

NEW FOREST NOTES MARCH 2012

The new subsidy scheme for the Forest

Last month the Official Verderer announced details of the new subsidy scheme which will replace the old Countryside Stewardship support for New Forest farming from the beginning of March. From a practical point of view, those who already receive subsidy should not notice any great changes, although certain bonus payment for reducing the number of animals turned out by an owner will now disappear. The actual amount of money paid for each animal will not be determined until the number of qualifying stock is known. The idea of this is that turn-out figures can be influenced by increasing or reducing payments. The whole thing is becoming fiendishly complicated, with five pages of rules drawn up in a probably vain attempt to keep one jump ahead of those who seek to exploit the system.

New entrants to the subsidy scheme will be accepted after three years of marking fee payments. That means that many commoners who have not been receiving Countryside Stewardship money will be entitled to Higher Level Stewardship funds from the start.

I have to say that I regard the whole process of subsidy as rather distasteful. Money pours into the Forest from Single Farm Payment on private farmland, from the same source in respect of a notional allocation of the Forest's grazings to commoners, and now from a direct headage subsidy under HLS. Of course we are not now allowed to call it a headage subsidy because that, in Natural England circles, would be politically incorrect. We must now graze the Forest with "livestock units" where a cow is equal to one unit, a registered New Forest mare equals 0.8 units and a pig equals 0.3. How much better it would be if we could secure a good market for Forest ponies in which the commoner received a fair return for his labour by producing good stock which the public would buy. That would be much preferable to the present artificial and bureaucratic system of finance. I think a good many of the older generation in the Forest are of the same mind, but we have no choice in the matter. Ponies are not economic and Forest farming has to be kept afloat.

From the Verderers' point of view the administration of subsidy is absorbing an immense amount of time and it is hardly the role for which we were appointed or elected. Things are only going to get worse, with the integration of payments to commoners of the Adjacent Commons at different levels, reflecting the under or overgrazing of those areas and the contributions made to the Forest HLS by the owners of those commons, instead of the flat rate which has been paid to date. Actually I am inclined to think that the changes will make little difference to payment levels. So far as I can see, the National Trust has been paying commoners not to overgraze its land, while the Verderers have been paying for stock to be turned out. In future it looks as though you will be paid to graze or not to graze as you please, so the commoners can't lose! The morality of paying people not to abuse common land is certainly open to question – not least because that abuse is specifically prohibited under the government's so-called "cross compliance" rules, but apparently Natural England is happy with this system.

None of this nonsense applies to the Crown lands, where grazing levels are generally acceptable. Still, we are likely to see a miraculous discovery that many animals claimed to have been on the Adjacent Commons (and thus paying reduced marking fees) are in fact on the Crown

lands, because the higher rate of subsidy which may apply to the Crown lands may more than offset the disadvantages of higher marking fees there.

I sometimes wonder how we managed to get ourselves into this horrible tangle, but then the love of money is traditionally supposed to be the root of all evil. I remember once being told by Professor Ian Mercer, then of the Dartmoor National Park Authority, that his commoners possessed two thousand years of accumulated cunning. I am sure the New Forest would not submit to being outdone by Dartmoor.

The battle of Latchmoor Brook

Residents in the north and west of the Forest show no sign of being intimidated by continuing pressure from the Forestry Commission to “restore” Latchmore Brook. Indeed, the organization and speed with which they have garnered support is impressive. On 22nd February I attended the inaugural meeting of the “Friends of Latchmore” at the Hyde Memorial Hall – which was filled to overflowing. I understand that 108 people signed the attendance book.

