

NEW FOREST NOTES NOVEMBER 2007

Extra financial support for New Forest Commoners

The past summer has been a particularly depressing time for agriculture and the New Forest has not escaped the general misery except in the markedly increased price of Forest ponies. Even now (last week of October) when most of the world regards the foot and mouth outbreak as being over, the restrictions are only just being eased in the Forest allowing the pannage season to commence very late. Unfortunately what DEFRA gives with one hand, it takes with the other, so that the Forest is just being made subject to bluetongue disease controls. All these disease restrictions followed closely on a very late and difficult hay crop. In the light of this, the announcement of greatly increased subsidies for New Forest commoners could hardly have come at a better time to raise spirits and give hope that things are really going to improve.

I have to admit that the ways in which New Forest farming is subsidised seem to get more complicated by the day and trying to explain them is equally difficult. Assuming that one is not in receipt of the various environmental subsidies provided by DEFRA, there are really three different payments which flow into the commoners' pockets – leaving aside, of course, such small sums as they may be able to make from keeping animals. Firstly there is the money they receive through the Verderers' Stewardship Scheme which works out at about £60 per head per annum. A commoner with say ten ponies and ten cattle would thus receive £1200. His payments are limited to the number of stock he turned out in 2004 and he must comply with various rules and regulations, although these are very far from onerous. There are special rules for new commoners, but the principal beneficiaries are those who have been farming for some years.

The next payment the commoner gets reflects the area of his holding. This is something which applies nationally and not just in the Forest. It is a subsidy called Single Farm Payment and is issued indiscriminately to thousand-acre dairy farmers and schoolgirls renting a tiny pony paddock. So long as each is, in Europe's eyes a "farmer", they get the money. To be a farmer one must occupy land and keep it in good agricultural condition. The determination of amount is very complicated with a basic payment which will rise each year and an historic element (reflecting animals the farmer used to keep) declining year by year. Eventually the total may be in the region of £180 per ha (2.47 acres), although I, for example, currently receive payment calculated as 80 euros (£55). I take it that DEFRA expresses payment in euros to show we are good Europeans. On a holding of say 10ha, the payment might currently be £550 and ultimately £1800. In return for this payment the farmer (commoner in our case) does not actually have to do anything so long as he remains a technical "farmer". He certainly need not keep any animals as it was an objective of the European Union common agricultural policy reform to break the link between production and subsidy. Still, to the working farmer, this is nonetheless a very welcome help.

Our commoner with the ten ha holding and 20 animals has so far received only £1750 at today's rates and anyone with experience of agriculture at present will know that he is not going to get rich on this.

Now comes the really complicated bit, but this is the area in which the subsidies have just received a major boost. The common land of the Forest is notionally apportioned to a commoner on a formula which reflects the number of animals which he turned out in 2004 and in which a cow was supposed to represent an animal and a pony a decimal part of an animal – 0.6. Those who started to farm the Forest after 2004 do not normally qualify for this payment. Anyhow, the original basis of allocation was that your holding was assumed to be increased in size by 1ha for each "animal" you turned out in 2004 and your payment for holding area was increased accordingly. Thus our commoner with 10 ponies and 10 cows was assumed to have 16 animals and therefore 16 additional hectares on which to claim. This was irrespective of what common rights he actually possessed. He might, for example have had only a quarter of an acre with rights. Never mind: his payment for the rights only was about £900 at current rates and perhaps £3000 eventually. What has now been announced is that his subsidy rate for this element only has been tripled. He will now receive about £2700 and ultimately perhaps £9000. The grand total of all payments at present will be about £4400 now and by 2012 perhaps £10750. Moreover, the increased common land single farm payment will be backdated to the start of the scheme. This is a very worthwhile bonus for which our thanks are due to the Commoners Defence Association and to Emma Rigglesworth of the national park for working tirelessly to secure the improvement.

