

# Redlynch & District Local History Society

## New Forest Commoning, Past, Present and Future by Dr Gale Pettifer

Over 60 members and guests enjoyed a first-rate talk by Dr Gale Pettifer an active Commoner. Her knowledge of the subject and the thoughtful illustrated presentation was well appreciated and brought out a lot of questions. The first part was devoted to the history of commoning from earliest days, through the Roman Period, and the impact that William the Conqueror had in imposing Forest Laws. It is mainly this process of leaving the Forest open for hunting that has left it for us to enjoy today.



The Commoners, unable to fence land for agriculture, had to make use of the area as woodland pasture, which included heath and mires, to survive. They with their stock, mostly ponies, cattle, pigs and donkeys, maintain the landscape through a natural process. This was nearly lost in the 19th century when a national enclosure movement which had changed most of the country was attempting to do the same for the Forests. In 1871 the government put forward a Bill to enclose appropriate land for timber enclosures and sell off the remainder. This was resisted by one of the world's oldest conservation bodies - the New Forest Association (now called Friends of the New Forest), in a nationwide and ultimately successful campaign resulting in the 1877 New Forest Act. As late as 2011 the government attempted to sell off the New Forest but eventually a Minister admitted they had "got it wrong".

The various forest rights that Commoners hold were explained, showing that all the stock is owned and that the rights go with the land that the Commoners occupy. Ponies and cattle pasturing are the most important with Pannage (pigs foraging in the autumn) and fuel rights (Estover) enduring to a limited extent.

Forest stock is semi-feral, they are rounded up in 'drifts' once a year to check their condition and for tail marking, but most of the year they are self-sufficient. They eat holly and gorse in winter, use the latter for shelter when needed and know how to self-medicate. Despite this Commoners check their stock regularly as they know the 'haunts' that their stock frequent. Commoners work together in much the same way as they have for hundreds of years, as was the norm in much of the country until the 18th century when enclosures changed everything.

It is still the commoning system that provides for the social, cultural and economic basis today, but care is needed so that now and in the future that it is not 'loved to death' by visitors and locals alike.

Our next talk is on Tuesday 5th April at 7:30pm in Morgans Vale & Woodfalls Hall and is "Who nominated our General Election candidates in the 1920's?" by Jane Howells.

Bob Inns, Secretary