For those who have not been following this saga, the Forestry Commission seeks to fill-in parts of Latchmore Brook and to dig out a new channel nearby on a line which it says the stream once followed. In order to achieve this, large numbers of trees have been felled and more are to follow them. Immense quantities of clay and gravel will be imported for the filling operation. This will involve large numbers of heavy lorry movements along tiny Forest lanes and past people’s homes. The residents believe that there will be considerable disruption of wildlife, interference with downstream water supplies, increased risks of flooding and a general spoiling of a very beautiful valley. The objective of all this work is that, at a cost of a quarter of a million pounds, a box can be ticked to indicate in Natural England’s records that Latchmore is no longer technically in unfavourable condition – a shocking state supposed to exist because generations ago some minor drainage work was carried out to improve grazing. The residents (clearly blinded by ignorance in the Forestry Commission’s view) can see nothing “unfavourable” in the present condition of the valley and they believe that the intended disruption is too high a price for the obscure scientific gain which it is supposed might be achieved.

The campaigners are not going to find this an easy battle because of the immense financial resources ranged against them. On the other hand, I think the Forestry Commission would be well advised not to underestimate the strength of feeling in that part of the Forest. Actually, I don’t think they do underestimate it. No less a person than the Deputy Surveyor turned up at the Hyde meeting and it is a good many years since I have seen so exalted an official at this type of gathering. Pacifying the natives is normally left to his staff.

The intended Latchmore operations are another aspect of HLS expenditure in the New Forest, controlled now by a governing board comprising the Deputy Surveyor, the chief executive of the national park and the Official Verderer. Before jumping down on the (to my mind) wrong side of the fence, the Park’s chief officer had expressed fears that going ahead with Latchmore in the face of fierce public opposition would affect the good reputation of HLS. Her authority has good reason to be cautious of such actions. The fiasco of attempts to regulate private horse keeping through park planning controls, is still fresh in everybody’s minds in the New Forest. You don’t tangle with an articulate, knowledgeable and extremely unhappy body of local opinion unless you are very sure of being able to crush it.

At the Hyde meeting, the chairman very wisely asked for a show of hands as to how much of the audience was dissatisfied with the explanations given to it by the Forestry Commission as to the nature of and necessity for its intended works. The overwhelming majority expressed dissatisfaction. Now an informal committee has been set up to see how the opposition can be taken forward.

The end of the cows' tale

In more than twenty years of writing New Forest Notes, I don't think that I have ever received so many comments on an item as I have done on last month's account of my cows' life in the Forest. I had evidently seriously underestimated the degree of affection in which cows are held, at least by a discerning element of the Forest's population.

A second consequence of what I wrote is that the herd has now gone to a new home twenty miles to the south east, where they will be exploring a new corner of the Forest, investigating new gorse clumps and ravaging fresh hedges. All this will take place after a suitable period of acclimatisation to their new holding. Cows have an excellent homing instinct and without this preparation it would not have surprised me to find them back outside my gate after a few days. Now, instead of distant glimpses of the Purbeck Hills, their horizon will be dominated by Fawley's chimneys, but I don't think that will trouble them too much. It has to be admitted that a cow's appreciation of landscape and other non-material qualities of the New Forest is not great, but in that they are no worse than many human Forest users.

The herd left quite suddenly in two loads on a snowy Sunday morning, leaving my wife and I quite numbed. Still, the best of intentions cracked at the last moment and two old favourites were kept back – probably to grow fat and lazy in our fields. Old habits are hard to break and for the moment I continue to feed (rather less) hay at dawn each day.

Good deed in Wilverley

I do not like mobile telephones and I carry one only for emergency use when working or riding in the Forest. The only number I have ever called with it is my own home. Anyhow, on a bitterly cold day when working in Wilverley Inclosure I lost it. It was no doubt ejected from my pocket with a handkerchief as I had a cold at the time. I had not taken the precaution of including my name and address in the case. By the time I reached home, unaware of what had happened, my wife already knew that the phone had been lost. A walker from Highcliffe had found it and, on failing to discover any clue as to its ownership, had studied list of numbers recently dialled and then called her. The phone arrived back safely a few days later.

With the Forest so full of people who cause damage, throw litter about and generally treat it as a resource to be exploited, it is good to know that there are still honest and responsible citizens about.

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