

## New Forest Notes – November 1993

### **Cattle subsidy chaos**

A decision by the Ministry of Agriculture seems quite likely to produce chaos in the payment of marking (grazing) fees in the New Forest, with one branch of the Ministry paying subsidies for cows which appear on paper to be grazing the Forest, but which do not in fact ever set foot there. These ghost cows will meanwhile be collecting an entirely different subsidy to which their owners should have been entitled in the first place, but for the same Ministry's ruling which led to the waste of the first subsidy. It is a farcical tangle which might well have originated in the office of Sir Humphrey Appleby!

It has come about like this. The Ministry has refused to allow non-practising commoners to count their common rights towards qualifying for certain beef subsidies which depend on farm size. I believe that in this refusal they are acting unfairly, contrary to their own instructions to farmers and quite probably beyond their powers, but all this is beside the point. The Ministry has decreed that, in the New Forest, if you don't turn out cattle, you don't get your allocation of land area in respect of common right. Since the so-called "extensification premium" is worth over £28 per head to farmers, those with insufficient enclosed land to qualify were relying on their common rights and will suffer badly on their entire herd because of the Ministry's ruling.

However, it was revealed at the Brockenhurst local meeting of the Commoners' Defence Association that enterprising local farmers have devised a straightforward method of correcting the injustice which the Ministry has inflicted on them. They will simply pay the Verderers for cows which never run on the Forest. The agister inspects and marks the cows and receives payment. The Verderers have no right to refuse payment for properly presented and branded cattle. Since the marking fee is subsidised by the Ministry of Agriculture in the shape of the Forestry Commission, £12 out of the total of £15 is paid out of public funds. The remaining £3 comes from the commoner. Armed with the Verderers' receipt, the commoner can now comply with the Ministry's requirement and receive his entitlement to the share of the Forest grazing which belonged to him all along, but which he had been denied. He will then be able to collect his £28 per head extensification premium subject to certain complex calculations.

The upshot of this whole crazy system is that the time of the agister and the farmer is wasted, the taxpayer squanders £12 per head paying for cows to graze the New Forest which are unlikely to do so and the farmer loses £3 per head out of a subsidy to which he should properly have been entitled. As a Verderer I suppose I should not complain of this modest swelling of the Court's funds as a result of such bureaucratic game-playing. As a taxpayer I have distinct reservations and as a very small farmer my views on the Ministry's policy are unprintable.

### **Envy of Verderers**

Representatives of several Forest organisations had an interesting opportunity of observing the national park amenity societies (the Council for National Parks) conference at Fawley during October.

The weekend meeting was held in the impressive and luxurious setting of the control building at Fawley Power Station and was sponsored by National Power. Between lectures and field outings, discussion groups of the societies' delegates exchanged views and information on the changes they faced in dealing with park authorities, local government and other developers, political appointees of central government to the parks and a variety of other problems.

For those of us New Foresters used to a relatively clean and efficient system of dealing with threats to our particular back-yard, the picture which these discussions revealed was alarming. Not all the park societies experienced exactly the same problems, but a fairly widespread complaint was of politically appointed park committee members with little interest in conservation and no understanding of the purposes of national parks. While in some parks there was competition for places on the park committees, in others unwilling junior councillors occupied the local authority seats under party political direction without even the most basic training.

Much discussion time was also devoted to the techniques of influencing park authority members (the officers seem generally looked upon as allies) so that they make the "right" decision on development and other issues. For example, if a park is threatened by a local authority road scheme, the park amenity society must strive for the support of the park authority members and officers in opposing it. Many of these members may have received political instructions on the subject already. The society must also try to influence the highway authority which, in many cases is just another committee of the same council. Finally, if a public enquiry follows, they must fight through that also. The process is time consuming and dispiriting and it is a wonder to me that the societies have the heart to continue the uphill struggle.

I found it sad that, insofar as the conference heard at all about how the New Forest's administration works, the Verderers' Court was portrayed as "the people who look after the ponies" while the Forestry Commission manages the Forest. Of course those of us who were able to talk to the delegates outside the formal sessions of the conference made a small step towards correcting the inadequate picture. We told them that in the New Forest it is only necessary to convince six Verderers who are already dedicated to the protection of the Forest, in order to kill any road scheme stone dead short of a Lyndhurst bypass style appeal to parliament. The response I invariably received to this revelation was one of incredulity followed by open-mouthed envy. More than one delegate expressed the forcible view that what his park needed was quite clearly a Court of Verderers!

### **Helicopters**

Several years ago there was an outcry over the activities of army helicopter pilots in the northern valleys of the Forest. The south, while burdened with noise from civil aircraft using Hurn and Eastleigh is, by reason of that commercial traffic, largely free from the military flying which was the subject of complaint. At that time, walkers and riders (to say nothing of the mares heavy in foal) were terrified by helicopters of all sizes flying along the valleys at below the level of the surrounding ridges. Complaints led to the easing of the problem but there was one activity that exceeded all others in its degree of

danger to people and live-stock. The smaller army helicopters took to flying underneath the 400 kv powerline which crosses the Forest. I remember speaking at the time to the CEGB who said that they were aware that this happened, that they thoroughly disapproved, but that they could do nothing about it. However, after the Forestry Commission convened a meeting at Queen's House to discuss all these aircraft problems, the practice ceased. Now it appears to have recommenced as we have an eyewitness report of a helicopter flying under the line at Millersford on Monday, October 18th.

It would obviously be unreasonable to expect our armed forces to track down enemies under difficult and dangerous conditions, or to extract endangered people from sinking ships or mountain slopes, without adequate and realistic training. I do, however, question the wisdom of obtaining this experience at the risk of the largest powerline in this part of the country and over an area densely populated with grazing stock and open for public recreation. If flying beneath wires is an essential element of training, I see no reason why two poles with a connecting wire cannot be erected on the gunnery ranges of Salisbury Plain.