

The Verderers of the New Forest Higher Level Stewardship Scheme

Annual Report for 2016

We now have just three years left of our 10 year Higher Level Stewardship scheme. Again I want to emphasise the importance of the HLS to the New Forest, achieving good things for the environment and ecology which would simply not be possible without this very important funding stream.

The New Forest suffers over time by a ratchet affect. No one activity will by itself ruin it, and each disturbance taken in isolation may on the face of it appear negligible. But add up every human intervention, such as artificial drainage, car parks, gravel tracks, utility structures such as telegraph poles or pumping stations, and incrementally over time we see the significant loss of grazing, loss of landscape amenity, loss of habitat, and loss of good environmental condition.

Through the HLS, we are funding projects to conserve or improve the ecology and environment of the New Forest Crown Lands. We find ourselves in an impoverished financial climate within the public sector, so the £2,000,000 per year which we are spending from the HLS is absolutely fundamental to the future good condition of the New Forest.

This money enables us to turn the clock back to remove previous man-made interventions. We are improving the landscape amenity of the forest. We are improving grazing for the benefit of the forest stock, which are the architects of our beautiful New Forest landscape.

Our terrestrial work on the New Forest has increased in importance and is providing ecological benefits as well as improved grazing.

We have removed 95 acres of rhododendron at Ashurst, Longdown, Dibden, Turfhill, Godshill and Deerleap.

We have restored lost lawns at New Park, Busketts, Boxwood Green, Beechwood Road, Shave Green and Woodside Bottom.

We have removed self-seeded non-native conifers over 337 acres of open forest at Longdown, Dibden, Fawley, Dunces' Arch and Marchwood.

We have carried out heather baling over 32 acres at Ashley Cross, Ocknell Plain, Handy Cross Plain, Milestone Bottom, Sandy Ridge, Holm Hill and Horseshoe Earth.

We have done over 500 acres of bracken control at Alderhill, Pitts Wood, Compton, Wilverley and Markway.

We have been holly coppicing as a trial at Hiscock's Hill, Fritham Plain, Broomy Plain, Highland Water, Bolderwood, and Holmhill.

Our HLS is also leaving a legacy in communing infrastructure. In 2016 we rebuilt the stock pounds at Woodgreen, Holmsley, Appleslade and Woodfidley, in hardwood for longevity. 2017 plans include Sloden, Ashurst, Pilley and Latchmoor; again, these pounds will be built in hardwood.

As the number of cars in use increases, we are seeing a huge loss of grazing and thus habitat interest: areas of grass on the edge of roads or outside houses are being lost to bare gravel. You have all seen it. The causes are widespread: over-running the verge at junctions; dog walkers not using car parks; car parking in villages; ignorance from visitors. We are therefore funding a programme of works which will protect eroded verges, and in the longer term allow re-growth of natural vegetation. 2016 saw a major project in Woodgreen, with some local objections, mainly due to local residents

losing free parking spaces outside their homes rather than having to open a gate and park on their own property. East Boldre is planned for this year. And the major project will be across Broomy Plain, to return the road to its single track carriageway width by creating a series of passing places; in mitigation and compensation, we will be returning some World War II concrete to grazing. We have appointed a Verge Restoration Officer who will be driving these projects forward in our remaining three years.

3,385 pupils had great learning experiences in the New Forest throughout 2016, thanks to the HLS education access funding. 21 schools benefitted from the funding across 50 visits. "This trip needs the highest commendation" said one headmistress.

Thank you to Catherine Chatters at the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust for her management of the New Forest Non-Native Plants Removal Project. Last year's work included Parrot Feather control in Hinchelsea Bog, at East End and at Castle Hill, Burley. Goldon Club was controlled at the Pond at Turf Hill; Control of Bog Arum at Ipley; Control of American Skunk Cabbage and Montbretia at Burley; Japanese Knotweed, Iris laevigata, Cotoneaster and Montbretia was controlled at various sites. Volunteer work parties cleared Himalayan Balsam and Pitcher Plants. The Living Record System was created in 2016 and volunteers have received training and started surveying data for the record. Terrific, well done Catherine.

We have a well-developed survey and monitoring programme, including the black bog ant, medicinal leech, one grooved diving beetle, botanical surveys, bat surveys, water quality sampling, fixed point photography, invertebrate sampling and riverfly monitoring.

