

# HLS AGM Chairman's speech 2023-2024 January 2025

## Words of Welcome

Thank you all for coming this evening. We are nearing the end of the 14th 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 September 2023. The exit of the UK from the European Union and the rewriting of domestic policy has meant the Verderers' HLS had been granted a five-year extension to the current HLS Agreement with the option of exiting 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 scheme. The Future Forest Farming Group together with the Verderers HLS Agreement have secured funding from the Rural Payments Agency and commissioned a Feasibility Study to investigate the options and the suitability of the newly launched Agri Environment Schemes to the New Forest.

**In the period April 2023 to March 2024 work on the following projects achieved the following outcomes**

### **The Restoration of Wood Pasture**

Projects have included

- The phased restoration of ancient and ornamental woodlands has continued, with non-native conifer trees being removed from selected sites last year and the thinning of **2.5 hectares** of previously enclosed Ancient & Ornamental Woodlands
- Dense holly has been cut back totalling **7 hectares over 9 sites** to let in more light for the benefit of rare lichens growing on nearby oak and beech

## Restoration of Species Rich Grassland

- The Verge Restoration Project has protected verges from vehicle damage by installing signs, dragon's teeth, barriers and car free ditching.

The Lost Lawns Project is a rolling programme of work that is targeting sites identified in the Lost Lawns Report by local ecologist Neil Sanderson to restore glades or edges of lawns and heathland. Tantany Wood, Balmer Lawn and Stricknage Wood have been restored in 2024

## Restoration of Lowland Heath

Projects have included restoring former forestry inclosures that have been thrown open.

- Once conifers are felled and removed for forestry purposes, there is a rash of regeneration which has been removed from more than **57 hectares** from 5 sites of 'thrown open' Inclosures, to help restore the areas open to grazing, back to heathland habitats.
- Sites across **4** '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 **27 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 **15 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.

HLS education access funding enabled 549 pupils from 11 schools to visit and learn about the special qualities of the New Forest in 2023.

Broad Chalke Primary School said “our children had an enjoyable day, they can talk about habitats and creatures with more confidence and developed more of a bond as a class as a result of the visit”.

Otterbourne Primary School said “We loved the amount of knowledge that was shared and opportunities to stop and gaze with awe and wonder at the wildlife around”.

## **Wetland Restoration**

The New Forest Freshwater and Wetland Restoration Forum have developed a new restoration plan for the New Forest. The HLS will resume this vital area of work for biodiversity and climate, following the plan to ensure the works are of the highest quality.

- **8 sites** saw minor repairs and maintenance works to previously restored mires and streams
- **Picket Bottom Mire** - A small-scale new wetland restoration project was carried out to infill a deep eroding nick point and bed level raise the channel along an enclosure edge. Temporary fencing was also installed along part of the restoration to help recovery of areas vulnerable to damage from stock poaching.

- All restored wetland sites are monitored regularly to ensure they are functioning as expected.
- **6 surveys** of rare species have been completed.
  - Six-spotted crane fly
  - Beaulieu dung beetle
  - Brown diving beetle
  - New Forest mud beetle
  - Dartford Warbler repeat survey
  - Nightjar repeat survey
- Also
  - Botanical surveys of Ridge & furrow sites
  - Botanical surveys of Wetland restoration sites
  - Citizen science volunteers have given many **hours** of their time to carry out Riverfly surveys over 2 sites in 2023, 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 team have surveyed ridge and furrow sites, as well as stream and verge restoration sites for historical features and ordnance prior to work commencing.

## **Grazing management**

**The Verderers' Grazing Scheme:** Over 80% of eligible stock is now entered into the VGS with over 478 commoners committed to achieving the agreements objectives of habitat and feature condition, with a view to long term sustainability

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

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

**Reflective Collars:** In the region of 3000 reflective collars have been fitted to ponies, donkeys and cattle during the last year.

**The Verderers' Stallion Scheme** has supported commoning by managing the number and period for turning out stallions on the Forest. Winter grazing for the stallions has been secured at National Trust land at Mottisfont giving future security to the project.

**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 HLS has been able to offer grazing at Mottisfont for these colts allowing the Pony Breed Society to continue this project for future years.

**The Bloodlines Scheme** has successfully regenerated the gene pool of the native New Forest Pony. The 1<sup>st</sup> two rounds of the project resulted in 7 working stallions whose progeny now exceeds 500 foals with rare and valuable bloodlines. A 3<sup>rd</sup> round of the Bloodlines scheme has been initiated in 2024 with 4 mares with rare breed lines being put in foal.

The HLS has delivered a wide range of long-lasting benefits for the Forest in the last year with too many to mention in this brief summary.

## **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 thank the staff of Natural England for all their hard work and support. I would also thank the CDA who have constantly supported the work of the HLS.

Please thank the following volunteers from the Riverfly Monitoring Project and the Non Native Plant Projects