



NEW FOREST NOTES

— AUGUST —

The New Forest and Brexit

How the New Forest will be affected by Brexit was the subject of much speculation at the July Verderers' Court. The Forest comes under the aegis of DEFRA, but of all aspects of British life, agricultural and countryside policies are at present those most dominated by European objectives.

They may thus be the most susceptible to change when policy is again decided in London.

In the immediate future there seems general agreement that little will change. Money will continue to flood into the Forest for the next three-and-a-half years under the HLS scheme, since the contract for those funds runs until February 2020. Thereafter things begin to look rather less certain. It remains to be seen whether an all-British agricultural policy will continue to regard as a priority the expenditure of up to half a million pounds per scheme, for filling Forest watercourses with gravel, in pursuit of ecological objectives. By that stage there may or may not be a government of a different political complexion, but I doubt if much will change in the local political scene, and we now know exactly what Sir Desmond Swayne MP thinks of at least one of these projects.

Of the proposed work of filling up Latchmore Brook with 96,000 tonnes of gravel, he has written that it would comprise "state-sponsored vandalism". That is a refreshingly clear pronouncement and the more valuable since the MP has actually taken the trouble to walk the entire scheme and to see for himself the damage that would be done if the scheme goes ahead. It is difficult to believe that there will not be some radical re-thinking of such priorities once Britain controls its own countryside policies.

The HLS scheme is not the only area where the possibility of change is opened up by Brexit. The Basic Payment Scheme (subsidy to farmers) is leading the Forest towards ultimate disaster in paying large sums to encourage more and more animals to be grazed in the Forest. By July of this year the number of stock paid for had risen by over 1,000 on this time last year and that follows on a similar (annual) increase in 2015.

There is nothing wrong with the BPS scheme elsewhere than in the New Forest, but here a stupid imposition of rules applicable to well-regulated common rights in the remainder of the country, is made on our totally unregulated numbers. The more animals you turn out, the more money you will be given. The precise sums are not yet known, but are likely to run into several hundred pounds for each "livestock unit". Some people are getting very rich.

The Verderers know that this could be the road to ruin for the Forest and so does the Commoners' Defence Association - it was a prime subject of discussion at its last AGM. These inflexible and damaging rules are an interpretation of present subsidy objectives, but with the Common Agricultural Policy about to be replaced, we have a golden opportunity to stop this nonsense once and for all.

There has been much wringing of hands in the Verderers' Court over the problem of rocketing stock numbers, and there is general agreement that somebody ought to do something, but we go on from month to month with no clear plan of action. Instead, the Forest should already be at the front of the queue to influence change in the post-Brexit subsidy schemes. Once new policies form and begin to harden in government, it will be too late. Rather than taking action, we worry about statistics, surveys and discussions.

The Forest needs to be working now, through our local MPs, to arrange the necessary meetings with government departments. When the original Single Payment Scheme subsidies were instituted (a sound system beneficial to the Forest), deputations of verderers were constantly going up to London to ensure that our management of the Forest was not undermined. It is very different this time.