

New Forest Notes – May 1993

A new benefit from Common Rights

Anyone involved with agriculture will know that the farming community is being driven to distraction by a flood of intensely complex EEC forms which have to be completed to secure subsidies. The worst of these charmingly entitled "Integrated Administration and Control System" (IACS for short) deals with the land area a farmer must have to secure certain subsidy payments on his beef cattle. He must, for example, have no more than 3.5 livestock units per hectare of forage area (grazing), while even lower stocking densities will entitle him to an additional substantial payment per head known as an "extensification premium".

For many farmers the problem is too many cattle on too little ground and this is where the question of common rights comes in. The possession of such rights will be counted as part of the commoner's holding, thereby in many cases, improving his entitlement to subsidy. Outside the New Forest area the extent of such improvement is straightforward. Since 1965 rights have been for a specific number of stock and the farmer simply has to include that number on his form. The fact that he does not use the rights is immaterial.

In the Forest area, however, numbers of animals in respect of any right of common are not specified and it seems clear that the Ministry of Agriculture is somewhat uncertain as to how benefit should be allocated. There is also an understandable resentment among practising commoners that other possessors of rights should seek advantage from a system which has never interested them until now. They argue that since the theoretical contribution of the Forest to the pool of grazing area is limited, why should not the practising commoners receive the whole benefit of what is available to the exclusion of others? After all, the government has repeatedly recognised the invaluable contribution of the commoners' animals in protecting the Forest.

The non-practising commoner is likely to see things rather differently. Firstly the beef subsidies are paid nationally and are in no sense a particular New Forest perquisite. He will question the justice of excluding him from exploiting his ownership of common rights simply because he lives in or near the New Forest, while anywhere else in England he could count them as part of his holding without challenge. The fact that he chooses not to exercise his rights is irrelevant. He will also argue that in buying his land he paid for the rights which are an inseparable part of it and it is no more equitable to exclude him than to demand the omission from his claim of a field which he has chosen to leave vacant.

Perhaps the whole argument will prove rather academic as I suspect that the 18,000 hectares of the New Forest will prove more than adequate for the claims which are made against it, although much will depend upon the formula eventually adopted by the civil servants. It is unfortunate that the Verderers, who are best placed to devise such a formula have not been formally consulted and have

not seen fit to take the initiative. An inconclusive discussion at the Court has not led to any tangible proposals, and the Ministry time limit for the submission is fast running out. The IACS forms must all be returned by May 15th, and I imagine that the officials will then have a fascinating time unravelling the claims of several hundred commoners prepared according to their individual ideas of what they ought to receive.

My own telephoned inquiry as to how to proceed produced the initial response that I should divide the area of the common by the number of persons possessing common rights and use the resulting figure as an addition to my forage area. When I pointed out that some of the tower blocks in Southampton are built on land with common rights, and that the number of possessors is impossible to ascertain, but must run into millions, the official thought for a moment. He then suggested dividing the area of the common by the known number of persons exercising rights. The Illogicality of this is patent, but the resulting figure gratifying, so that is what I did.

Roger Newland

This month sees the retirement of one of the Forestry Commission's senior officers at Lyndhurst. Roger Newland has been the operations manager for the Commission and chairman of the committee which determines matters of grazing improvement and maintenance - a position of great importance so far as the warring Forest factions of commoners and conservationists are concerned. I think there is a fairly general agreement that he has trodden this very difficult path with skill and diplomacy. He is also one of these rare public servants who when you complain about something, as most people in the Forest do on a regular basis, is able to convey the impression that the sole objective of his department is to deal with your problem to the exclusion of everything else. He will not be easy to replace although I understand that the Deputy Surveyor will in future be chairing the committee and this is perhaps a measure of the growing importance of that group.

National Park on T.V. and Radio

In early April many commoners and Forest dignitaries took part in the linked television and radio phone in "Southern Eye" produced by the BBC. Apart from the fact that the programme was made long after the closing of the consultation period for the governments proposals, it was a useful and interesting contribution to the debate. It was good that so many working commoners were able to express a view in the radio programme. As one of the studio panel, I was also struck by the very supportive nature of many of the calls from the public, most of whom clearly valued the Forest and seemed quite prepared to contribute financially to its protection if that is required. The programme also raised the intriguing question of whether with the benefit of hindsight, the 1970s policy of dispersing recreational pressure throughout the Forest was correct. Might it not have been better to concentrate pressure on a few areas (which would have been ruined) and leave the rest untouched? This is a question which will not go away and which will have to be faced by the Forestry Commission over the next few years.

Killing Rhododendrons

After the Scots Pine, rhododendron is perhaps the most pernicious of all New Forest weeds, invading large areas, especially around Rhinefield, Half Moon Common and Hale. The Forestry Commission wages a sporadic and expensive war on this pest by cutting fencing the stumps and spraying regrowth. The National Trust has done much the same at Bramshaw. This spring, however, the Trust has tried a new approach at Hale Purlieu, the most northerly of the New Forest's commons. Here the local landowning family, the Goffs, first planted rhododendron as cover for game in the adjoining plantations. During the succeeding century an inexorable spread has occurred onto the adjoining heaths given to the Trust in the 1950s. Volunteer working parties have proved insufficient to stem this rising tide of encroachment and during April a Hymac (a large tracked excavator) fitted with a root fork was hired. Despite appalling weather conditions the machine worked for two days tearing up bushes large and small and heaping them onto a fire which burned for two weeks. Although this is an expensive process, the results look extremely promising.