

New Forest Notes - February 1999

ADAS REPORT ON MARKETING FOREST LIVESTOCK

The long awaited ADAS report was published by the Verderers last month. It was prepared at a cost of £18,000, half of which was European "Life" money and its object is to provide advice on ways of improving the dreadfully depressed state of livestock farming in the Forest and the pony trade in particular. It is an open secret that the Verderers had some reservations about the value of earlier drafts of the document which were received as long ago as last summer. Since then a series of meetings between the Court and the consultants has resulted in a beefing up of some of the recommendations, but it is still very far from a panacea for all the commoners' marketing ills. To be fair to the consultants, they were probably asked to do the impossible. No-one can create a market for an unwanted product. To my mind, there is not much in the equine world which surpasses a really good Forest-bred New Forest riding pony, but that is not, unfortunately, a universally held view. As to the unexceptional small colt foals processed in their hundreds through Beaulieu Road Sales, the buying public has made very clear its attitude to these. It is no good asking even the most learned consultant to solve such an insoluble problem.

ADAS is, in fact, rather critical of Beaulieu Road, but not on welfare grounds. It believes that the sales present an intimidating prospect to potential buyers. The consultants suggest that the sales have a reputation as a meat market in which the private purchaser is frightened of competing with the dealers. Other reported off-putting factors include the speed of the bidding, the auction system itself and the confusing procedures. The appearance of the yard itself and the difficulty of examining stock in advance of bidding are suggested as further difficulties. A final disincentive is the wild and unhandled nature of the stock offered for sale. None of this is likely to go down at all well locally - especially among those volunteers who work so hard to maintain and run the sale yard, but it is an independent outsider's view and deserves to be taken seriously.

The report contains about eighteen recommendations on marketing. These call for more advertising of Beaulieu Road and more information at the sales. Improvements in the presentation of stock (including branding prior to sale) are called for, together with better management of stallions. A cull (voluntary with compensation) of poor mares is recommended. The remainder of the recommendations is a mixed collection ranging from the establishment of a buying group to assist commoners, to "good news" publicity to promote the positive aspects of the Forest as a healthy, welfare-friendly environment for producing happy (and in the case of cattle) palatable livestock. Altogether, the proposals range from the interesting and potentially worthwhile to a few which have little chance of achieving anything. I am inclined to give the consultants the benefit of the doubt and say that they have done a reasonable job of making bricks with very little straw.

A separate element of the report covers the returns from common right farming in the New Forest and this, especially as it is an impartial outside view of the subject, is extremely valuable. The figures are complicated, but in broad terms they show that for every mare on the Forest, the commoners are losing, on average, nearly £60 per annum. In other words, the commoners are subsidising the maintenance of the Forest to that extent. Cattle, on the other hand are profitable (just), producing about £6 per head. Both sets of figures make allowances for finance and labour costs

which, if ignored, continue to show a loss on ponies, but a profit of £110 per head on cattle because of the substantial value of subsidies. These subsidies have just been increased by a one-off payment of £30 per head which is not taken into account in the consultants' report.

Both sets of figures are based on fifty beast herds. I would expect the smaller producers of both cattle and ponies to be doing significantly worse than at this rather artificially large herd size. On the other hand, cattle producers with more than fifty are probably able to make better than indicated returns because of the economies of scale. That is unlikely to be the case with ponies where it is difficult to see how even the biggest commoners could make a profit unless they have developed special markets of their own.

We now have to see what (if anything) will be done with the report. I fear that the Verderers may have joined the legion of waste-paper report publishers with which the Forest is cursed, but I shall be delighted to be proved wrong.

Mire Restoration

The Deputy Surveyor last month published plans for the next phase of valley mire restoration. Until recently we were allowed to call the New Forest's bogs by their centuries-old name: they were bogs. Now a proper regard for Euro-speak requires that they should be "mires" and the blocking up of man-made drainage systems of the 1960s is "mire restoration". Since Europe is providing half the cost of destroying these drains, in the interests of conservation, it presumably feels entitled to name the process.

The plans brought forward cover eleven systems scattered across the entire Forest. They are Alderhill, Picket, Akercombe, Buckherd, Blackensford and Dibden Bottoms, together with Gritnam, White Moor, North Weirs, Denny and Holmhill Bogs. Their location is important because this will be the only opportunity that commoners have to make representations on the schemes. It will be no good complaining that a favourite grazing lawn has disappeared once the work has been carried out. Anyone interested should contact the Verderers' Office (or any Verderer) to see the detailed plans. The plans, unfortunately, are a new breed of computer-generated hieroglyphs - some dreadfully untidy and difficult to read, in marked contrast to the beautiful work formerly produced in the Queen's House drawing office. I suppose we shall have to get used to them.

My initial reaction to the proposals is that they are treading on some very sensitive ground. I have no objection to the principle of mire restoration, but only so long as it passes three important tests. Firstly, it must not create a danger for livestock. Secondly, it must not disrupt the essential track and bridge network on which the commoners depend, and finally it must not damage important grazing areas adjoining the bogs. A first examination of the plans shows that, in their present form, the proposals certainly fail the first two tests. Very detailed local knowledge will be necessary to make a judgement on the third. That is why it is so important that the commoners and Verderers act now rather than grumble later.

A large part of the restoration work involves the filling of existing ditches with clay. This, it seems to me, is little short of constructing a lethal linear pony and cattle trap. It is one thing to dig a ditch through clay subsoil consolidated over geological time, but quite another to throw it back into a water-filled ditch. The result will inevitably be a murderous porridge from which an animal will be lucky

to escape alive. The Commission's ecologist in charge of the work tells me that the method of filling and stabilising the fill is not yet finalised. Until it is, I think it unlikely that the Verderers' Court will give the plans very sympathetic consideration.

An example of a disrupted track system arises in Akercombe Bottom (north of Burley) where an essential bridge is to be removed. That is wholly unacceptable. Altogether, the proposals seem to be rather rushed and, leaving aside conservation considerations, not very well thought out.

This new phase of restoration seems to have sprung from the controversial operations in the Bishop's Dyke towards the end of last year. It will be remembered that several hundred heather bales were put into an eroding bog without proper consultation. Then the adjoining bridge was classified as dangerous. The Forestry Commission has now destroyed portions at each end in attempt to stop the passage from being used. Unfortunately the Forest animals do not understand and continue trying to use it in a now thoroughly dangerous condition. At least the Commission is talking about their bridge problems and a small sub-committee of Verderers and Commoners Defence is to meet the Deputy Surveyor. Gobbledygook

Before Christmas I was rather critical of the New Forest Committee's Stakeholder Conference designed to discuss the application of a national park type administration to the New Forest. Before I am challenged on the word "administration", I should make it clear that whether one wishes to manage or co-ordinate depends upon which national park faction one belongs to. The Countryside Commission, for example, wishes to see a new statutory body managing the New Forest. It probably makes little difference in practice. Anyhow, the participants in the debate were promised a report and last week it arrived - all sixty six pages of it ! I imagine that the average secondary school pupil taught to précis documents could have done a thorough job in two or three pages. Not content with this immense consumption of pulp (six thousand six hundred pages for all those attending), the consultants employed added a further four pages (part recommendations) of which the kindest thing that can be said is that they are rather meaningless. Recommendation 7, for example, is a real gem. " That in order to support the further development of the local dialogue process, the New Forest Committee continues to research and work with best practice in participatory processes, and that it also seeks ways to work with local stakeholders to build local capacity in facilitating these processes". Give me mire restoration any day.