentiful dry bedding and provided with a good feed. The pig and her litter would sleep there and return next evening looking for the next feed. In this way the bush became home and wandering was rare. The process is delightfully described and illustrated by Heywood Sumner in his "Local Papers" in relation to a supposed mediaeval pig pound which he found on the Open Forest.

The placenames "Pig Bush" near Beaulieu and "Pigsty Bushes" near Godshill may be echoes of this nesting process. I also remember reading somewhere about the barbaric sport of pig sticking in India, in which an essential preliminary was to locate the victim "pig's bush" before commencing the chase. Attachment to such a base would thus seem to have been partly inherited from wild ancestors.

Perhaps there is scope for a return to some of the old ways in what is in any case a very ancient method of exploiting the mast harvest.

#### **Holly Hatch – the end of the generator ?**

Almost ten years ago I recorded that the Verderers had just given permission for an underground electricity cable from Linwood to serve Holly Hatch Cottage. It would have removed the noise and fumes which had dominated this quiet corner of the Forest for many years and the Court had welcomed the news. Thereafter nothing happened and, on enquiries being made, the land agent told the Court that the Forestry Commission had run out of money and the plans had been abandoned. There was great disappointment.

In November this year the application was renewed, in conjunction with proposals for a water pipe and it looks as though, finally, the Dockens Water valley will be freed of this disagreeable intrusion. No doubt the cottage occupier will also welcome a more standard and reliable source of electricity. Perhaps this time it will actually happen – government cuts permitting.

#### **Fly-posting the Forest**

Promoters and salesmen of all sorts of events and products evidently regard the New Forest as a soft touch. If you put up a large board at a prominent road junction in the Forest you are almost certain to get away with a few weeks of free advertising. Eventually you may get a polite message from the Forestry Commission to say that your board has been removed and may be collected from a depot. At Bramshaw Telegraph, for example, we have a regular litter of boards announcing music festivals, producers' markets, rallies, fairs etc. Elsewhere estate agents flout the rules with impunity and I have recently even seen notices advertising caravan maintenance. Many of these boards are well-made and expensive, because the perpetrators of the offence are secure in the knowledge that they will neither be prosecuted under the byelaws, nor lose their advertising materials.

In my own village there is one place on National Trust land where fly-posting became an epidemic. Posters were nailed to the oak trees, stapled to the barrier gate or tied to the Trust's logo board. As it is on the route I take daily to feed my cattle, I eventually got fed up with it. Every time a new notice appeared, I took it down and destroyed it immediately. For a month or so notices continued to appear sporadically, but eventually the message struck home. Now, give or take the odd lost cat appeal, the site is poster free and clean (I also collect litter there). This seems to me to give a clear lesson for the Forest as a whole. If the Forestry Commission adopted a similar policy I have no doubt that the place could be cleared permanently of illegal advertising within a year. It would, of course, need the support of the County Council which is responsible for the fenced road verges. I am told that one of the

keepers has been given special responsibility for assisting the estates department in tackling such problems, so there is at least the chance of an improvement. Controlling this type of abuse is really the sort of thing the National Park should be doing, but it has so far achieved little in this field.

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