If the new scheme is perhaps a little ungenerous to new commoners, it is of great benefit to those who have just retired from active farming or are nearing retirement. They will receive the money (Stewardship excepted) irrespective of whether or not they continue to run animals on the Forest. Indeed, so far as I can see they need retain no land with common rights at all. All they must do is to continue to fall within the definition of "farmer". This, I think, is a fitting reward for those senior members of the Forest community who have given so much over the years for so little financial return.

Park plan workshop

Last month I attended the first of the great roller coaster of meetings which is supposed eventually to lead to a "park plan". It was held in delightful surroundings at the Beaulieu Road Hotel and was altogether a very jolly occasion. Whether it actually achieved anything, I very much doubt. Delegates (most of them knowledgeable, but quite a few who would not have been able to tell you where the Knightwood Oak is) were required to discuss the Park's vision for the Forest and afterwards to contemplate what the organizers thought to be the "big issues" for the Park. All this was done in group sessions which some may have regarded as fairly predictable and uninspiring. What this cost in money terms is difficult to imagine. I don't suppose the hotel was cheap – or the lunch – but the real expense comes in labour costs for the government, council and park officials who would presumably otherwise have been employed on more productive business. If, at a conservative estimate, one

assumes that thirty different officers were present and that on average their services are priced at £200 per day each, a great deal of taxpayers and council-taxpayers' money was spent to little advantage. Then, on top, outside consultants were hired to put a swing into the proceedings. I don't imagine that their services either were secured for peanuts. Apart from those on salaries and councillors, many delegates from voluntary groups will have received nothing in the way of remuneration or expenses, but will have expended a lot of time. Still, as one of my colleagues rightly put it, the value of such days is not in anything they actually achieve, but in the opportunity they provide for meeting interesting people ! So far as I am concerned, the most worthwhile part of the workshop was the chance of hearing over lunch from a local landowner about the wood-fired district heating system which he is installing on his estate.

Drift visitors

When I first remember the Forest in the 1950s there was a series of cattle drifts each autumn to remove the cows before the winter. There were also one or two pony drifts in the Brockenhurst area for no very clearly defined purpose. Now the cattle drifts are no more than a distant memory, having faded away, I think, about thirty years ago. The pony drifts on the other hand have become a dominant feature of Forest livestock management between August and October each year. There are usually about forty of them, although each year one or two seem to be cancelled (usually because of strangles outbreaks) and a few unofficial tidying-up drifts are added. They serve various purposes. They are an opportunity to check the condition of the ponies, they allow for the branding or removal of foals, reflective collars can be fitted to ponies running in fast traffic areas, and not least they act as a check on what animals have been turned out and whether they have been paid-for. Tail marks are supposed to indicate that payment has been made and show the agister's area in which the owner lives. All this is very good and necessary. The agisters put in a great deal of hard work and they have some loyal volunteer helpers amongst the commoners and local people – if not always as many or as competent as they might wish.

Unfortunately the pony drifts are not only a crucial management tool, but they are also spectacular with fast-moving streams of ponies and what the public (wrongly) perceives as demonstrations of Wild West riding. There has thus arisen the idea that this is some sort of spectator sport which the Forest puts on free for the visitors. Camera-wielding tourists, trailing small children and dogs have the potential to disrupt the driving of ponies and put both themselves and the participants in the drift at real physical danger. Driven ponies no doubt assume that their last moment has come and are desperate to escape, while the riders are equally determined that they shall not do so. Mr and Mrs. Smith, strolling down from a nearby car park to enjoy what they see as the fun are a menace to everyone's safety.

In an effort to counteract this problem, the Verderers decided that weekend drifts in popular tourist areas would commence early in the morning to beat the arrival time of the trippers, but this has its disadvantages. In hot weather the ponies congregate to shade later in the morning and may still be widely dispersed at 8.00am. Now, with the problem of public

pressure continuing to grow, the Court has decided that it will no longer publicise the time and place of drifts. The drift list has accordingly been removed from its website. At the October Court, the Official Verderer made a firm public announcement asking everyone who is not assisting the agisters to stay away from the drifts. It will be interesting to see how the visitors respond. I understand that some of them already regard the new policy as an infringement of their civil liberties.

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