

NEW FOREST NOTES FEBRUARY 2013

European CAP reform and the New Forest

In discussing subsidies to New Forest farming, one of the larger commoners was heard to remark, with more truthfulness than tact, that “the Verderers subsidies are chicken feed: the real money is in the Single Payment Scheme”. He was referring, of course to the national (EU derived) subsidies to all farmers, but which have a special twist in the New Forest which makes them exceptionally valuable here. Under the Verderers’ HLS scheme to support livestock farmers, the maximum annual payment to any individual is £6,000, although to circumvent the rules, it is alleged, large herds have been fragmented within families and additional commoners have magically appeared. The Single Payment Scheme on the other hand, can yield many times the Verderers’ ceiling figure, depending on how much land a commoner has and, far more importantly, what notional share of the common grazings he is assumed to enjoy, based on his actual turn-out figures in 2004-5.

It is the Single Payment Scheme which has allowed many small farmers here to purchase modern equipment such as Land Rovers, livestock trailers, and tractors – equipment which any previous generation of commoners could only have dreamed about. By the standards of wealth in the New Forest population generally, I doubt if subsidies have made many people rich, but they have allowed commoners’ incomes to start catching up with those of their non-farming neighbours.

There are, unfortunately, losers as well as beneficiaries from the present subsidy regime. Those genuine young commoners who started in business after 2005 fall into the former category, and they must find it particularly galling to see money flooding into their senior colleagues’ pockets while they struggle without support. There are also some who, for one reason or another, failed to secure an allocation of the Forest grazing subsidy at the registration period.

On the surface of things, therefore, the Single Payment Scheme and its generous provision of money should ensure a prosperous future for New Forest farming. To a man who receives say £20,000 per annum single payment, it should perhaps matter little if he sells his foals for virtually nothing. It is the small pony keeper with minimal single farm payment who feels the pain. Even that is not the full story, as there are several threats to subsidies on the horizon.

The Single Payment Scheme is an EU subsidy system and is subject to periodic review, making its long-term future uncertain. We are in the middle of one of these review periods and the future course of subsidies should have been determined by now. As always in such matters there has been delay and a British official of one of the lobbying bodies in the process, recently described the review as characterized by “muddle and mess.” Instead of a new scheme coming into force now, it is likely to be 2015 or 2016 before Europe sorts itself out. In the meantime, the existing payments will probably run on.

In the New Forest there is a desire to present a united front to those concerned with the negotiations in government. To that end the Verderers, NFU, Pony Society and Commoners' Defence are preparing a joint letter to the relevant minister. At the moment there seems a consensus that the basis of the present subsidy payments should be continued unaltered, but that at the same time provision should be made to allow new claimants to participate in the good things which the scheme provides.

The second potential threat hanging over subsidies is that our government seems to dislike them and would be happy to see the EU agricultural budget cut. Fortunately the French farmers tend to do unpleasant things with their tractors in the streets of Paris when any such enormity is suggested. The British benefit quietly from the militancy of their Gallic brothers. Still, even if the funds remain uncut, our government invariably likes to siphon off some of the money destined for farmers' pockets, to spend it on other rural community projects. Continental farmers are less tolerant of such nonsense.

Finally, and contrary to the ideas of many urban dwellers, the Single Payments come with some very stringent rules attached. They are called "cross compliance", which is Euro-jargon for "observing the rules". Every recipient of subsidy is expected to comply with a vast list of minimum farming standards, whether he keeps three Forest ponies for fun or grows a thousand acres of arable crops. The paperwork alone is terrifying. Breaches of the rules result in "fines" in the form of deductions from payments. These can range from a few percent for technical infringements to huge sums for certain animal welfare failures. In December I attended a lecture given by the Farm Advice Service (a government sponsored body) on common failures of cross compliance and their consequences. I must say that I hurried home afterwards to check on the updating of my soil management book and nitrate vulnerable zone plans. No doubt there were others equally worried about their animal movement records or medicine books.

