

NEW FOREST NOTES OCTOBER 2001

The Legacy of Foot & Mouth disease

Although the we were spared infection, the after effects of the disease hit the New Forest hard at the beginning of last month. During the Spring, it had become clear that the number of cattle depastured on the Forest this year would be drastically reduced and by early September that reduction was estimated at approximately two thirds. In the medium term it is likely that some of these losses will be replaced, as commoners re-stock after welfare slaughter programmes which were a horrific if financially acceptable consequence of restrictions on the use of the Forest. Unfortunately, the extent of the recovery is still very uncertain.

The reduction in cattle numbers, bad as it was, was not the end of the story. The long-running crisis in the pony market continues to deepen, with foals selling for virtually nothing at Beaulieu Road and increasing numbers of animals being sent for humane slaughter, or even given away, because they are now simply a liability to their owners. Hay crops were light this year and record prices (at least for recent times), mean that the prospect of having to feed animals over the winter is distinctly unattractive. How could anyone justify feeding twenty or thirty bales of hay costing up to £4 per bale to a foal worth at most £5 ? Pony numbers on the Forest are also dropping as a result of all this, and the Verderers concluded that there will be no prospect of a recovery in the foreseeable future. Estimates of the likely reduction vary between one and two thousand animals during the period 2001 – 2002.

On 7th September, the Verderers held a special meeting to review the drop in marking fee income (marking fees are paid in respect of each animal turned out on the Forest) and received a report that income had fallen £40,000 below the budgeted target. Since every scrap of avoidable expenditure had already been cut out, there remained no option but for the Court to reduce staff. Such a decision is at any time a highly unpalatable one, but when welfare problems are likely to be at their most acute, it was something the Court regarded as little short of a disaster. Applications to DEFRA to make good the shortfall in income consequent upon the foot and mouth outbreak have, so far, fallen on deaf ears.

The Verderers decided that they would have no option but to make three staff members redundant – two agisters and one part-time office assistant. In addition, the assistant clerk's hours have had to be reduced. With these savings it is estimated that the financial position should just about be stabilised, provided no further massive reductions in stock numbers occur. To the outsider it might appear that if there has been a major reduction in the number of animals, a corresponding reduction in field staff is quite appropriate. Unfortunately it is not quite as simple as that. The Forest remains the same size and the reduced agister force must now cover a wider area per man. They may not have so many animals to attend to, but they must still patrol the length and breadth of the Forest and it will

be increasingly difficult to secure the steady improvement in animal welfare which has been the Verderers' goal.

In distressing circumstances such as exist in the Forest today, it is natural to look for someone to blame, although of course disease and market forces are the real villains. Everyone's favourite target is the government, through their agents, the Forestry Commission. "Why don't they pay the Verderers more?" is a frequent complaint and one often made by people with little idea of how the Verderers are actually funded. In fact, the Forestry Commission is, by one means or another, financing the Verderers to the extent of about £114,000 per annum. That amounts to about half the Court's expenditure to date and a good deal more than half in the future. Only about £70,000 was raised in marking fees in 2000, although the substantial increase in fees announced last November should, but for foot and mouth etc, have come near to balancing the books. I have not the slightest doubt that local Forestry Commission management is fully aware of the seriousness of the situation and, given a free hand, it would probably do a good deal more to help. The Commission is itself under intense financial pressure and the problem lies higher up the tree in a government which sees the New Forest as a mere national playground to be squeezed for all it is worth so far as recreation is concerned. A handful of what it no doubt sees as winging farmers who have dared to question its plans for developing the Forest into a giant recreational zone, needs keeping firmly in its place. The fact that the Forest cannot survive without the commoners' stock and that there would be no New Forest at all but for the Verderers, is casually brushed aside. No doubt DEFRA officials and the Countryside Agency look forward to the time when their new national park will be able to silence those troublesome Verderers once and for all and when any surviving commoners are licked into line as quaint tourist attractions.

