

NEW FOREST NOTES SEPTEMBER 2009

New Forest Stewardship Agreements and beyond

If there is one area of the New Forest's management which is really complicated, it is the so-called "Stewardship Agreement" between the Verderers and DEFRA and between the Verderers and the commoners, which is now an indispensable source of support for those who graze their animals on the Forest. I suppose it hardly needs repeating that without the services of the grazing animals the Forest would be covered by scrub.

Over the last year or so the Stewardship Scheme has begun to face problems which the Verderers are attempting to tackle by adjustments to the amounts and methods of payment made to stock owners. Moreover, as the scheme is nearing its end (it has about four years outstanding), the Court has under consideration an early termination and replacement with something even more complex but with much greater sums of money available. This is called a Higher Level Stewardship scheme or HLS for short.

In essence the present stewardship scheme is a system of subsidies to commoners aimed at ensuring an adequate, but not excessive, level of grazing pressure on the Forest. It was established in 2004 at a time when it seemed quite likely that many commoners would be forced by economic conditions to give up, triggering a collapse in stock numbers. Those wishing to benefit from the subsidies (currently £70 per head per annum for registered ponies and for cattle) have had to enter into an agreement with the Verderers and are then issued with money up to the number of stock they depastured on the Forest in 2004. That is a fairly crude summary, but the details are tedious. Entry to the scheme has been made increasingly restrictive as stocking density approached the maximum permitted level of 7000 head. It is now effectively closed. Of course not all commoners are in the scheme and it follows that a large number of animals on the Forest do not benefit from the Verderers' payments. Last year (October 2007 to October 2008) payment was made on 5374 animals but the total paid-for was 7177. As a first step towards cutting the increasing numbers, the Verderers have introduced a scheme whereby members can reduce the stock they turn out by 25% and yet will receive the full amount of their subsidy entitlement. This inducement has not worked sufficiently well and numbers have continued to rise. By August 2009, a total of 7358 eligible animals had been paid-for and the figure is expected to rise still further in the remainder of the year. That has prompted the Court to introduce new measures.

The ceiling figure of 7000 animals grazing the Forest is laid down by Natural England. The Verderers are under contract not to allow that figure to be exceeded although in practice (as with so many Forest rules), a great deal of latitude is apparent. The target figure is controversial. Many commoners believe that the Forest can support far higher densities of stock without degradation of the vegetation and without welfare problems arising. They maintain that the 7000 ceiling does not adequately reflect valuable new grazing which has been opened up in abandoned timber inclosures and other areas or the fact that not all animals are on the Forest at all times of the year. Whether these are valid arguments or not,

Natural England continues to regard 7000 as a “realistic maximum” and, since this is what the Verderers are required to deliver by those who have a firm grip on the purse strings, the theoretical stocking capacity of the Forest is not particularly relevant.

I suppose it might be hard for an outsider to see the difficulty in cutting stock numbers. If there are too many animals, why not reduce the subsidies until one has the correct density? Unfortunately nothing is that simple in the New Forest. You cannot simply turn pony breeding on and off. Herds are built up over years and breeding is (by some) carefully planned. Land must be rented or bought and equipment supplied. Simply slashing the subsidies across the board could promote exactly the sort of collapse which the scheme was designed to prevent in the first place. Adjustments must therefore be slow and careful.

The new measures introduced by the Court will take effect from October this year (the subsidy “year” starts in October). Those commoners who have made the 25% reduction or who now make it, will receive a bonus of 15% in addition to the full subsidy based on their 2004 turn out. There are some technical qualifications and conditions which do not affect the broad picture. The bonus comprises the carrot element of the new package. The stick will affect those who turn out *more than* their 2004 entitlement. They will have their total subsidy reduced by 25%. Those scheme members who fail to remove a poor animal within ten days of being asked to do so by an agister will have the full subsidy for one animal withheld. If more than one animal is involved, so will more than one subsidy be docked.

Whether these measures will be sufficient to stem the seemingly inexorable rise in stock numbers remains to be seen, but a start has to be made somewhere. Much may depend upon the ability of commoners to dispose of surplus stock at this autumn’s sales.

