



Commoners of The New Forest

Who are they?
What do they do?



COMMONERS AND COMMONING?

Commoners of the New Forest are people who occupy property to which attaches one or more rights over the Forest and/or the adjacent commons (areas brought into the Forest under the New Forest Act of 1964) so, to be a commoner you must own or rent land which benefits from common rights. There are six registered rights. Pasture, Mast, Marl, Turbary, Sheep and Fuelwood.

The land which benefits from rights over the Forest extends from just south of Salisbury in the north, to Southampton in the east, the Solent shore in the south and Bournemouth in the west. The rights have existed since time immemorial, undoubtedly pre-dating William the Conqueror's afforestation of the area.

Many commoners are descendants of families who have been commoning for many generations. Commoning today does not provide a living. Some commoners are also farmers who use the Forest for some of their stock for a part of the year. Many commoners nowadays are employed in other industries, some work for Forestry England whilst many others are employed in local businesses and a few even commute to other areas. Many Commoners continue to turn out animals because they have always done so and enjoy

the social contact it provides. A number of others have come into commoning simply for the interest it provides.

Commoning, although a way of life to many, has seldom provided the total means of subsistence for any commoner. Today, few children of commoners find it easy to continue the system because of the poor return involved, particularly in the pony market and a major difficulty is the lack of affordable back-up land (land needed to graze animals when they are not on the Forest) and housing in or close to the Forest. Many properties with common rights are purchased as retirement or holiday homes or by people who work out of the area and many new owners have no intention of maintaining the old traditions.



COMMONING IS IMPORTANT FOR THE ENVIRONMENT

The ponies have been called the architects of the Forest landscape, for it is through their browsing and grazing that the Open Forest lawns and trees look as they do. Without their work, and that of the cattle and deer, the Forest would soon become overgrown with brambles, gorse and other coarse herbage.



Government recognises the essential role that commoners play in maintaining the Forest's landscape and ecology and the National Park Authority is committed to supporting commoning. Several initiatives have been introduced which will assist commoners.

Under the Higher Level Stewardship Scheme, the Verderers' Grazing Scheme, provides financial support for commoners who are exercising their rights in a responsible fashion; additionally, under Basic Payment Scheme, commoners can receive payments, over and above those which they would have received on their back-up land, for every pony, cow and donkey they have on the Forest.

Improvement of the Stock - the Stallion Scheme which limits the time the stallions run out on the Forest and only selects the best stallions has been effective in reducing the number of foals born each year and improving the quality. As such prices for young stock have generally improved.

It is hoped that with this assistance, commoners will be able to continue the tradition of grazing animals on the Forest for many years to come.

HOW DO I FIND OUT IF MY LAND BENEFITS FROM FOREST RIGHTS

On request, the Clerk to the Verderers will carry out a search of the Forest Atlas to ascertain whether your property benefits from rights and if so, which ones. The Forest Atlas comprises seven large volumes of bound ordnance survey sheets, some dating from the early 1900's. The detail of common rights was added to these plans after 1949 following the New Forest Act of that year. Prior to 1949, the rights were listed in a register dating from 1857. In addition a further set of atlases exist showing the land which benefits from rights over the Adjacent Commons. These Atlases were produced following the 1964 New Forest Act. If rights were not claimed under the 1949 or 1964 Acts they are deemed to have been lost. Members of the public may view the Atlases during normal working hours by prior appointment but if assistance from the Verderers' staff is required a fee will be charged. A fee will also be charged if a written search is requested.

ANY MORE QUESTIONS?

If you want to know more about commoning - perhaps you would like to find out if your property benefits from rights - please contact the Clerk to the Verderers at the address over leaf.

enquiries@verderers.org.uk

THE RIGHTS OF COMMON

The Right of Common of Pasture is the most important right which permits the commoner to turn out ponies, cattle, donkeys and mules onto the common grazing. Those who wish to exercise their Right of Pasture do so by application to the Verderers' Clerk who will confirm the existence of the right and allocate a brand for the animals. Once they have been branded, the animals may be turned out upon payment of a *marking fee* which helps to finance the cost of employing the Agisters who are responsible for supervising the stock on the Forest.

The Right of Common of Mast is the right to turn out pigs in the pannage season. Pannage runs for a minimum of 60 days in the autumn. Commoners who turn out pigs in the pannage season may apply to allow a female pig who is in-pig (pregnant) to remain on the Forest after the season ends. Such pigs are known as *privilege sows*. They must return home at night and once they have given birth to their piglets they must go home and stay off the Forest. Pigs are extremely important to the Forest – they can eat acorns with no ill effects. Acorns eaten in excess may kill other grazing animals.

The Right of Common of Sheep permits the commoner to turn out sheep onto the Forest. There are very few sheep rights in the Forest and the right is rarely exercised these days.

The Rights of Common of Marl and Turbary the right of marl permits the commoner to dig for a special type of clay that is used to improve agricultural land. The right of turbary is the right to cut peat for fuel. Neither of these rights are currently exercised.

The Right of Common of Fuelwood (previously known as *Estovers*) is the right that everybody wants! It means Forestry England is obliged to give the commoner some free fuelwood. There are only about 100 properties throughout the whole Forest to whom Forestry England will allocate a number of *cords* of wood (a *cord* is a stack of wood 8ft long, 4ft high and 4ft deep).

In addition to the six registered rights, some properties benefit from additional rights over the adjacent commons, such as the right to dig gravel or cut bracken for animal bedding.

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