

## **NEW FOREST NOTES DECEMBER 2011**

### **Government cuts and a second marking fee increase**

The announcement last month of a second rise in marking fees in two years will have distressed many in the Forest, but should have surprised no-one. In November 2010 it was clearly foreshadowed by the lately retired Official Verderer and neither his successor nor the Court as a whole can turn back the inexorable march of financial austerity at a national level.

For a great many years the marking fees (payments for the services of the agisters and Court), were held steady, despite inflation, because the profits from running stock in the Forest remained slight or, in the case of ponies, non-existent. Then last year it became apparent that that government cuts would lead to a significant reduction in the grants which the Verderers' Court receives. Because grants now account for the bulk of the Court's income, there was only one alternative to instituting a slow steady rise in marking fees. That alternative would have been to cut the services provided by the Verderers, or in plain language, a reduction in the number of field staff resulting in a lower standard of animal welfare. This is not simply a scare story. It has happened several times in the past when the Court's income has declined and the agister force has been cut as a consequence.

Raising the marking fees is, apart from making staff redundant, the most difficult decision that the Verderers ever have to take. All elected members of the Court (and some appointed ones) are stock keepers and are fully aware of the consequences for the commoners. It is not a question of cutting into profits, but of increasing losses. In other words, the Court must sack staff or make life even more difficult for the commoners. That is not to say that this is a choice which confronts the Verderers immediately. A satisfactory surplus was made last year (£77,000) and for the next two years it is hoped that the Court will more or less break even. Thereafter, as government cuts bite deeper, the losses are likely to mount.

On the face of it one might suppose that there is no real problem for the commoners. This year's marking fee is £22 (next year £24) and the subsidy paid for each head of stock is about three times this much. The trouble is, as always, that pony breeding in the New Forest is thoroughly uneconomic. Disastrous foal prices this year – often as low as £15 to £20 per head with some not even reaching the minimum bid level, means that heavy losses are being incurred which the subsidy only partly offsets and which any making fee increase exacerbates. With cattle things are a bit different with most keepers still able to make a modest profit. Of course all these figures ignore the fairly generous European Union subsidy called "single payment" which is all that really keeps New Forest farming afloat, but that can scarcely be regarded as attributable to the exercise of common rights because it is payable to nearly every land occupier in the country who practices a reasonable standard of management, whether or not they bother to keep any stock. For small farmers it is a lifeline, although the general public tends to look on it somewhat less charitably as another European nonsense.

Marking fees used to be the sole source of the Verderers' income, leaving aside small sums of rent and compensation. Now it is very different. Of the £416,000 income last year, only a quarter

came from marking fees – somewhat less than was actually spent on employing the agisters (nearly £150,000). Forestry Commission, HLS and Park grants amounted to over £200,000, twice the marking fee income. That in itself is a very uncertain and unstable way of funding the Court. If the plug is pulled on any major part of the grant income, the whole Forest system will be in imminent danger of collapse. For example, if HLS funding for the Forest were to be withdrawn, there could be a wholesale clearance of ponies from the Forest with all the misery and inevitable slaughter that would involve.

New Forest stock keeping has perhaps no right to expect exemption from national economic hardship, but if the public wishes to see the Forest and its animals protected, it must ultimately acknowledge the need for stable long term funding rather than relying on the goodwill and sense of tradition among the commoners which supports the system at present.

### **The aftermath of stream filling projects**

Whether one regards the present programme of stream filling projects as a wonderful thing for the New Forest or as a damaging and hideously expensive waste of public funds, there can scarcely be any argument against completing the work in proper and tidy manner before moving on to the next batch of schemes. This the Forestry Commission is patently failing to do. In October a string of complaints was received by the Verderers relating to schemes across the north of the Forest which were supposedly finished over the last few years.

