

# **HLS AGM Chairman's speech**

## **September 2023**

### **Words of Welcome**

Thank you all for coming this evening. We are nearing the end of the 13th year of the Verderers' HLS which is a partnership between the Verderers, the New Forest National Park Authority and Forestry England with support from the Commoners Defence Association and Natural England

The last time we got together to celebrate the achievements of the Verderers' HLS was May 2019 when we looked back over the highlights of the previous 10 years of the scheme that was due to come to an end in February 2020. The exit of the UK from the European Union and the rewriting of domestic policy has meant the Verderers' HLS had been offered annual rollovers from the RPA for the past two years – the great news is we have now been offered and accepted a five-year extension to the current HLS Agreement. This will enable us to continue with the incredibly important projects within the scheme. We can exit to an alternative Agri-environment scheme during this period so long as any new scheme equals or exceeds the environmental benefits delivered by the current Higher Level Stewardship Scheme.

Covid 19 came and put a spanner in the works as regards to being able to get together in person for two years and then very sadly our dear Queen passed last September and it was correct to cancel our planned AGM celebrations out of respect. Lord Manners very kindly agreed to deliver his Chairmans report for 2020 & 2021 on film – which I hope many of you have had the opportunity to view. So now we are very pleased to be able to join together in person again with the partner organisations, their teams, supporters and the interested public tonight to run through the highlights of 2022.

## **The Vision for the HLS was;**

That during the life of the scheme the New Forest Higher Level Stewardship will have created a lasting legacy of investment for the New Forest that will give sustainable benefits to Forest communities, wildlife, habitats and visitors, and safeguard a viable future for commoning that lasts well beyond the life of the Scheme.

Against that background I propose to talk about some of the key areas of the work of the Scheme. I think you will be amazed by the breadth of the work and the scale of what has been achieved.

### **Restoration of Wood Pasture**

Projects have included

- The phased restoration of ancient and ornamental oak and beech woodland at Woodcrates has continued, with non-native conifer trees removed from nearly **5 hectares** of the selected sites last year.
- Dense holly has been cut back totalling **10 hectares over 6 sites** to let in more light for the benefit of rare lichens growing on nearby oak and beech trees. This new programme of work is critical as the old growth pasture woodlands support an internationally important lichen assemblage.

### **Restoration of Species Rich Grassland**

Approximately 12,500 hectares of the New Forest is heath and grassland.

Much work has been done to improve these areas by removing invasive plants and trees, which are crowding out our native plants as well as restoring lawns – those wonderful large grassy areas where stock graze and which are vital for a huge range of species.

- The Verge Restoration Project has protected **3.2 miles** of verges across 20 different sites from vehicle damage by installing signs, dragon's teeth, barriers and car free ditching.
- More than **33 hectares** of bracken has been forage harvested to restore acid grassland and lawn habitat over 27 sites.  
The Lost Lawns Project is a rolling programme of work that is targeting sites identified in the Lost Lawns Report (N. Sanderson) to restore glades or edges of lawns and heathland. Millyford Green and Anderwood were restored during 2022.

## Restoration of Lowland Heath

Projects have included

- Naturally regenerating trees and scrub have been removed from more than **171 hectares** from 7 sites of 'thrown open' Inclosures, to help restore the areas open to grazing, back to open habitats after conifer felling.
- Sites across **5** 'thrown open' Inclosures also saw work to remove the ridges, furrows and stumps left behind from plantation forestry. This included cutting tree stumps down to ground level, and complete removal of ridges, furrows and stumps from approximately **30 hectares**.
- This programme of work is helping to restore the former open habitats by naturalising the hydrology of these areas, making it easier to carry out any future habitat management work, and improving areas for drifting of stock and stock access.
- A rolling programme to treat or cut and burn rhododendron at more than **11 sites** on the Open Forest has also continued.

Across all New Forest habitats we have also worked to control invasive non-native plant species. Many non-native plants have escaped from our gardens during the last century and are out-competing our native plants. The problem is particularly severe along rivers, which provide 'pathways' for infestation.

Invasive species on rivers can smother or kill native wildlife, spread disease, cause serious bank erosion, increase flood risk and even provide a risk to human health and safety.

## **Educational Access**

This is a key area for the HLS. Educating young people about the Forest is one of the keys to ensuring that people understand and appreciate what the Forest is and what makes it so special.

An Education Access pack/toolkit has been created which has enabled:

- HLS funded visits – HLS education access funding enabled 598 pupils from 13 schools to visit and learn about the special qualities of the New Forest in 2022.

We have now seen the welcome return of the school visits after Covid and we look forward to continuing to be able to educate young people of all ages.

## **Wetland Restoration**

The New Forest contains 75% of the remaining lowland valley bog or ‘mire’ systems in north-western Europe, making it an internationally important site for this rare habitat and the species that it supports.

Together with its high value streams and other scarce wetland habitats, the Forest also supports one of only four significant sites of bog woodland in the UK, as well as one of the six best sites of riverside woodland.

