



Who are the commoners?

1. First of all, what is commoning?

Common grazing is an ancient form of land management that used to be widespread in the UK and in many parts of the world. It is based on the shared use of land for grazing animals owned by farmers and graziers who have the right to turn their livestock onto the land. In the UK common grazing now only survives in certain very specific and often remote parts of the country: places such as Dartmoor, Exmoor, the North York Moors, Cumbria – and the New Forest.

It is an extensive form of land use that creates the sort of rugged landscapes and diverse ecosystems that make up the great majority of the country's national parks. In other words, commoning is the system of farming that has created and maintains some of our most precious landscapes. You can find out more about commoning in the UK on the website of the Foundation for Common Land: <http://www.foundationforcommonland.org.uk/rights-of-common>.

2. So, who are these people?

New Forest commoners are mostly small land owners and renters, though some farm on a larger scale. The income from commoning is often small and almost all commoners have other sources of income. They may work in other Forest related occupations, such as forestry, as farm labourers or cattle dealers or they could be council workers, teachers, nurses, shop workers, secretaries or carpenters – in fact anyone who lives in the New Forest and has the right to turn animals onto the heath could be a commoner.

3. A tradition with a long past and vibrant present

In 1069 William the Conqueror designated the area we now call the New Forest as a Royal Hunting reserve shortly after the Norman Conquest. In order to protect the game he wanted to hunt, he introduced Forest Law to the area. This meant that the land could not be enclosed for agriculture. In exchange, the local population were given the right to graze their animals within the hunting reserve – at least during certain periods of the year – and a number of other rights (such as to collect fallen timber for burning and clay as fertiliser).



Commoner's Cottage in Brockenhurst

The rights meant that small holders were able to make a living on very small areas of land: a situation that continued up to recent times. In 1883 local landowner and defender of the commoners' rights, George Briscoe Eyre, described the open Forest as the 'cottager's farm', the source of his livelihood and of a modest capital. Even as late as 1947 the Baker Report to parliament stated that a commoner 'could keep three times as many cattle on a small holding in the New Forest as on 50 acres in the Midlands'.¹

¹ Report of the New Forest Committee 1947, p46.



Pony Sales at Swan Green, Lyndhurst circa 1910

The ponies and cattle that grazed the open Forest were an essential part of that livelihood. The weekly market at Ringwood was an important outlet for the commoners' animals, as were the regular pony sales. The earliest recorded sales were held at Swan Green (started 1840's). Beaulieu Road became the site for the sales in the 1930's where its proximity to the station allowed ponies to be shipped easily to London and beyond.

Hay making in the 1930's

The peculiar nature of commoning in the New Forest – where a large number of small holders grazed their animals on common land, and grew crops on their holdings – which were typically less than 20 acres – meant that they worked together to grow and harvest their produce. They didn't have large areas of crops to plant or harvest, and their small herds of ponies and cattle grazed together on the heath. So, when the time for complex or heavy labour was required, commoners joined together to share the work and the machinery - and the conversation.



Gathering ponies into a pound in 2015

Commoning has been based on sharing and working together since the very earliest days. It's what made it work then – and it is the same today. When animals are grazing freely across large areas with no fences to restrict their movement – information shared between one commoner and his neighbour – or with the agisters and keepers - is vital to manage the herds effectively and care for the animals.

Today commoners share information, work parties, animals and equipment. They socialise together, and often marry other commoners. In this way, they ensure that the community remains strong and the traditions of commoning continue into the future.



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The Shared Forest Project is working to increase public awareness and understanding of depastured animals and commoning in the New Forest
Email: shared.forest@btinternet.com

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