I have never seen the Forest community quite so miserable as it is now. One leading commoner and breeder of good quality ponies told me recently that he is getting rid of as many of his animals as he can and, reversing years of encouraging his sons to follow in his footsteps, he is now advising them to have nothing more to do with farming the Forest. The government's fine words about promoting cultural heritage and conservation seem very hollow now, as the New Forest is overwhelmingly promoted as a recreational sump for Southern England and scant regard is paid to the community and natural grazing upon which its survival depends.

The Management Plan 2001- 2006

The Forestry Commission has just published its management plan covering the next five years. Unlike the plethora of glossy (and largely worthless) reports with which the Forest is regularly plagued, there is a great deal of meat in this document. The problem lies in being able to get at it. Despite the fact that the Verderers were involved in various aspects of the plan's preparation over the last few years, I find it an extremely confusing document. The plan volume just released comprises a sort of umbrella document containing summaries of a series of sub-plans (each a bound volume in its own right), ranging from deer management to

“community involvement”. The umbrella also contains a good deal of factual material – geographical, historical, geological and so on. One section is devoted to finance and that, at least in the amount of detail now published, is new to this forest’s management plans.

The sub-plan dealing with the Forest’s “Ancient and Ornamental Woods” is a massive book, but one of the more straightforward and accessible elements. That contrasts with the Inclosures where the sub-plan seems not to exist in a manageable form, but in the sprawling records of the New Forest Design Forum, copies of which occupy a mountain of tattered brown envelopes in the corner of my office. Other sub-plans, including Ancient Monuments and Deer have yet to get through to me and it remains far from clear how much of the package is final and how much in draft. Certainly the umbrella document is, the Verderers were told, still a draft.

If I have one real quarrel with the Management Plan (all parts of it, but especially the heathland section), it is that it fails to give adequate recognition to what most people would regard as the really important and fundamental characteristic of the New Forest – its appearance. Acres of paper are used, quite rightly, in ensuring the protection of obscure plants and bugs, but what the man in the street regards as important is virtually ignored. Foresters are trained to grow and cut down trees and, increasingly, to understand ecological matters. When you try to get them interested in landscape and its subtle qualities which make the New Forest what it is, they are inclined to adopt a slightly bored and uncomprehending look. If a group of trees is found to interfere with rare Bug X, it should be cut down at once – no matter if it screens an intrusive main road or is a beloved skyline feature. Only in the Inclosures is there a real sign of acknowledgment that landscape is an important consideration, and securing that acknowledgement was quite an effort for those concerned.

District Council and the national park

Those in the Forest who dislike the national park proposals of the Countryside Agency were much cheered by the New Forest District Council’s announcement on 6th September that the Council would oppose the Agency’s park plans. Moreover, the Council, whose sphere of interest is very different from those looking after the non-planning aspects of the area, has itself highlighted many of the dangers that others had complained about from the start. In particular, the Council draws attention to “costly and confusing duplication of functions, for no claimed advantage to the Forest”, inadequate representation for Forest interests and the fact that the Countryside Agency’s own work has confirmed that “the standard national park authority being provided is not right for the future of this special area”. The Council leader concludes that “creating an expensive new local authority is not the right way forward for the New Forest”.

Where I and many others still differ from the Council is that it continues to hanker after a “tailor-made authority”, but that is something for the future. The immediate problem will be to challenge the present damaging proposals.

Cow marking

Years ago, the normal hot branding of cattle was banned by a rather ill-informed government welfare committee. Fortunately they seemed quite unaware that ponies are routinely hot branded and therefore did nothing about them. The Verderers were then forced to look for an alternative marking system and they required that all cattle on the Forest should be freeze branded. That is a difficult and expensive procedure. It was carried out at first by the agisters (for a charge), but last year that was stopped on health and safety grounds. Commercial contractors are not interested in branding small numbers of cattle, so that left the small commoner in a difficult position – required to brand, but unable to do so at reasonable cost. Now the Verderers have approved an alternative method of marking. It will comprise large plastic ear tags (Ministry style) bearing the owner's brand mark. Commoners will have to buy their own tags, but it will be a lot more convenient than freeze branding.

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