Last year we ground-truthed 6,500 acres of LiDAR analysis, giving us a total over the last seven years of 36,500 acres out of our 10 year target of 50,000 acres. That is 73% of the HLS area, and we are on target to complete the analysis by 2020. Over the last year volunteers have undertaken 91 volunteer days, ranging from survey work, data cleaning and heritage events where they have represented the projects work. Lawrence Shaw at the National Park Authority is running this project, and is doing a terrifically good job. I would also like to thank his team of willing volunteers, some of whom are here tonight.

Man-made drainage has proved so damaging to the New Forest's natural ecology, scouring out deep ditches, lowering the water table, washing organic matter downstream and out to sea. Our wetland restorations correct these harms, encouraging the re-establishment of the flood plain, depositing beneficial organic matter on the forest rather than it being washed out to sea. And a happy by-product is to reduce flood risk in villages and towns downstream.

Many years ago, while riding my horse around the forest, I first became aware of wetland restorations as a work in progress, and frankly, I thought then that they were a waste of public money. However, over the years I saw the speed with which the forest recovers, and the multiple benefits of removing man-made drainage channels: a raised water table, re-establishment of the flood plain, improved grazing, a more natural-looking and attractive landscape.

So I am a convert, and like all converts, I am a zealot in my advocacy of the benefits of using this HLS money to turn the clock back, re-creating a more natural, less artificial environment, with benefits for the overall ecology of the New Forest.

In November, we were unsuccessful in gaining planning permission for our river restoration at Latchmore. At our January HLS board meeting, we decided that we will not pursue the Latchmore project further, withdrawing from the planning process, allocating our money and staff time to less controversial projects over our 50,000 acres, the largest HLS scheme area in the UK. This pragmatic decision gives us the opportunity to press on with other very good HLS projects, without committing staff to a further round of the planning process and stakeholder discussions at this time.

I believe that the Latchmore restoration would have greatly benefited the condition of the Forest, and we will therefore continue to monitor the erosion of the mires and deterioration of the ecology of the catchment; it would be irresponsible of us not to do so. I am much in favour of river restorations in general, and the Latchmore project in particular, and I am disappointed that it will not go ahead. But I am pleased to report that our stream and mire restorations are continuing throughout the Crown Lands. In total 2.1 kilometers of drain were infilled, 1.6 kilometers of meanders were restored, and we raised the bed level in a total of 0.8 of a kilometer. This work was across eighteen separate sites, including at Suburbs Wood, Wooton, Pondhead, Dibden Bottom, Broomy Bottom, Bagshot Moor, Crockford, Linford Brook, Brick Kiln, Waters Copse, Allum Green, Three Beech Bottom & Horseshoe Earth. In 2017, we plan work at fourteen separate sites, including Coxlease, The Noads, Dockens Water, and Ferny Crofts.

As land manager for the New Forest, the Forestry Commission's HLS team deserves credit. It is led by Sonia Lorenzo-Martin, with support from Lucy Andrews, Nick Wardlaw, Sarah Oakley, Keith Mansbridge and Gemma Stride, with Grace Herve providing invaluable admin support. I am very grateful for your detailed work which is so valuable in our restoration of the New Forest, so a big thank you.

The projects that I have described today demonstrate again why the Verderers' Higher Level Stewardship Scheme is such an important funding stream: it is our once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to reverse the ratchet effect of man's slow ruination of the common land, and we must therefore continue to use this money for the maximum benefit of our beautiful, unique, working New Forest.

This is my last HLS AGM as Official Verderer: my successor is Lord Manners, who is here tonight, and I welcome him to his new role which he starts on 1st May. Under my stewardship over the last six years, we have funded essential and long lasting improvements to the open forest. Thank you to my fellow board members for your support and wisdom. Particularly thank you to Graham Ferris of the CDA who has stepped down at the end of March, and was a founder board member: his forensic analysis of projects and his focus on improving grazing have been crucial to our success. It has been my privilege to serve as Official Verderer and to chair this funding organisation. Thank you all very much.

Dominic May, Official Verderer
Chairman, Verderers of the New Forest Higher Level Stewardship Scheme
5th April 2017