

NEW FOREST NOTES FEBRUARY 2004

Money for New Forest Farming

After years of campaigning by the Forest, it seems that the government is now willing to acknowledge the service to the nation provided by the Forest's commoners and to pay them for the grazing of their animals. It is upon that grazing that the entire character and ecological importance of the area is so largely dependent. From time to time in the past there have been hand-outs of a few pounds per head, for example to improve pony standards. Such assistance has been welcome, but the Countryside Stewardship scheme announced just before Christmas is in a different league with anticipated minimum payments of about £60 per head per annum for every animal which falls within the schemes rules. The Stewardship support will run for ten years and will be open to all New Forest commoners, subject to some simple rules. A larger owner of stock with, for example, a mixed herd of one hundred ponies and cattle could expect something in the region of £60,000 over the life of the scheme. Even a farmer with a modest herd of say a dozen animals would collect over £7,000. The annual equivalent of these sums is, of course, in addition to the national cattle subsidies which, this year, could amount to a little under £200 per head.

It has to be said straight away that no-one gets rich out of farming the Forest and the new scheme will not alter that, but it is a very valuable first step. For pony keepers it should greatly reduce the annual loss per head, while the present modest profit on cattle should receive a welcome boost. The net benefit to individual commoners will depend very much upon what stock they keep and where their holding is located. Those who will proportionately receive the most are cattle farmers on the Adjacent Commons of the Forest such as the National Trust lands at Ibsley or Bramshaw. Such commoners pay marking fees at a special reduced rate of £2.50 during the life of the scheme and for twelve years thereafter. Their net benefit per animal will accordingly be £57.50. A commoner at Beaulieu, on the other hand, pays marking fees at £18 leaving him with £42 of financial "support". I am told that the term "subsidy" is not regarded as being politically correct in DEFRA circles and must be shunned.

What must a commoner do to receive these payments? The answer is really nothing at all in any active sense. He must, of course, provide the promised grazing of the Forest (which he is doing in any case) – for at least seven months a year in the case of ponies and for at least four months in the case of cattle. This means that DEFRA will be paying for a cow grazing at the rate of about 50p per day and for a pony at 29p. The commoner must comply with the Verderers' byelaws and conform to the existing standards of welfare for his livestock. These again are things he is doing anyway. New requirements are that his holding and stock may be subject to periodic inspection and he must also fill in an application form.

For the first year of the scheme it will not matter how small his holding is. Theoretically he may enter into the scheme (subject to the rules) one hundred animals from a quarter of an acre plot with common rights and collect his £6000. Practically, of course, such an occurrence is extremely unlikely. After the first year he will have to demonstrate to the

Verderers that he has enough land available to him to support all his animals on the Forest (whether entered in the scheme or not), together with any animals he keeps upon his holding. This is a necessary safeguard against abuse. At all stages of the scheme it will be irrelevant whether or not the commoner has sufficient land with common rights to justify the number of animals he turns out, entered in the scheme or otherwise. So long as he has a tiny plot with rights and enough land without rights to accommodate his stock, he will meet the requirements for support. This is an interesting exception to the national rules where subsidies are related to the "quantity" of rights possessed. It perhaps demonstrates the key importance which DEFRA attaches to protecting the grazing system which has survived in the Forest.

The scheme will be run by means of annual agreements between the individual commoner and the Verderers. The £60 estimate is thought to be a conservative one and more than this may actually be paid. In addition to support for ponies and cattle, there will be payments for pigs in the pannage season and additional supplements may be payable for specified geographical or seasonal grazing in due course. There may be penalties in over-grazed or otherwise damaged areas. In order that "excessive" payments should not be made to individual commoners, the distribution of money in the first year at least will be capped at £6,000 in any one case. The overall objective is to achieve a stocking level in the region of 5,000 ponies and cattle (about the present level) and entry to the scheme will be by quota based on numbers of animals paid for in 2002. If subsidies look like pushing up stock numbers to an unacceptable level (7000), they may be cut back or eliminated. The Verderers will employ a new officer to oversee the scheme.

