

NEW FOREST NOTES NOVEMBER 2011

Changes to the Higher Level Stewardship Scheme

The New Forest Higher Level Stewardship Scheme is either the financial salvation of the Forest or a serious threat to its well-being – depending upon one's point of view and upon which aspect of its work is being considered. It came into being in March last year and is administered jointly by the Verderers, the Forestry Commission and the National Park. However, it is at least in name, a Verderers' scheme with the Official Verderer as a signatory to the main contract with Natural England. Its objective is to secure a form of management which Natural England likes, while contributing money to the local farming economy so as to facilitate acceptance of the more unpopular aspects of that management.

At first it seemed that the Stewardship Scheme would put money into a wide variety of projects for the benefit of the Forest, with the bulk of the money set aside to support the commoners on the one hand and to provide the Forestry Commission with money for stream filling, bog creation and other Open forest management on the other. Substantial sums were also to be expended on research, education, historic environment and so on. That is exactly how it worked in the first year, with a manager in the person of Mr. Chris Caswell to oversee all projects except those already being dealt with by the Verderers officer, Colin Draper. Because of the way the scheme was funded, any under-spend in the first year would have resulted in cuts to future payments. Projects of all sorts were immediately suggested, ranging from the very worthwhile to the completely hair-brained. Nothing attracts interest like the awarding of seemingly unlimited funds. Many of these peripheral schemes were implemented and I hope that they were the better ones. They included a water supply to Beaulieu Road sale yard. Within the Forestry Commission's allocation, huge sums were devoted to stream-filling and some of this was very controversial. The Verderers joined in the spending with enthusiasm providing, in addition to direct subsidies to the commoners, new landrovers for the agisters, contributions to staff costs and many smaller projects to assist the welfare and quality of Forest livestock. Two huge committees were set up to advise on projects which were put forward and the money flowed freely.

Now, as we approach the end of the second year, some of the initial euphoria seems to be evaporating, not least because the HLS Board's new chairman, the Official Verderer, has sought to bring some financial discipline to expenditure which seemed to be getting out of control. All non-essential projects have been scrapped. The two big committees have been closed down and the post of manager will disappear early next year. The Forestry Commission's money, which it had been generally understood (perhaps erroneously), would do much for the maintenance of Open Forest grazing, will now be tightly focussed on stream filling and bog work, although some limited and directly related scrub clearance and similar sweeteners will continue. Given the fury engendered among local residents by some schemes, such as the proposed diversion of Latchmore Brook, this focus is not necessarily good news. It is a sort of scientific domination which, in a time of national economic difficulty,

still seems capable of commanding immense sums of public money. I was interested to read this week that the New Forest is not alone in its concerns over such projects and that on Dartmoor challenges are being made to the legality of some aspects of the bog work.

Even in the Verderers' sector of the HLS, rules are being tightened and planned expenditure cut. Moreover, money which had been ring-fenced for grazing-related work is now to assist, if only in a small way, to finance other projects. For example, two thirds of the National Park's lidar analyst's salary will now be paid by the Verderers and one third of it by the wetland funds of the Forestry Commission. I do not say that this is anything but entirely worthy expenditure, but it is not exactly what the commoners' had expected from the "Verderers' Grazing Scheme".

I understand that in future, schemes which fall outside the Forestry Commission and Verderers' sectors may still be possible under HLS, but with no full-time officer to guide their progress, they are likely to be few in number. It is probable that the so-called Land Advisory Service, which is also heavily financed by the Verderers sector, will be asked to shoulder some of this burden of such overseeing.

As to the direct payments to the commoners, these also may be subject to change. The claimants have been accustomed to receiving their cheques from HLS (and before that from Countryside Stewardship), in one lump sum each autumn. Now, however, as the Official Verderer told the October Court, payments may need to be made in two instalments – one in the autumn and the other in the spring. There remains some uncertainty about this as the Verderers seek to establish a payment system which adheres strictly to the rules, while helping the commoners as far as possible.

