

## New Forest Notes - September 1996

### **Verderers' accounts for 1995**

On 2nd August the Verderers' accounts for the year to 31st March were advertised as being available for inspection at the Clerk's office. For some years past, hardly anyone has bothered to examine the accounts, evidently demonstrating the supposed dullness of the subject. It was rather different when the Court's whole income was derived from the marking fees (the headage, payments made in respect of ponies and cattle turned out into the Forest). Then, those liable to the charges kept a very close eye on the Verderers' expenditure. Today, however, out of a total income of a little less than a quarter of a million pounds, over 60% comes from the Government via the Forestry Commission, and only 30% directly from the commoners- The remainder is made up of various compensations, donations and fees.

The government contribution comprises a subsidy to encourage cattle keeping (about £24,000), a subsidy to encourage pony grazing (about £30,000), compensation for loss of grazing — mostly from recreational development i the cost of a new grid, even on a (about £9,000), compensation for timber plantations (about £18,000) and an administrative grant of about £61,000 The subsidy payments are, in conjunction with the marking fees, now used as a regulator for the number of stock on the Forest — roughly in line with the recommendations of the Government's Illingworth Committee. In broad terms too many animals leads to increased fees and / or reduced subsidies, while too few should lead to greater incentives to turn out.

This year the accounts show a comfortable, if perhaps temporary, surplus amounting to over £42,000 after deduction of expenses of £185,000. The vast bulk of the Verderers' expenditure goes upon employees — over 66%. Office expenses account for 8% and premium payments 15%. Just as there is a link between stock numbers and income, so the extent of the Verderers' expenditure on staff has recently been determined by animal welfare considerations. When stock is in good order the expenses tend to remain static, while public pressure during periods of difficulty may lead to demands for the employment of more staff to secure tighter supervision. At the moment the number of the Verderers' staff is at record levels, but stable. Whether or not further increases will be necessary depends upon the agisters' ability to enforce existing standards during what promises to be a difficult winter. The strangles epidemic among Forest ponies continues and, at the time of writing, it is difficult to know how far the annual drift (round ups) programme will be affected. It is upon the drifts, of course, that enforcement of standards is most dependent. If the Forest is cleared of sub-standard stock by the beginning of the winter, there is a good chance of getting through to the spring without too much difficulty The figures for last year contain few surprises. There is a very welcome one-off compensation payment of £10,000 in respect of an extension to a Burley telephone installation, while fees charged for the Clerk's searches of the Forest Atlas have reached the remarkable figure of almost £3,000. Expenditure is a little down on last year. An exceptional item is £700 on materials for a major pound building and maintenance programme being supervised by the agisters.

The days when the Court was permitted to hold a useful reserve against unexpected expenses have now gone. Only the so-called "Gridding Fund" remains. This is about £20,000 largely raised by public subscription in the 1960s and is held by the Verderers for the repair and replacement of certain grids and gates on the Forest's boundary. Over the years responsibility for many of these grids has been taken over by the highway authority, but one or two remain in the Court's control and the cost of a new grid, even on a private road, is considerable.

### **Raining Hay**

One of the chief factors governing the economics of running animals on the Forest is the price of winter feed. Not only do many of the smaller commoners have to buy their own supplies of hay, but the market for foals is in part determined by the likely cost of feeding them. Last year for example, the average colt foal looked after well and properly fed, could quite easily have consumed hay during his first winter worth ten times his own autumn value. Add to this the costs of hard feed, gelding and so on and it is not surprising that the market was poor. This year things started to look equally gloomy with early hay advertisements seeking £4 or £4.50 per bale. However, by the end of July, large quantities of good hay had been made and prices of under £2 per bale on the field were being quoted. It remains to be seen what effect this will have upon the pony trade.

Towards the end of this year's haymaking season there occurred in the north of the Forest a most peculiar meteorological phenomenon. On the afternoon of Thursday, 18th July. I was working in a field near Hale Purlieu. It was a brilliantly clear day with the distant rumble of balers filling the air. Some time after three o'clock it started to rain, but the rain comprised not water droplets but hay. The "shower" continued for about fifteen minutes falling mostly as single straws, but sometimes bundles of a dozen or more stems. A subsequent walk over the adjacent heath showed that the fall-out had occurred in an area of at least half a mile square and probably much more. Since there were no hay fields in the immediate vicinity and no fields at all for about five miles south, the hay must have travelled for a considerable distance. There was a light southerly wind, but I suppose the direction at higher levels would not necessarily have been the same. I imagine the hay must have been picked up by a miniature whirlwind and could have represented a considerable volume of someone's crop.

### **Crown freeholds**

At their July Court, the Verderers were told that the Forestry Commission proposes to let Ironhill Lodge (near Ashurst) and a portion of its land on a full repairing lease. No doubt this charming if dilapidated house in its secluded site will make someone a lovely but expensive home. The lodge comprises part of a peculiar category of land in the New Forest which is known, for convenience rather than precision, as "crown freehold". Most of the Forest is subject to common rights and comprises either timber plantation on which the rights are temporarily suspended or open heath and woods. This land cannot be sold or leased free from rights except in very special circumstances laid down by the New Forest Acts. It thus enjoys an almost unique degree of protection from development. However, if one goes back to the beginning of this century, the Crown then owned an additional huge

estate in the Forest which comprised country houses, farmland, woods and even shops and offices. All this property was entirely free from the burden of common rights and could be sold or leased by the Office of Woods (later the Forestry Commission) at will. In those days, of course, the possession of such a fine estate was a matter of pride and disposals were very few. Over the subsequent years, policies and values changed so that by the 1970s sales were taking place at an alarming rate irrespective of their potentially damaging effects on the remainder of the Forest. In those days we lost Rhinefield House, Broomy Lodge, Ladycross and so on. The folly of such sales was only too plainly demonstrated in a series of planning battles which are continuing even now. Today (following a public outcry) the Forestry Commission is prevented by ministerial directive from selling any more agricultural land and, to be fair, many surplus fields have been let to commoners in order to encourage local farming. This is to be the destiny of some of the Irons Hill land. However, the post-war losses have been very great.

Many of the Forest lodges had a long and interesting history. Some of them were formerly fine mansions held by the "master keepers" of the walks or administrative sub-divisions of the Forest. These became expensive to maintain and several were demolished early in the 19th century. Irons Hill was one of them, the original lodge site being some distance to the west of the present building, on top of Irons Hill. Most of the lodge sites were then leased for the building of large houses in the years immediately following the Deer Removal Act of 1851. Eyeworth Lodge, for example, dates from this period. At that time the old forest administration was destroyed and the need for such properties disappeared. However, the Crown was always careful to retain the freehold in the interests of good estate management.

The greatest of all the old lodges must have been Bolderwood where traces of large scale landscape gardening may still be found throughout the dense woodland of Bolderwood Grounds. Indeed, this area, like the huge plantations around the south edge of Lyndhurst, was and remains crown freehold and no attempt has been made to sell such land. This is presumably because it has continued to serve a forestry purpose. Parkgrounds and Pondhead may look like any other 19th century oak plantation of great beauty, but their legal status and former land use is very different. Fortunately, the Forestry Commission has agreed that they should enjoy the same limited protection as the statutory inclosures of the Forest proper.