

#RealNewForest

What is the origin of commoning in the New Forest?

Following the Norman Conquest William the Conqueror designated the area we now call the New Forest as a Royal Hunting reserve (between 1066 and 1068). The designation resulted in the introduction of Forest Law which meant that the land couldn't be enclosed for agriculture or housing – and introduced other controls that might interfere with the King's hunting rights. In exchange for these controls, the Law established common rights to be exercised by those who owned or rented land within the hunting reserve.

However, the right to graze animals on common land was widespread across the country at least until the end of Feudal times. Prior to the introduction of Forest Law, the New Forest, like many other areas of Britain was made up of large tracts of land whose common usage was an essential part of peasant farmers' economy.

From the 12th century onwards, increasing areas of land over which common rights were exercised were incorporated into the great estates of the nobility and church. Over succeeding centuries, the common agricultural land that had supported the lives of tenants and copyholders, was enclosed and converted to pasture at the whim of the landowner. In the 18th and 19th centuries, the enclosure of manorial waste and commons was accelerated under a series of Enclosure Acts, until very little land over which common rights operate now exists in lowland Britain.[1]

The New Forest was not seriously threatened by inclosure until, in 1851, an act of parliament (the Deer Removal Act) introduced a 'rolling power of enclosure' which threatened to turn all the best land in the Forest into timber enclosures and sell the remainder. As the full implications of the Act became apparent, local landowners whose rents were increased through the added income provided to smallholders by access to the common grazing, organized opposition through a petition to parliament in 1867. Shortly afterwards, this group founded the New Forest Association and set about preventing further inclosure. Using the growing interest in landscape, the Association galvanized the power of public opinion to save the Forest from inclosure and build the foundations for the 1877 New Forest Act which re-instated the powers of the Verderers and assured the future of the New Forest.[2]

During the latter part of the nineteenth century the urban populations around the New Forest spread considerably, while the development of the railway through the Forest and extension of the road network meant that new residents started to move into the villages in the Forest itself. Increasingly, commoners and their animals came into contact with people who had little understanding of their way of life, and often found the presence of their animals on roads and village greens a nuisance. In 1909 the New Forest Commoners Defence Association was founded in response to the increasing level of such conflict, and has continued to defend the rights of its members against numerous threats to the present day.

[1] Hammond, J L and Barbara (1920) *The Village Labourer 1760 to 1832: A Study in the Government of England before the Reform Bill*. Longmans, Green and Co, London.

[2] Pasmore, Anthony (1977) *Verderers of the New Forest: A History of the New Forest 1877-1977*. Pioneer Publications, Beaulieu.