

## **NEW FOREST NOTES FEBRUARY 2005**

### **Money for Horsekeepers**

The flow of agricultural subsidies which has for years benefited only commercial farmers is changing course. From 2005, not only will keepers of cows and growers of corn receive money (if at a declining rate), but for the first time cash will find its way into the pockets of horsekeepers – whether they are in business or simply maintaining the odd riding pony for recreation. The key to their entitlement will be the occupation of land – not the nature of the stock grazing on it. The implications for the New Forest are considerable. Now commoners who operate exclusively in the equine field (apart from certain premises like riding stables) will secure their share of the subsidy cake for the first time. All this follows from an announcement by farm minister Alun Michael in November of last year to the effect that land used for horses will, in most cases, qualify for the new subsidy known as “single farm payment”. Exactly how much will be paid is as yet unclear. We do know that it will start at a low level and increase rapidly over the next seven years. At the end of that time it could be as much as £200 per hectare (2.47 acres) per annum. Nevertheless, it is expected that the government and the EU between them will discover ways of reducing the payment. Ultimately it is likely that all subsidies will disappear, but perhaps that is the more reason to reap the benefit while it remains available. At the end of the seven year period, there seems every chance that a girl renting a couple of acres for a riding pony might be able to recover perhaps a third of her annual farrier’s bill, while a business man occupying a big house with say twelve acres might buy himself a good quality saddle each year out of the single farm subsidies. Of course the government hates the term “subsidy” – you will not find it in any of the official explanatory booklets – but subsidy is exactly what the payment is. Moreover, they like to portray the scheme as being subject to strict and onerous environmental conditions known by the peculiar title of “cross compliance”. That also is a myth. Anyone who takes care of their land and has pride in the welfare of their livestock should automatically qualify. Cross compliance includes such basic requirements as not damaging ancient monuments, not overgrazing, controlling weeds and not cutting hedges between 1<sup>st</sup> March and 31<sup>st</sup> July. A full list is in DEFRA’s “Cross Compliance Handbook for England” 2005.

The obvious next question is how does the average horsekeeper go about getting his hands on the money? The answer is that he must possess patience and determination not to be conquered by the slough of paperwork and official form filling. First of all, the land must be registered with the Rural Payments Agency and that needs to be done very quickly. My own dealings with them suggest that mistakes and confusions in the department are frequent and may take a long time to sort out. Then it will be necessary to claim what are called “entitlements” before 16<sup>th</sup> May this year. Effectively one entitlement equals one hectare of land occupied for a minimum of ten months in the year. Finally, to qualify you must be “a farmer” in the terms of the legislation. This sounds daunting and exclusive, but in true European fashion, it means something completely different from what the ordinary

Englishman might expect. European law sees you as a farmer if you are “either producing agricultural commodities OR maintaining your land in good agricultural and environmental condition”. Thus, little Susie renting a paddock for her recreational pony with dad doing the hard work of keeping it in good order is a subsidy-worthy farmer in the eyes of Brussels. It may sound nonsensical to the townsman, but few horsey beneficiaries are likely to complain.

The horse world is only just beginning to wake up to the possibilities of (collective) riches and no doubt such bodies as the Commoners Defence, Pony Breeders and British Horse Society will be issuing suitable guidance to their members. In the meantime, a commercial website – [www.thesubsidysite.com](http://www.thesubsidysite.com) – is offering an advice pack for the fairly modest fee of £5. I have no personal experience of its use and cannot endorse the service offered, but for the small cost involved it might be worth a gamble.

I don't suppose pony-keeping commoners will be putting in an order for the new Land Rover quite yet, but it does make a nice change to have government trying to give away money rather than collecting it. Moreover, the well of single farm payment is not yet by any means exhausted and there are further announcements from DEFRA in the pipeline which should give an even more substantial boost to New Forest farming.