As if all this was not enough, the rules under which subsidies are provided are being revised from top to bottom, apparently to meet Natural England's requirements. I must say that the early draft of the new rules I have seen, looks more like cosmetic change than fundamental reconstruction, but it is still unsettling. The draft will be considered by the Verderers in their November Court.

Cycle route progress

If the HLS generally is going through a rather difficult patch, the Official Verderer was at least able to give an optimistic report on progress over new cycle route markers and, more importantly, clear signs indicating that only official routes may be used. He told the Court that he had received very welcome support from the Park's representative on the HLS Board after some difficulties had been encountered in discussions with the Forestry Commission. This is a key area of management and it is good to see the Park recognizing the need to protect wilderness quality and tranquillity of the Forest.

Aldridge Hill camp site

Aldridge Hill has always been one of the most controversial of the Forest's camp sites. It was established on an area of prime streamside grazing and is, in landscape terms, an abomination, ruining the view across Ober Shade from the north. Its boundaries have been pushed back on occasions and its opening times limited, but that is mere tinkering with

the problem. In 1987 the expert committee which prepared the New Forest Review initially recommended that because it was such a damaging site, it should be closed altogether. That infuriated regular campers and the committee backed down, putting forward "a compromise between irreconcilable views". Since then the site has continued to operate with reduced opening times.

In July of this year the commercial company now running the site applied, through the Forestry Commission, for the opening time restrictions to be lifted offering, in exchange, the early closure of Long Beech camp each season. The Verderers decided in September that such an arrangement would not benefit the Forest and accordingly the application did not progress to the stage of a formal presentment.

Jeff Kitcher memorial

As a general rule I dislike seeing the Forest littered with memorials, but there are occasions when an individual makes so great a contribution to our community that it is right for an exception to be made. The new Jeff Kitcher memorial on the pound at Furzey Lodge is such a case. Large numbers of commoners turned out on a calm October Sunday, the day of the Furzey Lodge drift, to hear Commoners' Defence Association chairman Graham Ferris and former head agister Brian Ingram pay tribute to my late Verderer colleague and to unveil a plaque beside the pound on the edge of Rans Wood. Jeff had lived within yards of the pound and was part of a traditional commoning family with roots in that area going back into the mists of time. It was altogether a very successful day and one of which I hope Jeff would have approved.

Coxhill Lodge proposed land exchange

Last month I referred to the principles governing land exchanges with the Forest. The subject had arisen as a result of an informal consultation with the Forestry Commission by a householder at Boldre. In October the application came to the Verderers in the form of a presentment asking for the enclosure of a portion of gravel driveway in return for an area of paddock land. The Court will receive representations in support of the application or in opposition at its November meeting. Thereafter it is usual for a decision to be made the same day.

New stream-filling projects

The Forestry Commission has just announced the locations of the next three stream filling projects which it would like to carry out. Unfortunately precise details are not issued until just before the first site visit, but the names of the locations give a fair idea of what is to be done. The first target is described as "Pondhead" and this presumably means Parkhill Lawn just outside Lyndhurst. It is a grassy lawn lying at the heart of the 13th century deer park and in an area where the water levels were once carefully managed so as to create a huge lake stretching back towards the village. There are also records of prehistoric occupation in the area. The second scheme will be at Soldiers Bog. That is not a name which appears on the Ordnance Survey map, but is an alternative for Backley Bottom. It runs south from the A 31 road towards Oakley Inclosure. I was not actually aware that there had

ever been much drainage work there, but presumably the Forestry Commission thinks that it has found some to justify a filling project. Finally the list says "Cowleys Heath and Ipers Bridge", both in the extreme south east of the Forest. The description is too vague to identify the streams involved. Three of them drain Beaulieu Hilltop Heath southwards in this area and again very rich historical remains are potentially threatened by the work. However, I understand that the archaeological survey work for such stream filling will now be carried out by the National Park's archaeologist, so that the damage and inadequate recording of recent years may be avoided this time.

Anthony Pasmore