

# NEW FOREST NOTES JULY 2015

## The Forest's new subsidy regime

The New Forest's new subsidy regime, introduced last month by the Rural Payments Agency, has the potential to cause really serious problems for management. It is also fiendishly complicated and, like so much that DEFRA does, it was set up so late that claimants were struggling to complete the voluminous paperwork by the deadline of 15<sup>th</sup> June. This was not helped by the fact that instead of the two or three farm maps normally issued to commoners, this year most of us received a huge box containing 9kg of maps, 99% of which were quite irrelevant to the holdings concerned. One farmer suggested papering his lounge with them, but then enquired what he should do with all the rest.

New Forest farmers receive two different subsidies. The first is a fairly modest payment per head from the Verderers in respect of animals turned in accordance with certain rules. The second and far larger payment comes from the RPA. About ten years ago the Common Agricultural Policy was reformed to achieve what Europe called "de-coupling". In other words farmers were no longer to be paid for the number of animals they kept or the quantity of grain they produced. The public had had enough of butter mountains and wine lakes. Instead, subsidy was to be paid to farmers for providing environmentally friendly land management. In the New Forest this was achieved by an allocation of subsidy entitlement to established commoners. There was therefore less incentive to turn out more and more stock, but more importantly, those who reduced their stock numbers were not penalised by a cut in payments. When the Verderers repeatedly appealed to commoners not to overload the Forest with animals, those who responded to the requests believed they were safe in the knowledge that they would not lose financially. They are proved wrong.

Now DEFRA has thrown the whole system back into the melting pot. New Forest farmers will be paid, probably at a far higher rate than ever before, for every animal they turn out into the Forest. They will need to acquire "entitlements" at a very small cost in relation to the subsidy they will receive, but that is a detail. De-coupling, so far as the New Forest is concerned, is abandoned to be replaced by an old fashioned headage payment. The more ponies and cattle you turn out, the more money you can expect to receive, or at least that is how many people in the Forest see it. Actually things are not quite so clear cut. In the first year, commoners will be paid for every animal they turned out in 2014. The big question is what happens next. The Verderers, evidently fearful of uncontrolled overstocking of the Forest, have announced that the scheme will not necessarily be the same next year since the Minister has promised to work with the Court to avoid the dangers it fears. Commoners have therefore been told that there is nothing to be gained by turning out more animals this year in the hope of rich rewards in 2016. Perhaps not all of them will take this warning seriously. Many, I think, may gamble on the Minister not being nearly as helpful as he suggests. Already the total number of stock on the Forest shows an increase on the same time last year. I have often written in these Notes about the caveats and cautions which have to be built in to any interpretation of New Forest stock numbers, but despite these the trend has been upwards over many years. This

year's jump is not exceptional but there are still many months of 2015 remaining in which the total could rise further.

The crazy part of the whole subsidy scheme for the New Forest is that this is the only area of common land in the country where this form of payment will apply. On all other commons farmers have a right to depasture a fixed number of stock, and their subsidy will reflect that number, so long as the animals are actually turned out on the common. The area of the common (which determines the amount of money paid) will be divided between those actually using the rights and that will be the same in the New Forest. The crucial difference here is that the Verderers have chosen not to reflect the actual rights possessed in the number of animals which may be turned out. That is a longstanding thorny question. It is therefore hardly surprising if enterprising farmers gamble on a repetition of this year's system in 2016 and subsequent years and begin to ratchet up their stock numbers still further.

At a recent RPA subsidy meeting in Lyndhurst with every seat taken, one commoner commented that while "we all like the money, but we do need to think of the consequences for the Forest". It will be interesting to see how far his warning is heeded.

### **A girl in a photograph**

Whether the New Forest's contribution (a very small one) to the planning of the atomic bomb attacks on Japan is a matter of pride or revulsion no doubt depends on one's view of the justice of fighting WW 2. That the work of Armaments Research Department Millersford had made such a contribution was completely unknown to me and no doubt to many other people, so I am much indebted to local historian Peter Roberts who has discovered the relevant papers amongst the online archive of the Los Alamos National Laboratory Research Library.

In August 1944, ARD Millersford exploded twelve 500lb bombs at Turf Hill on successive days and in differing weather conditions, with the object of assessing the effect of weather on the destructive power of the bombs. A United States report of the 6<sup>th</sup> February 1945, declassified about thirty years later, quotes the Millersford research in its planning for using "the gadget" – evidently code for the atomic bomb. The attack, at least at Hiroshima, took place in just such weather conditions as Millersford had concluded would secure the most destruction.

Millersford was staffed very largely by teenagers too young for military service and by young women, all under the control of the scientific team. Among the many photographs of the range which former workers kindly permitted me to copy about twenty years ago, is one which I find particularly poignant. It shows a dark haired girl of perhaps twenty years old kneeling, apparently alone but for the photographer, in the centre of a large expanse of heath. In the background are the two massive steel towers which dominated Turf Hill and beside her is a pressure gauge on which she is carrying out some delicate task. She looks serene and as though she might have been a heroine lifted directly from the pages of a Hardy novel. The contrast between the innocence of this scene and the violent objectives of her work is immense. It was the business of these young people to test and improve the killing power of the devices on which they laboured – how efficiently could a German house with 15" brick walls be destroyed, how much force would be needed to penetrate a given thickness of

protective armour and how much more lethal could be made the hail of shrapnel from a bomb blast. It was a necessarily savage craft and perhaps they did not think too much about their objectives, beyond the fact that it was “their lives or ours”. In considering this and the latest revelations about Millersford’s work, I find the present-day jolly promotion of WW2 sites in the Forest as tourist attractions very distasteful. Research and record them by all means. In a way we owe that to the wartime generation that created them, but at least while there are still survivors here or in Germany, such sites as ARD Millersford and the Ashley bombing range are best left in respectful anonymity.

Meanwhile, as my horse stumbles through a half-filled cable trench or his shoes strike shrapnel or concrete from one of the flattened laboratories, I sometimes wonder what happened to the girl in the photograph in after years. If she is still alive, she must by now be well into her 90s.

### **Draft Recreation Management Memorandum of Understanding**

A couple of weeks ago I was contacted by a member of the New Forest Association who had discovered this document on the national park’s website. It is a proposal which could have serious implications for the New Forest. Worse still, it carried (amongst others) the logo of the Verderers’ Court and that seemed inexplicable. Of course such claims to the Court’s endorsement are no longer my concern, but I thought this so strange that I decided to check with the Clerk’s office. They had not seen the paper and it had not been before the Verderers. The use of the logo had not been authorized.

It is one of those papers which pretend to be all things to all men, saying how important it is to protect the Forest against damage and how necessary it is to promote recreation, while at the same time fostering “economic and social well-being”. In other words it sets out to fight the fire by pouring on petrol. This is all fairly standard “park speak” and perhaps it now fools less people than it once did. My concern, however, is that this is a more subtle attempt than the previous frontal attack to undermine the Verderers policies on preventing the net expansion of recreation trails and urbanization. Such an objective is, of course, not expressly stated, but it is certainly the underlying thrust of parts of the document.

Having said this, not all parts of the proposals are bad. It is certainly time for a review of the location of some recreation sites and for the moving of certain entertainments off the common land. Still, I hope the Court will have the wisdom not to allow itself to become bound by any such memorandum. They are a classic means of fettering discretion and would undermine the invaluable protection which the Court’s own policy document gives to the Forest. Where the objectives are laudable, they can be achieved without a binding commitment to a memorandum - one which may have less pleasant consequences as well. Where they are damaging, they need blocking without the claim “but you signed up to the implication of this or that development when you adopted the memorandum”.

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