#### **Hyde Common mystery**

Hyde Common near Fordingbridge is not among the most spectacular or well known parts of the New Forest, but it is a particularly interesting and mysterious place so far as its history is concerned. The eastern part, near the Abbots Well view point, has probably altered little since the Bronze Age, apart from various phases of abuse such as gravel digging or, more recently, topsoil stripping. Indeed, it contains a remarkable collection of water heating sites probably dating from the Second Millennium BC. The west end of the common on the other hand has been modified not only by gravel digging and topsoil stripping, but it has also at one time been enclosed and probably ploughed. This sort of treatment is not exactly uncommon in the New Forest. There are many abandoned field systems, especially in the south, but most of them date from Mediaeval times or earlier. The intriguing thing about Hyde Common is that the long straight banks which divide it up are probably not a great deal more than one hundred and fifty years old. If they are this recent in origin, there must be local memory still surviving as to who made them, when and why – yet there appears to be nothing written that I can discover. The Hampshire Field Club is at present undertaking an archaeological survey of Hyde and several adjacent areas of common land and the unravelling of this mystery is a primary objective. If anyone in the Hyde area can throw light on this subject, I would be very grateful to hear from them.

#### **Commoners' Defence chairman**

Richard Manley is giving up as chairman of the New Forest Commoners' Defence Association after four years in that exacting and time-consuming position. In the words of one current committee member, he has pulled the Association into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century in more ways than one. It is now unquestionably the most influential and prominent of the Forest societies – seldom out of the news and with the chairman always available for comment on important

Forest issues to the press or television. Moreover, during his term of office the CDA has initiated or participated in various projects crucial to the Forest, including the Stewardship Scheme (which pays Commoners for the services they provide) and the re-building of the Beaulieu Road sale yard. I understand that Richard will leave at the forthcoming AGM and that the association will then be faced with the hard task of finding a successor. Until that is achieved, the business of the CDA will be run by the committee, but such collective efforts are at best a poor substitute for individual leadership. The important ground which has been gained over the last few years needs to be held and that calls for the choosing of a knowledgeable and articulate leader without delay.

#### **Battle of the campsites**

The Verderers' decision on proposals to alter Hollands Wood and Roundhill camp sites probably surprised no-one, and certainly not the Forestry Commission. Opinion in the Forest had swung solidly against the plans over the last few weeks and was overwhelmingly expressed in presentments against the scheme at the January Court. What was, perhaps, rather more unexpected was the speed with which the refusal came. A less honest, if politically more astute, response would have been to defer a decision pending English Nature and the planning authority making up their minds. Then the Verderers might have been spared the wrath of the Commission which would have been turned instead against the ecologists and planners. Of course this presupposes that one or both of these bodies would have had the strength and determination to stand up against the plans in the absence of a Verderers' veto. That was a gamble the Verderers were disinclined to take. If a proposal is bad for the Forest, that needs to be said clearly and at once and that is what the Court did. Now it remains to be seen if English Nature will harden up its "holding objection" and if the planners are sufficiently supportive of the Forest to refuse permission. If they don't, the Commission will almost certainly look for ways of getting the Verderers' decision set aside, but I do not think they will find that very easy. Great care was taken in making the decision, with every ground of objection carefully related to the Verderers' statutory responsibilities. Of course if the planning application is rejected and English Nature stands firm, the Forestry Commission would probably be wasting its time in mounting any challenge.

#### **Beatrice Tame**

The New Forest seems to be such a magnet for the authors of poor quality and badly researched books that I have almost given up buying new titles. It was therefore a particular delight to discover "Beatrice of Bolderwood" by Veronica Walton with an introduction by Jude James. It comprises the diary of a remarkable teenage girl, written over only a few months in 1899. Beatrice lived at Bolderwood Farm and was the grand-daughter of the famous "Old Tame" – one of the very few who are born near the end of one century, live throughout the next and die in a third. Beatrice's father was a Crown tenant and commoner. The diary shows that she led a hectic life riding, cycling, attending the Lyndhurst Baptist Church (where she played the organ), assisting the family to exploit emerging tourism in the Forest, shooting, reading and competing with her brothers. This is undoubtedly a specialist's book rather than

one of the “see the pretty ponies” variety. Not only does it paint a wonderful picture of the writer herself and life at the time (one is left regretting that there is no opportunity to meet this intriguing but now long-dead girl), but the historical and biographical notes add greatly to its value. The book is available through the New Forest Museum in Lyndhurst at £18 for the hardback version and a bit less for soft back.

Anthony Pasmore