It has to be admitted that the launch of the scheme was not quite so smooth as might have been hoped. This was because, I am told, DEFRA insisted on such a degree of secrecy that even the majority of Verderers were not permitted to know the details until they were issued to the commoners as a whole and to the press in the week before Christmas. The inevitable consequence of this was that numerous problems came to light at a very late stage. A meeting of Verderers had to be called in early January and the paperwork had to be hurriedly re-drafted in advance of an open day held at the Court on 14th January. Even at that stage the forms were still being re-designed. However, by the end of the month the remaining gremlins had been largely eliminated and new application forms are now available. Those who have already submitted the obsolete version need not be concerned. Amendments can be sorted out later on.

It is estimated that the scheme will put into the Forest between four and five million pounds in total, but there is still one important string attached to the offer. At least 70% of the commoners must agree to join. To an outsider, achieving that minimum joining rate might seem like a foregone conclusion. Why should any commoner in his right mind turn down an offer of hundreds (in many cases thousands) of pounds per annum for no additional work? The answer lies in the old bugbear of paperwork: that form which must be completed. Farmers of all types hate paperwork and perhaps the New Forest commoner hates it more

than most. For this reason both the Commoners Defence Association and the Verderers are offering assistance to anyone intimidated by the largely DEFRA inspired detailed paperwork. Once the Court's new officer is in place, he will have the responsibility of rounding up stragglers and inducing them to accept the government's largesse. However, if all this enthusiasm and assistance should ultimately fail, the entire scheme could collapse. Everyone's hard work will have been wasted and the commoners will receive nothing. In that event, government is unlikely to turn a sympathetic ear to cries of financial pain from the Forest community over the years to come.

Official litter

For some years now I have been finding sheets of rusted corrugated iron littered about the Forest's heaths. They constitute a particularly nasty and vicious type of litter with their rusted ends, knife sharp, capable of severing the flesh and tendons of any horse hitting them at speed. Colt hunting horses and their quarry, of course, do not keep to paths. I once had a cow who cut her leg so badly on the edge of just such a sheet of corrugated iron on the farm, that she was only saved from destruction because the attending vet did not have about him the necessary lethal injection to destroy her. She proved a fighter and recovered. Anyhow, from time to time (and especially in New Forest Pride Week) I would collect and dump those sheets I found littering the heath near my home. I assumed that they were the wind-blown detritus of "den" building by local children, careless of the damage to the Forest and the threat to livestock.

Last year the Verderers started to receive complaints of such rubbish occurring throughout the Forest, sometimes with painted numbers scrawled on the surface of the sheets. One of my colleagues had a horse which actually hit one sheet, fortunately on the flat surface and thus escaping hideous injury by inches. The inquiries which followed revealed that the litter is not in fact the work of village louts, but of the Forestry Commission and its licensees. The sheets are scattered about as part of a reptile monitoring programme in pursuance, the Commission says, of its duty to secure the welfare of rare species. The corrugated iron apparently produces a safe (for the reptiles) and warm environment to which snakes and lizards are attracted and at which points they may be inspected and counted. Figures given to the Verderers show that there are 244 sheets of corrugated iron scattered about the Crown heaths and there are more on the Adjacent Commons which are not the Commission's responsibility.

It is perfectly reasonable that the New Forest should be used for scientific study of all types. Studies of lichens, slugs, visitor behaviour, prehistoric burial mounds and pony fertility are all entirely proper uses for this unique area. What is not acceptable is that such studies should endanger livestock and people and disfigure the Forest.

I think it is fair to say that the Verderers were amazed at this discovery and not a little annoyed when, having had the danger pointed out to them, the Forestry Commission expressed an initial intention of continuing to use this lethal debris for its monitoring, apparently upon the basis that corrugated iron had been used so far "without incident"! The

Court's response was that the iron must be removed and I understand that it will now be replaced with less dangerous materials like rubber or bitumastic-based corrugated sheeting. Neither is beautiful, but either could be hit at speed without the risk of serious injury.

Anthony Pasmore