At Pinnick Wood, the “new” stream bed is unstable and much gravel has been left exposed on the surface in the surroundings. Stacks of Scots pine trunks have been left lying about the woodland, even after long bone dry periods which would have allowed for its extraction. Then, in the next valley to the east (Buckherd Bottom), exposed heather bales with plastic strings intact, together with numerous posts sticking up out of the filling are widespread. The Commission has been told over and over again that plastic binder twine on the Forest is potentially lethal. Cattle, and calves in particular, cannot resist chewing it and if swallowed it can kill. A desultory attempt was made to clear up this site earlier this year, but major problems remain.

In Claypits Bottom near Bramshaw, six huge stacks of waste have been left to rot on the streamside lawn instead of being burnt when weather conditions were ideal.

All of this was discussed by the Verderers last month and it is clear that much tighter conditions will have to be attached to any future permissions which may be granted for stream filling and bog creation projects. The present informal reliance on assurances is not working.

### **The Boldre land exchange**

Rather to everyone’s surprise, there were no presentments at the November Court either in support of or opposition to this proposal. It will be remembered that a householder there wished to enclose the driveway (Forest land) leading to his house and offered in return a strip of paddock. Unfortunately there was a technical flaw in the application which none of us noticed until the last moment. The land being offered to the Forest was outside the perambulation. The “perambulation” is the legal boundary line surrounding the New Forest and was established in 1964, although the term is an ancient one meaning the line within which forest law applied. The consequence of such an exchange as that proposed would have been that the Verderers would have had no control over stock

on the land to be added to the Forest. A gipsy might, for example, tether an infected horse on it and the Verderers would have had no power to order its removal. Inside the perambulation, of course, the health and welfare byelaws of the Court apply.

As a result of all this, the merits or otherwise of the application were never considered, although it remains open to the applicant to return to the Verderers offering other land to which the byelaws could apply.

### **Latchmore**

I have just returned from yet another site visit to the Forestry Commission's most controversial stream filling and diversion project to date. On this occasion the Commission was endeavouring to sell its plans to a distinctly sceptical audience of mostly local residents. There cannot have been many fewer than one hundred people present and of these perhaps fifteen or so were Commission and Natural England staff, along with their supporters, all briefed to argue the case for the promoters. The remainder were locals, commoners and so on with the majority very unhappy with what is intended. Natural England, it appears, has classified the valley as being in "unfavourable condition" because in the distant past drains were dug, with some success, to improve the grazing. It is thus necessary, in the eyes of authority, to correct this situation by filling the present stream and constructing another. For this, many trees have been felled and more are proscribed. Flooding patterns and water retention of the stream margins will be manipulated. Thousands of tons of clay and gravel will be imported to achieve these objectives. It is small wonder that lovers of this corner of the Forest are unhappy.

Inevitably with such meetings, the big themes are very difficult to keep in focus. Arguments become concentrated on whether or not bird X will be harmed by the works, how many additional (or less) blades of grass will be grown, how many more trees will be felled and how much damage will be done to the archaeology. What really mattered, but was hardly expressed, is whether the scientific benefit of disrupting Latchmore, however short or long that disruption may be, outweighs the unhappiness which will be caused to local people in seeing their favourite bit of the New Forest, in their eyes, violated. To my mind the answer is simple: they should leave Latchmore alone and concentrate their time and money on filling ugly trenches elsewhere in the Forest, where there is likely to be little objection. Latchmore, illustrated and written about by Heywood Sumner, is one of the Forest's gems. It has remained free of mechanical disruption for half a century, whatever drainage may have been undertaken before that. The so called "drain", a term much used by the Forestry Commission's advocates, is in reality a beautiful meandering stream, crossing lawns dotted with knarled thorns and beautifully shaped oaks. To anyone but a hydrologist it has all the characteristics of an entirely natural watercourse.

My feeling is that if the local residents stand their ground they have a fair chance of success in protecting their valley, but the pockets of Natural England are deep (the scheme will cost a quarter of a million pounds) and its tentacles long. Their grip on this project will not easily be released.

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