

# New Forest Commoners Defence Association



Presentment                      Wednesday 15<sup>th</sup> May 2019

## **New Forest Crown Freehold Properties**

I would like to begin with a quotation from the only person I have yet encountered with 100% confidence in their own knowledge of this landscape:

*"It is not the flowers, not the birds or the deer or the badgers or the butterflies that are in most urgent need of conservation here but the people, the real people of this place"*<sup>i</sup>.

Chris Packham's wise words are deeply relevant to what I have to say.

It is now more than two years after I succeeded Dr Ferris as Chair of the CDA. Since then nothing has caused me greater and more consistent concern than the challenge of ensuring that there will be affordable land and homes available for the next generation of commoners - in Britain's least affordable National Park<sup>ii</sup>.

We are fortunate that we have a keen and active young commoners group in the CDA. Young people who are willing to commit their lives to sustaining the grazing of the New Forest – An incredible vocational commitment, amongst all the other pressures of modern life, upon which everything that is so special about this landscape depends.

In 1991, after a thorough review of the challenges and all options to sustain grazing, the Secretary of State determined that the 65 Crown holdings should be prioritised for those who would commit to New Forest grazing, and that they should be kept truly affordable to them. Since the time of the Illingworth Report these holdings have enabled families with a long history of commoning to maintain the practice, from one generation to the next. We all benefit from their love of the New Forest, their deep knowledge of the livestock and the landscape, and their lifelong commitment to commoning. The Crown holdings have been crucial in this.

In 2016 all that changed - on a whim. The Forestry Commission simply decided that market rents would help fill the coffers: To cash in on property values in Britain's most expensive and least affordable National Park. In 2017 Sir Desmond Swayne prompted ministers to remind the Commission that such a change of policy would require a formal and inclusive review, and a decision by ministers. Since then we have caught the Commission advertising cottages to the highest bidder, with no mention of grazing, and allocating them to its own managers however it sees fit.

Forestry England is now attempting to entrap this Court in its disgraceful strategy of privatisation by stealth. By selecting just one small part of the Government policy, for one cottage at New Park; this is the involvement of Verderers in tenant selection. Clearly, it hopes that the Court will not notice:

1. Every other holding has been auctioned or allocated to staff. With no consultation with this Court: Powdermill, Kings Hat, Longbeech, Springfield.
2. The rent for Little New Park has been fixed at more than 100% of many young commoners' household income. Not the 15% stipulated by Government. With no consultation with this Court.
3. An arbitrary qualification has been set, that at least 10 ponies will be turned out from Little New Park's 1.3 acres of back-up land. With no consultation with this Court
4. It has separated the barn from the property: Again with no consultation with this Court.
5. For Little New Park it is demanding income statements from anyone interested, to check they can afford £18,000 a year in rent alone and to deter all those commoners who cannot.

Tenant selection is, therefore, just a trap that the Court would be wise to avoid. This is simply a diversion along the route to effective privatisation of the Crown freeholds; removing them from support for commoning.

This open defiance of government policy for Crown property is shameful from a public body. It not only defies policies that have worked well to sustain Forest grazing over a quarter century. It also defies the Ministers Mandate to the Commission; that it should put the Forest first, ahead of its corporate financial interests. And it defies the 2018 Accord with National Parks England. I am very sorry to say that we no longer have confidence in the Deputy Surveyor to put the Forest first in this regard.

This is a matter of the utmost gravity for the future of commoning in the New Forest. We have tried for three years to work with the Forestry Commission – willing to discuss update the Illingworth policies, but their ears are deaf to the voice of the Forest. They will push on regardless of all due process. Standing idly by whilst Forestry England misappropriates these Crown properties, so that tenancy is a matter of income rather than the good of the Forest, will have lasting consequences for the conservation of this precious landscape. We are very grateful to the Friends of the New Forest for their support.

I have written to the Secretary of State to ask him to put a stop to this disgraceful episode. I would urge the Court and the National Park Authority to do likewise.

Tony Hockley  
CDA Chair

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<sup>i</sup> Chris Packham, Foreword to Clive Chatters *"Flowers of the New Forest"* WildGuides (2009), p9

<sup>ii</sup> Average property values within the National Park boundary are now 15.9 times average local income.