

NEW FOREST NOTES MAY 2010

Forest ponies surviving a tough winter

A recent local paper headline “Ponies left to starve” brings back some unhappy memories of conditions in the Forest a few years ago, but its fairness is very much open to question. Moreover, the attempt to condemn all commoners for the sins of a few is certainly wrong. Like any section of the farming community, the New Forest contains some commoners who pride themselves on very high standards of stock management. There is next a group (a large majority) which adopts an unsentimental attitude to stock, but would not knowingly mistreat ponies. Finally there is a (fortunately tiny) minority of individuals who could not care less about the welfare of their animals – as witness the periodic prosecutions by the authorities.

My own assessment of the Forest ponies this spring is that a surprising number have come through a very harsh winter in good order and that there has been no wholesale breakdown in the welfare system in the Forest. On the other hand, unusually large numbers of animals have been removed by the agisters or on their instructions, because they fell below the Verderers’ welfare standards. Up to 21st April, 455 animals had been so removed this year (500 through the course of the winter) and, of course, others will have been taken off by their owners before the need for an instruction. Strictly speaking, the responsibility for removal does lie with the owner and not with the agisters. Unfortunately there has been a growing tendency for commoners to rely on the Verderers’ staff to do this work for them. Sometimes this is justifiable because of the owner’s age or sickness, but there is an increasing number of commoners who are unable or unwilling to face up to this fairly basic responsibility of management.

I suppose that the Forest has, in recent years, become a little complacent over animal welfare, as we benefited from a succession of mild winters and early springs. Confident and sometimes self-congratulatory press statements have ignored the fact that there is a very fine line between getting through the winter with minimal problems and encountering real difficulties such as we have seen this year. Perhaps even the Verderers’ Court has not been guiltless in this respect.

All sorts of problems conspire against the Court’s efforts to maintain a high standard of animal welfare in winter. None is wholly responsible on its own, but collectively they threaten what I suppose we must now call the “sustainability” of the system. Firstly, the New Forest is capable of producing more than enough feed for all its livestock in the summer months, but that is not the case in the winter. Moreover, the slow but inexorable rise in pony numbers exacerbates the problems of any winter scarcity. For various complicated reasons, the numbers shown on the marking fee registers do not necessarily represent the actual numbers out at any one time, but this is a question of trends and the trend is upwards. The Verderers have been at pains to devise increasingly complex disincentives to turning out more stock, but a headage-based subsidy system such as we have in the Forest, inevitably

encourages more pressure and more ingenious methods of evading the disincentives. The simple fact is that when subsidies are paid per head, owners (often through family arrangements) will seek ways of depasturing more animals so as to maximize receipts.

As to the animals themselves, certain classes do much better than others. Fit mares without foals on them and which are not in foal have a reasonable chance of getting through an average winter in fair condition. Mares feeding themselves, suckling a foal and feeding another embryo inside them, have very little chance indeed of making it through in reasonable condition, yet many foals are not weaned as a matter of policy. It is claimed that a winter on the Forest under mother's instruction is necessary to educate the foal in the ways of eating gorse and holly. For some that is a deeply held belief, but for others a convenient way of avoiding the inconvenience and expense of weaning. It is not a policy which is supported by evidence of weaned foals returned to the Forest in later life, which then adopt all the instinctive feeding habits of the breed and without maternal instruction. Formerly the Verderers would only allow foals to be carried into the winter by mares in first class order. That rule is now abandoned and the consequence is that large numbers of suckling mares degenerate.

Other classes of animal which are particularly vulnerable to harsh winters are young ponies "shelling" their teeth and old mares, many of which should have been put down, but even destruction is expensive nowadays.

The nature of the feed on the Forest in winter is a widely misunderstood subject. The public sees no grass (there is none to speak of) and assumes, understandably, that the ponies must starve. In fact key elements of the ponies' diet include gorse and holly, large areas of which are specifically managed by the Forestry Commission to make these resources available in winter. In a winter such as we have just experienced there would certainly have been a disaster without these feeds, but there are limits to what even such miracle shrubs can achieve.

