

The Verderers of the New Forest Higher Level Stewardship Scheme

Annual Report 2013/14

The New Forest Higher Level Stewardship Scheme is a 10 year agreement with Natural England, which started 1st March 2010 and runs to 29th February 2020. The HLS is a partnership between the Verderers, the Forestry Commission and the National Park Authority, and as a board, we are in effect a funding body, with £2,000,000 per year to distribute for environmental improvement. In effect, we are able to use the funds to turn the clock back, restore previous human intervention into more favourable ecological condition.

Activities are delegated to the partners to manage: the Verderers manage the grazing-related projects; the Forestry Commission manages the Wetland Restorations; and the National Park Authority manages Historic and Archeological Protection, and Education and Access, and bird surveys.

2013 has been the year in which we developed a mature work plan to 2020. This has had several desired effects. Firstly we have concentrated on the delivery of the obligations entered into under the HLS agreement with Natural England. Secondly we now have a clear programme of work which is to the huge benefit of the New Forest as a whole. And thirdly we have given the partners and contractors long term funding so that our ambitious work plan will be achieved.

The HLS board is made up of one voting member from each of the partner organizations: I, Dominic May, represent the Verderers; Mike Seddon represents the Forestry Commission; and Alison Barnes represents the National Park. Additionally, we have two non-voting members: Jenny Thomas from Natural England; and Graham Ferris from the Commoners Defence Association. The board has met four times since last year's AGM, every three months.

The HLS scheme funds projects to conserve or improve the ecology and environment of the New Forest Crown Lands, excluding the inclosures and camp sites. The HLS board is concentrating on the agreement objectives:

Nature Conservation / Biodiversity

To achieve target condition (favourable or unfavourable recovering) for the designated habitats and species through appropriate management and depasturing of domestic stock, and the physical restoration of unfavourable habitats.

Landscape

To maintain, enhance and restore characteristic landscape features which contribute to the traditional semi-natural landscape character of the New Forest.

Historic Environment

To improve the understanding of the historic environment in order to support positive conservation management of visible and below ground archaeological and historic features, and restore historic buildings which contribute to the area's heritage and special qualities.

Resource Protection

To restore habitats and landscapes damaged by soil erosion and diffuse pollution.

Access

To improve the quality of visitor experience and to influence behaviour through improved understanding of the New Forest's natural and historic environment, and land management.

In 2012 we introduced the new Verderers Grazing Scheme, which pays the commoners for each animal they turn out, so 2013 was its second year. The grazing stock of ponies and cattle are the architects of our unique New Forest landscape, and the purpose of the Verderers Grazing Scheme is to maintain this commoning activity. The introduction was a huge success: 93.4% of all animals on the Crown Lands are entered into the VGS.

The Verderers are continuing to pay annual grants to organisations which promote benefits to grazing or stock management. 2013 saw the start of our stock pound rebuild programme, using hardwood so that they last longer than the old softwood pounds. We are using oak posts and chestnut rails, and we see this 10 year project as leaving legacy for many years. In 2013 we rebuilt the pounds at Bratley, Bentleys, Amberwood, and Hurst Hill. 2014 will see rebuilds at Puckpits, Backley, Markway and Crab Hat.

A small grant fund for commoners is managed in-house, and this year we have helped commoners with cattle handling facilities, hedges and connections to mains water.

The Verderers sponsor one staff member of the Land Advice Service at the National Park Authority.

Wetland restoration is the catch-all phrase we use for reversing the effects of deep drainage channels which were originally created at a time of intensification of agriculture and forestry: it involves re-inserting meanders in streams, infilling deep man-made drains, and protecting mires. I am a supporter of wetland restoration, particularly as it helps to re-create wilderness areas which had been previously lost. Successful works have been carried out at Buckherd Bottom, Pennymoor and Soldier's Bog. But our wetland restoration programme had a slow year. We have now started the very bureaucratic process of applying for planning consent for the larger schemes, and these will be on a whole catchment basis.

In January, the HLS Board carried out a very interesting site visit to Driver's Nursery and Queen's Meadow, a 2012 project. The restored areas have recovered extremely well and it is no longer easy to identify the original routes of watercourses where these have been filled in.

The separate streams have been returned to their original meanders, and these are working well. You will remember that December and January had very heavy rainfall, and we saw good evidence of where the streams had flooded onto the surrounding flood plain, leaving beneficial organic matter deposited which would otherwise be washed downstream and lost out to sea. This is an excellent example of an HLS project which has turned the clock back, to re-wilderness an area, increasing biodiversity and improving environmental condition.

The major wetland restoration projects for 2014 are the old Sluffers Inclosure, now thrown open, Parkhill Lawn, Matley Heath and Cowleys Heath.

Using the survey of bracken stands which we completed in 2012, bracken management on the forest has been stepped up as part of our new Terrestrial Restoration programme. Also included in this we have started rhododendron clearance. And we have plans to remove the remaining hundreds of old concrete fence posts along the old railway from Gate 10 in Brockenhurst to Holmsley.

I am pleased to report that our Historic Environment projects have proceeded at pace: the continuing LiDAR analysis is an invaluable resource for the wetland restoration planning, and we have so far analysed and surveyed 7,640 hectares which is nearly 19,000 acres; and we have completed the restoration of thirteen Scheduled Ancient Monuments.

Natural England gives us an incentive to host educational visits by school groups. 2,248 children aged between 7 and 16 benefited from a total of 48 education visits to the New Forest led by the National Park Authority Education Service and New Forest Centre Education Service. Most of these 48 school groups would have been unable to access education about the New Forest were it not for the financial assistance provided by the HLS funding.

Our first bird survey took place last year to identify the breeding population of nightjar. The survey indicates that the breeding population of nightjar has remained relatively stable since the previous survey 10 years ago. This year we are surveying Dartford Warbler, Woodlark and Nesting Waders.

The projects that I have described today show why the New Forest's Higher Level Stewardship Scheme is such an important funding stream, and the board will continue to manage it for the benefit of our beautiful, unique, working New Forest. I thank everyone who has been involved in some way, small or large.

Particularly I would like to thank Colin Draper. Colin retires at the end of March. Colin joined our office staff in 2004, to administer the Countryside Stewardship Scheme. He was instrumental, with his great tact and diplomacy, in persuading commoners to join the scheme. More recently, the Countryside Stewardship Scheme was replaced by the Higher Level Stewardship Scheme, and Colin very ably took on the additional responsibilities connected with it, including the new Verderers' Grazing Scheme. During my three years as Chairman of the HLS

Board, Colin has worked extremely hard to advance both the Verderers' Grazing Scheme and the Higher Level Stewardship Scheme. I am very sorry to lose Colin's good wisdom and common sense; he has been a great servant to the Verderers and to me too. Thank you, Colin, and we wish you a long and happy retirement.

Some of you will already have met Leanne Sargeant, who is taking over from Colin administering the Verderers' Grazing Scheme. During her three month handover with Colin, Leanne has rapidly come up to speed with the intricacies of the VGS and the HLS, including helping to organise this AGM. Welcome, Leanne.

Dominic May, Official Verderer
Chairman, Verderers of the New Forest Higher Level Stewardship Scheme
3rd April 2013