Since 2010 we have delivered dozens of projects across the New Forest, totalling 20 miles of restoration to watercourses and approximately 5,000 hectares (more than 7,000 football pitches) of SSSI wetland habitats have been improved and protected.

The restorations, led by Forestry England, are improving habitats for rare wildlife, protecting streams and mires from further erosion, helping to manage flood risk and increasing resilience to drought.

The work carried out so far has been guided by previous projects and plans, including the New Forest Wetland Management Plan 2006-2016.

We are now working with a forum of stakeholders to develop a new wetland management strategy for the New Forest, ultimately working towards resuming this vital area of work for biodiversity and climate.

- **3 sites** saw minor repairs and maintenance works to previously restored mires and streams, including small-scale adjustments to short stretches to prevent any issues such as eroding nick points or damage to ford crossings from reoccurring.
- All restored wetland sites are monitored regularly to ensure they are functioning as expected.
- **2 surveys** of rare species have been completed. A targeted survey and habitat assessment for the six-spotted crane fly at selected wet transition mires in the New Forest and a targeted survey and habitat assessment for the Beaulieu dung beetle at selected wetland sites in the New Forest.
- Citizen science volunteers have given many **hours** of their time to carry out Riverfly surveys over 3 sites in 2022, which are helping to monitor the health of New Forest streams.
- **9** specialist species and habitat surveys of wetland sites were completed, and a selection of sites were monitored using techniques such as water level loggers and timelapse cameras.

## Historic Environment

The HLS has provided a wonderful opportunity to improve our knowledge and understanding of the history and archaeology of the Forest.

- The team have assisted in surveying potential ridge and furrow sites, as well as stream and verge restoration sites for historical features and ordnance.
- Clearing scrub from scheduled monuments (with the help of volunteers)
- And the Good news that finally it has been possible to deposit the LiDAR data with the Archaeology Data Service (ADS), in order to provide public access to data where possible.

## Grazing management

The New Forest pony, the Forest run cattle and the Pannage Pigs are the iconic symbols of the Forest. More than that they are the architects of the Forest landscape and are integral to commoning which is part of the unique cultural heritage of the Forest. Grazing management has thus been a key part of our work. Here are some highlights:

**The Verderers' Grazing Scheme:** Over 80% of eligible stock is now entered into the VGS with over 540 commoners committed to achieving the agreements objectives of habitat and feature condition, with a view to long term sustainability

**The New Forest Pounds:** these play an important role in the success of commoning and are symbols of the unique cultural heritage of the New Forest. Nearly 40 pounds have been rebuilt during the project in hardwood for safety and longevity.

**Sightline and Driftway fencing:** fencing has been erected to assist in stock management and animal safety.

**Reflective Collars:** In the region of 29,000 reflective collars have been fitted to ponies, donkeys and cattle during the last 13 years.

Reflective eartags have now been introduced for cattle, all aimed at improving the welfare of the forest stock.

**The Verderers' Stallion Scheme:** has managed to support commoning by managing the number and period for turning out stallions on the Forest. It has also benefited the value and future of the breed which is essential to the future of the Forest landscape.

**The Futurity Scheme:** offers incentives to commoners for young colts with important bloodlines to be brought forward for inspection and retained as potential future stallions.

**The Bloodlines Scheme** has successfully regenerated the gene pool of the native New Forest Pony. The 7 colts born from the 2 bloodline schemes have matured and subsequently made the grade to join the Verderers Stallion Scheme and run on the forest Their progeny now exceeds 500 foals with rare and valuable bloodlines.

**The New Forest Pony Enthusiasts Club** work to improve the value and diversity of the New Forest Pony Breed by showcasing the versatility of the breed and its suitability for all equestrian disciplines. This work is important to promote the breed and secure a viable future for the New Forest's unique commoning practices.

### **New Forest Land Advice Service**

Farming today is increasingly complex and technical. Good quality advice and training is essential to commoning.

The New Forest Land Advice Service:

- provides advice and training to commoners to ensure best practice
- advises on legislation regulations, land management and rules relating to the HLS Scheme. E.g., Cross compliance and Nitrate Vulnerable Zones.
- Organises a huge variety of courses to support commoners and commoning.

## **In summary**

The HLS has delivered a wide range of long-lasting benefits for the Forest

## **So, what does the future hold?**

The current HLS scheme will expire in February 2028. The work of protecting and enhancing the Forest is endless and we look forward to continuing the legacy of the New Forest HLS in a new format. Many in the Forest are actively engaged in trying to secure future funding for the Forest. The hope is for a tailored flexible scheme that suits the needs of the Forest.

## **Thank you**

There are so many people who work so hard to deliver the benefits of the HLS scheme and they are due thanks from us all. However, it is not possible to mention them all but I would like to pay tribute to the staff of Natural England for all their hard work and support. I would also thank the CDA who have engaged constructively and supportively with the work of the HLS.

## **Volunteer Awards**

FE – Riverfly Monitoring Project

HIWWT – Non Native Project