We are now entering a particularly dangerous time of year when the sun is shining and the grass is beginning to grow in the fields (but little in the Forest) and when it is often said of a marginal mare "she'll get through on the Forest now". In fact animal condition on the Forest often continues to decline right into May and occasionally through it. Easing up on welfare at this stage would be a bad policy.

A final difficulty faced by the welfare authorities and not least by the Verderers' Court, is that for commoners it is extremely inconvenient to remove livestock in the spring. Scarce acres must be laid-up for hay and on-farm feed stocks are at a very low ebb, especially in years like this. That, of course, raises the question of holding size in relation to the number of animals turned out. The foot and mouth epidemic demonstrated the inability of many cattle keepers to accommodate all their animals on enclosed land in the event of an emergency and the same is true of some pony keepers. The traditional relationship of common rights and holding size to the numbers turned out on the common has been broken, making the system

unstable. Of course there has always (rightly) been a bit of flexibility over this, but the pressures are becoming more and more extreme. The New Forest is almost the only area of the country where the numbers of stock turned out on the common are not in practice regulated by the rights possessed. Moreover, the subsidy rules which require a relationship between holding capacity and the numbers depastured are not firmly enforced.

I think we will get through the winter of 2009/10 with the reputation of the Forest largely intact, some adverse headlines notwithstanding, but the grazing system of the common land is becoming increasingly unstable and some fairly radical rethinking will be necessary if future problems are to be avoided.

Sally Cardwell

The Verderers are about to lose their long-serving assistant clerk, Sally Cardwell, who is retiring shortly. Sally has been the public face of the Verderers' office every afternoon for the last fifteen years, in that she occupies the outer part of the rabbit hutch from which the Verderers' business is transacted. I have often wondered how she and the clerk manage to operate at all in such a congested space, but neither the Park nor the Forestry Commission seems able to match the efficiency and economy of the Court – despite their vastly superior premises and huge staffs. The Verderers are not yet tied up in red tape to the same extent as the other management agencies. A good example of this occurred just before the announcement of Sally's retirement.

A group of visitors decided to show their respect and affection for the Forest by running an illegal camp at Latchmore. They drove about the Forest, lit camp fires and left large amounts of rubbish strewn around. Some of this they thoughtfully threw into Latchmore Brook. In due course the Forestry Commission sent a team to clear up the mess. The collectors apparently expressed horror at finding some of the rubbish in the few inches of water which comprises the brook. They were not equipped to deal with the clearance of rubbish from water and a formal risk assessment was obviously required. That, at least, is the story and it was not denied by the Deputy Surveyor at the Court on the 21st April. Sally Cardwell lives not far from the site of this outrage and her response was to put on wellington boots, reach for a plastic sack, and clear up the filth herself. That, I think, demonstrates very well the spirit of the Verderers' operations.

At the public session of the Court, the Official Verderer paid tribute to Sally's long service to the Verderers, while later in the day she was presented with a New Forest picture by Verderers and some colleagues working in the Queen's House complex.

Tightening the net on bovine tuberculosis

Back in February I wrote about DEFRA's plans to review TB testing in the New Forest. These were finally announced on 15th April in a letter from Animal Health to all cattle keepers. As expected, all herds which are depastured on the Forest must now be tested annually. That annual test is free. After a clear test, a commoner will have sixty days in which livestock may be moved freely to other premises. All other movements outside the

sixty day period will require a clear test in advance of the intended move. Since each test needs two visits from a vet, three days apart, it is an expensive business.

Animal Health's letter was accompanied by an explanatory booklet which sets out some exceptions to the testing requirements. One is particularly interesting for New Forest commoners. There is an exception for "cattle moving between premises sharing rights of (sic) the same common". Evidence of possession of rights must be produced by buyer and seller. I hardly think that such an exception can have been intended, but it is there in black and white in the rule book. Having just spent a lot of money testing a cow and calf sold to another New Forest farmer in the next village, I am particularly sore that DEFRA had not made this exception known earlier.

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