Nitrate vulnerable land is a particular problem for some farmers in the New Forest, particularly those with land draining towards the River Test – me included. One might expect this to be relevant only to arable farmers, but that is not the case. Livestock keepers must make fascinating calculations of the annual dung production of each cow and then apply the results to the number of cows grazing on nitrate vulnerable land and the time they spend there, all in relation to allowable applications of nitrogen. Exceeding the limits leads to fines, although it is not clear to me how the inspectors obtain the required evidence. Still, cross compliance inspections do take place regularly, if covering only about 1% of farms annually. I know of several commoners who have been inspected and have been caught out on minor infringements of the rules.

A private gravel mountain

If you walk out into the centre of Beaulieu Heath west, on the southern margin of the old aerodrome, you will come to an artificial hill of gravel, from the top of which there is a commanding view over the surrounding Forest. This mound has a peculiar history in that,

according to a correspondent in Lymington, it belongs to him ! We thus have a hill in private ownership sitting on a site belonging to the Forestry Commission.

It appears that about fifty years ago, in the days when Arthur Cadman was Deputy Surveyor of the New Forest, my correspondent purchased the hill with a view to using it to construct a road on his property nearby. In fact he sold up before much of the engineering work was completed. Only a small amount of gravel was removed and the hill survives. It seems, therefore that unless the contract of sale required removal within a set time, this particular piece of the New Forest still belongs to the gentleman in Lymington. Since he served in the Home Guard as a teenager and is now presumably comfortably retired, the chances of his turning up with excavators and a fleet of lorries seem rather remote. He tells me that in addition to the gravel hill, he also bought an aerodrome Nissen hut for £3. A corresponding size of agricultural building today might cost in the region of £2,000.

As to the origins of the hill, there is some uncertainty. My informant believes that it is material excavated nearby for use in the aerodrome construction, but subsequently rejected because of its poor quality. He tells me that the Bull Hill and Setley gravel pits were then greatly enlarged to supply material. What seems certain is that the mound was used for aerodrome purposes because it is shown as a carefully formed crescent on a map of 1945 and described there as a "shooting-in butt". It is shown as being 250 yards from the nearest concrete apron and was presumably used for testing guns in aircraft parked there.

Aside from his reminiscences on the Forest's gravel reserves, my correspondent recalls one event from his time in the Home Guard which occurred in the same part of the Forest. On a night in August 1940, a lone bomber circled round dumping bombs almost at random, but no doubt with Wellworthys as the intended target. None of the bombs came within a mile of the factory, but they were effective in keeping the workforce in the shelters all night. One bomb fell uncomfortably close to the Home Guard at Portmore Crossroads, but was not found for two years. It seems that another in the same area was never located and remains buried to this day.

Developments over stream filling

During the course of January, there were two important developments in the discussions over stream filling projects in the Forest. First of all the Deputy Surveyor told the Verderers that the planning authority (the national park) has determined that all his large engineering works will require planning permission. The Forestry Commission's major stream operations are about as big as engineering comes in the New Forest. Of course this determination raises a question as to previous works – all of which were undertaken without any planning application. Those dating from before four years ago probably escape the net, but more recent schemes should properly be considered for enforcement action. I hardly expect to see that done, not least because the use of enforcement powers seems to be discretionary and no actual offence is involved.

The second matter relates to the vexed proposals for Latchmore Brook. Before the lawyers for Friends of Latchmore challenged the Commission's right to develop there without

consent, preparatory works had already been going ahead, including some quite significant felling of broadleaved trees – mostly oak. For some, but only some, of this work the Forestry Commission had obtained the required felling licence. Felling actually took place over a much wider area but this was stoutly denied by Queen's House over many months. Friends of Latchmore pressed home their complaints and in January the Deputy Surveyor wrote to them acknowledging that part of the felling was unauthorized. "Supervisory errors" he said, were at fault, and the situation "does not live up to the high standards we set ourselves". Interestingly, the authority charged with investigating failures to obtain felling licences is the Forestry Commission ! Unlike most *development* without consent, for unauthorized *felling* prosecution and significant fines can follow. A builder who, without consent, cuts down trees to facilitate a development project can look for little sympathy from the magistrates. Once again, I would not expect any action to be taken in this case.

Anthony Pasmore