All these measures are decided and underway, but the great unknown remains the HLS scheme which is in the offing. About half a million pounds a year is going into the present scheme. The best guess I have heard is that something like two and a half million pounds a year is likely to be involved in HLS – five times as much money. So far as I can understand it, there is not likely to be a massive increase in the sums paid directly to the commoners’ pockets. The extra two million pounds will be spent on what may loosely be described as community projects. These could include things like grazing maintenance, administration and salaries, research into historic environment and landscape and enhancement of those features. There might be money for legal fees, equipment, public awareness and policing, “resource protection”, vehicles, barriers, dragons’ teeth and so on. Managing this lot is likely to be an immense task and in the middle of this month the Verderers will be asked to decide whether or not to undertake it, but the lure of money is so irresistible that I would be surprised if the Court decides against HLS. Even if it was inclined to do so, there is another factor to be considered. If the Court does not do the job, it is likely that the National Park will step in and be allocated the funds. The idea of the Park intervening in Forest management to that extent may be far from appealing to Forest people. Already I am rather concerned to discover that outside committees are busy deciding on what may be financed by the scheme, before the Verderers have made their decision or even been

consulted about the details. I imagine that the Court may feel rather like the directors of Lloyds Bank on being offered the “outstanding opportunity” of acquiring HBOS. We must hope that the outcome for the Forest is rather more fortunate.

More trouble at Islands Thorns

Islands Thorns Inclosure near Bramshaw Telegraph is a continual source of dispute, quite apart from being one of the most beautiful of the 19th Century oak plantations. It was made in 1852 and some of it lies on the site of ancient woodland which may be as old as the Forest itself. Last year, it may be remembered, an important archaeological site (a 14th Century royal hunting lodge) was damaged by random timber hauling. A lesser site which is probably Iron Age was damaged at the same time. Cosmetic repair to the hunting lodge has now been undertaken, but of course archaeological stratification, once disrupted, can never be recreated.

From a more practical point of view, the wood has been left in a dreadful state with waste timber lying about all over the place, much of it now completely concealed by bracken and thus a danger to riders and livestock. The inclosure, despite its name indicating otherwise, forms part of the Open Forest for the time being and is thus open to grazing stock and both colt-hunting and drifting can take place there. Riding fast onto a concealed stack of timber waste is an unpleasant experience while unsightly tangles of dumped branches disfiguring the woodland floor are simply unacceptable. The waste could be neatly stacked and burnt – as on other parts of the Open Forest. Shortage of money is not the problem as I understand that the proceeds of timber sales from Islands Thorns accounted for a significant part of the Forest's income last year.

In the past few weeks yet more trouble has arisen at Islands Thorns. Once again contractors, pulling out timber on an unauthorized route, have damaged archaeological features. This time it is a field system physically associated with Romano-British occupation, although quite possibly older.

In the central part of the wood, a huge stack of waste materials (heather bales with plastic binder twine), left over from conservation engineering works, has been left rotting in the centre of a ride. Such untidiness seems to be a feature of these works: a similar pile in Pitts Wood (about a mile away) has been lying in a decayed state for several years – despite complaints about it.

Most remarkable of all are the events described to me by head agister Jonathan Gerrelli, respecting the vast stack of timber pulled out of Islands Thorns to Studley Head and there left lying on the Open Forest for months on end. Here hundreds of oak stems have been pushed up tight together beside the track to Telegraph - and a great mess that operation made. As the months passed and nobody bothered to collect the timber, juicy grass stems started to grow up between the trunks. Eventually this attractive but dangerous meal proved irresistible to a steer who climbed into the stack to reach it. The inevitable happened and one of his feet became jammed between the stems. Steers, of course, do not read the Forestry Commission's liberal scatter of notices instructing visitors “not to climb on the timber stacks”.

Unless you want your teeth knocked out, you don't try helping half a ton of trapped steer by hand. The agister eventually located a small gap between two trees some way along the stack. By harnessing his landrover to tree after tree and pulling each a few inches sideways, he was eventually able to move the gap down the stack until it reached and released the captive.

Perhaps it is now time that the Forestry Commission acknowledged that Islands Thorns has other values than as a source of money and agreed to leave it alone.

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