



Agisters OF THE NEW FOREST

*WHO ARE THEY?
WHAT DO THEY DO?*

WHAT IS AN AGISTER?

The Agisters are employees of the Verderers of the New Forest. They are often commoners in their own right, and as such depasture stock themselves, thus giving them an intimate knowledge of the area and the workings of the Forest. The word agist means to take in to graze for payment, and this explains part of their role. The post of Agister is medieval in origin, when they were also known as 'marksmen'. As officers of the Crown they were required to collect grazing fees from 'strangers', those who wished to depasture animals but had no right to do so. New Forest commoners with rights of pasture did not have to pay a fee at that time.



To be an Agister a person must be adept at handling all types of livestock, an excellent rider, and able to work, very often on their own, in the rough and tough conditions found out on the Forest. The hours are long, and they can be called out at any time and in any weather to deal with an emergency. They also have the general public to deal with, and are required to be good ambassadors for the Forest in general, and commoning in particular.



WHAT DO THEY DO?

Their work is to assist in the management of commoners' stock on the Forest, and carry out instructions given to them by the Court of Verderers. Much of their time is spent out on the Forest, often on horseback, observing the conditions of both land and stock. They are on call 24 hours a day, seven days a week to respond to any problem involving the stock on the Forest.

In the spring, they collect the 'marking fee', which is the payment a commoner has to make for each animal he wishes to turn out onto the Forest. This helps to offset the cost of their employment. They are also required to report to the Verderers any breaches of the Verderers' byelaws, which could include such things as unbranded or unpaid for animals.





Another important aspect of their work is the monitoring of the welfare of the livestock on the Forest. During the winter and spring the stock will lose some body condition. The Verderers, in conjunction with various welfare organisations, set a condition standard below which the animal must not fall. If it does the Agister will arrange its removal from the Forest back to the owners holding so it can receive supplementary feeding.

HOW DO THEY DO IT?

There are currently five Agisters, one Head Agister, and four colleagues. Each one is responsible for a specific area of the Forest, but many of the tasks they carry out require them to work as a team. Much of the day to day routine will involve contact with both the animals and the people on their 'patch' and an Agister will develop an uncanny ability to identify animals and to whom they belong.

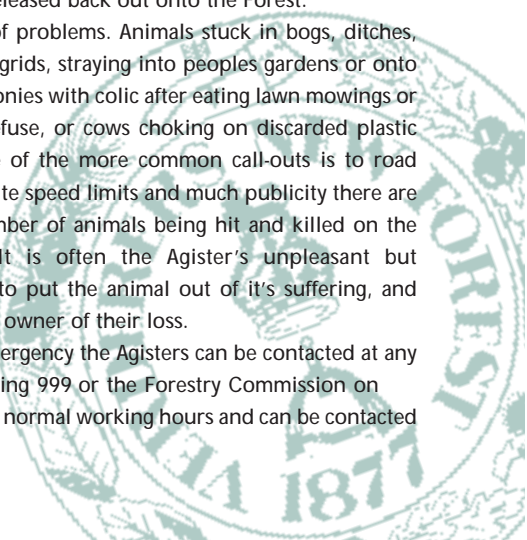
In the late summer and early autumn the Agisters organise the 'drifts' or round-ups of the Forest ponies. At this time the ponies are 'tail marked', a certain cut of the hair of the tail of the pony is put in to show the pony has been paid for. Each Agister has his own mark, and this is to signify in which Agisters' area the owner of the pony lives. Any foals that are to be kept are branded with the owners individual brand, a register of which is held by the Verderers. Commoners may take this opportunity to remove any ponies they want to sell or take in for the winter, and the rest of the ponies are given a good check over before being released back out onto the Forest.



The Agisters are called out to deal with all sorts of problems. Animals stuck in bogs, ditches, fences or cattle grids, straying into peoples gardens or onto fenced roads, ponies with colic after eating lawn mowings or other garden refuse, or cows choking on discarded plastic bags. Sadly one of the more common call-outs is to road accidents. Despite speed limits and much publicity there are still a large number of animals being hit and killed on the Forest roads. It is often the Agister's unpleasant but necessary duty to put the animal out of it's suffering, and then inform the owner of their loss.



In the event of an accident, or any other animal emergency the Agisters can be contacted at any time of the day or night by calling the Police, dialling 999 or the Forestry Commission on 023 8028 3141. The Verderers office is open during normal working hours and can be contacted on 023 8028 2052.



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