



# *Verderers of the New Forest*

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## **NEW FOREST COUNTRYSIDE STEWARDSHIP SCHEME ANNUAL REPORT FOR 2007**

1. **Introduction.** The Scheme completed its fourth year on 30<sup>th</sup> September 2007. Of the 580 practising commoners, 378 took part in the Scheme, equating to 83.6% of those entitled to join. Of the remaining 197, 128 are new commoners who had yet to turn out stock for the necessary 2 years, which is a requirement for membership and so were ineligible, and 69 chose not to join. The number of animals which were entered once again exceeded the total of 5,000 to which the Scheme is limited. The numbers on which payments were made was therefore reduced proportionally. Significantly, for much of the year the total number of animals recorded on the Marking Fee Register stayed below 7,000, eventually creeping up during September to a high of 7,101 – although nearly 100 of those were simply marked and not turned out (that figure includes 2 herds of cattle marked by their owners, possibly because of unfounded concerns over continued qualification for the Single Payment Scheme). On the welfare front, the mild Winter and Spring compensated for the very dry Summer of 2006 and enabled most of the stock to remain in good condition. Subsequently, the very wet conditions ensured a plentiful supply of grazing, with stock approaching the Winter in excellent condition. The regular Winter and Spring welfare tours were well attended and the Verderers continue to be complimented on the standards achieved.

### **2. Details Of Grazing Activities On The Open Forest 1 October 2006 – 30 September 2007.**

As in previous years, commoners remained capped on the number of animals they were allowed to enter in the Scheme to the total they depastured and paid Marking Fees on in 2004. Unfortunately, that did not prevent a rise of 282 in the overall number of ponies turned out. The small reduction of 38 in the number of cattle turned out, is not large enough to be significant. A case of TB which was confirmed in early Summer in the North of the Forest, in a cow that had been bought in Wiltshire last year, was a cause of concern and resulted in a number of commoners in that area, quite sensibly delaying their plans to turn out their own cattle. Despite this incident, no restrictions were placed on depasturing cattle on the Forest and, after advice from DEFRA, the remaining animals were eventually turned out. Although this meant that some animals completed slightly less than the 4 month qualifying period which is a normal requirement for cattle entered in the Scheme, the Verderers' Sub Committee, with the support of the Advisory Group, decided to allow some flexibility in the qualifying period, for those affected. More significantly, the outbreak of Foot and Mouth disease in Surrey and the incidents of Blue Tongue disease, caused significant disruption during the second half of the Summer, with strict controls placed on the movement of livestock. As a result, there was no movement of cattle or pigs on or off the Forest during this period. One of the effects of this was to prevent commoners from exercising their right of 'mast' and turning out pigs during the first half of the pannage season. Pigs play an important role in eating acorns, which are poisonous to ponies and cattle, and make a valuable welfare contribution in this way (most restrictions were eventually lifted on 21<sup>st</sup> October). Fortunately, the number of acorns was relatively light.

a. **Total numbers.** The total number of cattle, ponies, and donkeys on the Forest, up to the end of September 2007, rose to 7,101. The table below shows the number of each, and their relative percentage of the total, together with comparative figures for last year:

Stock	Number 2006	Percentage (of total) 2006	Number 2007	Percentage (of total) 2007
Ponies	4,188	61%	4,470	63%
Donkeys	110	2%	118	2%
Cattle	2,551	37%	2,513	35%
Total	6,849		7,101	

b. **New Members.** The Scheme remains open to new entrants, and 7 new members joined this time.

c. **Percentage of animals in the Scheme (On which payment for 2006/7 will be based).** The table below shows the total number of animals entered in the Scheme this year. As figures are capped at 2004 levels, the percentage is calculated against the 2004, rather than the 2007 total:

Stock	Total Entered in Scheme in 2007	Total Depastured in 2004	Percentage of Eligible Stock in Scheme
Ponies	3,580	3,917	
Donkeys	63	71	
Cattle	1,698	2,154	
Total	5341	6,142	87%

## ASSESSMENT BY NATURAL ENGLAND

3. **Statement on the Condition of Heathland and Pasture Managed under Countryside Stewardship.** The condition of the heathland and pasture woodland within the SSSI is monitored on a 6 year cycle. In 2007/8 the condition of significant areas of the Forest will be monitored for the first time since the Scheme began with the results becoming available in March 2008. Outside the standard monitoring cycle Natural England has undertaken some specific monitoring of areas known to be used by high numbers of stock, often in relation to adjacent areas where they are fed. There are some concerns over the condition of small but significant areas where concentrations of animals may be compromising the condition of the SSSI overall. These areas will continue to be monitored on a separate basis.

4. **Statement on any Areas of Land Defined by English Nature as Being in Unfavourable Condition, with Proposed Actions.** Whilst there are fortunately no areas within the Stewardship Scheme agreement that are unfavourable as a result of the grazing regime there remains a significant area of the Forest which is unfavourable for other reasons. An area of approximately 3,500ha of wet heath and bog habitats will remain unfavourable without measures to restore them being agreed. The target date of 2010 for full restoration is ambitious but an agreed plan to be taken forward over the next few years is achievable with the co-operation of the key bodies involved. Natural England will be looking for support for these measures from the Verderers and the commoning community.

## ADVISORY GROUP/COMMITTEE MEETINGS

### 5. Synopsis of the Activities of the Scheme Advisory Committee, Its Views and Opinions and the Response of the Verderers.

a. **Advisory Group.** The Advisory Group has met twice since the publication of my last report (meetings were held on 16<sup>th</sup> March and 29<sup>th</sup> June). The following new items have been approved:

- A grant from Scheme funds towards the cost of the Stallion Scheme should that be required.
- Funding towards the cost of providing access to/incorporating additional grazing if any suitable areas can be identified.

### b. **Verderers Sub Committee.**

The Verderers' Sub Committee has also met twice since my last report – on 20<sup>th</sup> April and 5<sup>th</sup> November 2007. Payments have been maintained at existing levels with the addition of a supplement of £15 per head for cattle (to encourage commoners to maintain stock levels in the face of difficulties caused by the Foot & Mouth and Blue Tongue restrictions – which have impacted adversely on cattle farming locally) and registered pure bred New Forest ponies (to encourage continued improvement in the breed). It was agreed to contribute towards the cost of making additional land available for grazing, where that is appropriate; to provide financial support to the Stallion Scheme should it be needed; and to contribute towards the purchase of reflective pony collars. Despite a general desire to provide additional support for young commoners, it was concluded there is no room for increasing their entitlement while stock levels remain so high.

## ACTION PLAN

6. **Brief Proposals on Future Tasks and Activities.** An updated copy of the Scheme 'Action Plan' is attached at Annex A.

*Signed on original*

C F R DRAPER  
Scheme Manager

29 February 2008

Annex A. Action Plan

**ACTION PLAN**

Serial	Action	Target Date	Comment (as at 30 November 2007)
1	Monitor pony/cattle ratios	Biannually	Satisfactory – Premium introduced for cattle
2	Review annual payment and incentive payment levels	Biannually	See Report
3	Monitor impact of Single Payment Scheme on animal numbers depastured on the Forest	Biannually	Satisfactory
4	Formulate policy on encouraging/supporting depasturing of native breeds	May 06	Premium introduced for Registered New Forest Ponies
5	Monitor condition of supplementary feeding sites	Biannually	Satisfactory
6	Continue to support research into availability of adequate back-up grazing	On-going	On going
7	Investigate inclusion of the Adjacent Commons within the Verderers' Countryside Stewardship Scheme	2006	Outstanding