**New Forest Facts in a Nutshell**

**The Forest landscape**

The New Forest is a unique survival of an English medieval landscape. It has changed remarkably little in essential character since the establishment of the ‘Nova Foresta’ by William 1, and the physical Forest still possesses an ancient and timeless quality that clearly separates it from the surrounding countryside and urban areas.

To a large extent the 49,500 acres (20,000 ha) of the Open Forest1 , which lies at the heart of the National Park, has been created and maintained over the last millennium by the practise of commoning. This has given rise to the extensive and interconnected mosaic of woodland, heath and Forest lawns grazed by commoners’ animals. The New Forest is one of the last remaining strongholds of commoning practice and tradition in western Europe.

The lack of intensive agriculture and major development has enabled the survival of an intact cultural landscape, charting the influence of local people on the Forest from the Bronze Age to the present day. There is a wealth of extant archaeology, much still being uncovered, and the New Forest includes almost 10 % of all the Scheduled Ancient Monuments in South East England.

**Land use and habitats**

The New Forest is not, and never has been, an exclusively wooded Forest. It is, instead, an intimate mosaic of semi-natural habitats, forestry plantations and farmland. Open heath and grassland comprise 22% of the land area of the National Park, while 27% is a farmed landscape of scattered small-holdings and larger estates, often closely connected to the Open Forest. In addition the National Park also has about 26 miles (42km) of coastline, with more open views and fewer settlements. The coastal area contains a range of important habitats, such as grazing marsh, mudflats and salt marsh.

Tree cover accounts for 34% of the land area of the National Park, with almost half of this (22,000 acres) being ancient semi-natural woodland and about a quarter (11,000 acres) being softwood plantations (both publicly and privately owned). The 9,000 acres of Ancient and Ornamental woodlands on the Crown Lands are the ancient pasture woodlands that formed part of the medieval hunting Forest, and which are now of exceptional conservation value. 2

1 Unfenced land grazed by commoners stock, including the majority of the land controlled by the Forestry Commission (the Crown Lands) and the adjacent commons in a variety of ownerships.

The sheer scale, interconnectedness and historical continuity of the habitats in the New Forest make it one of the premier sites for nature conservation in Europe. In particular the 22,000 acres of lowland heath and mire and the extensive tracts of ancient woodland are unparalleled elsewhere in the lowlands. Both the Open Forest and coastal habitats are protected by international designations, which in total cover 54% of the National Park. A large number of rare or threatened species depend on the New Forest as their main stronghold in the UK, and some, such as the wild gladiolus, are found no-where else in the country. Conserving these habitats and species is of high importance and requires complex and sensitive management given the many competing uses and pressures on the Forest.

**Administration and management**

The administration of the Forest has always been complex, and historically there have been tensions between its uses as a hunting forest, its role in timber production, its importance for commoning and its value for amenity and conservation.

This has given rise to the present day system of administration, with a series of checks and balances to ensure decisions are taken carefully, with the long-term good of the Forest in mind. The roles and responsibilities of the main organisations, including the Forestry Commission, Verderers and National Park Authority, are set out in legislation specific to the New Forest. This comprises the various New Forest Acts, the Minister’s Mandate and the National Park Designation Order with accompanying guidance. More detail on the work of the Forestry Commission and the Verderers is included separately.

The Crown Lands are managed by the Forestry Commission and consist of 66,000 acres (26,800 ha) at the core of the National Park, making up nearly 50% of its total area. Other major public / voluntary sector land managers include the National Trust, Natural England, the Wildlife Trusts and Hampshire County Council. In total these are responsible for about 10,400 acres of the National Park, while private landowners in total manage 37,000 acres of land. The Verderers administer and protect common rights within the 93,000 acres of the Perambulation2 and work to preserve the traditional landscape, wilderness quality and tranquillity of the Forest.

There are many mechanisms for ensuring full consultation on all important issues, including the regular debates at the New Forest Consultative Panel. The Panel has been in existence for more than 40 years and includes about 80 grassroots organisations and all the main statutory bodies in the National Park.

2 Historically the Perambulation was the boundary of the area governed by Forest law. It is now the area that has been fenced and cattle gridded, within which commoner’s stock are able to roam. It is wider than the Open Forest and includes road verges, villages and other areas of unenclosed land.

**Public access**

The National Park attracts an estimated 16 million visitors days annually3 . The majority of visitors come to enjoy the natural beauty, tranquillity and opportunities for quiet recreation in one of the last extensive areas of unspoilt and open countryside in England.

More than 50% of the Park is openly accessible on foot or horseback, the vast majority of which lies within the Crown Lands. There are also 186 miles (300 km) of public rights of way across the enclosed landscape4 and 110 miles (180 km) of permissive cycle routes using forestry tracks. As such the New Forest represents a significant proportion of the total accessible natural green space in South East England.

The legislative background to public access is complex. Access is provided to most of the Crown Estate through the Law of Property Act, 1925. Small areas are dedicated under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act, 2000, which also applies to adjacent commons, owned both publicly and privately. National Trust land is subject to its own specific access legislation.

**Pressures and challenges**

The New Forest lies with the busy South East and immediately adjacent to the two growing conurbations of Southampton and Bournemouth. Proposed major development in these areas may result in an 8% increase in recreational visits to the National Park by 2026 and also bring additional pressure to the local road network.

The challenge will be to manage recreation effectively in order to maintain the quality of the sensitive landscapes and habitats while enabling the quiet enjoyment of the special qualities of the Forest. This may include looking for additional sites for outdoor recreation in more robust areas outside the National Park, and continuing to promote existing facilities beyond the Park, such as Moors Valley Country Park, run by the Forestry England and Bournemouth Christchurch Poole Council.

The National Park is one of the most desirable places to live in South East England and property and land prices are still rising despite the general economic situation. The average cost of a house is now more the ten times the average income and there is a growing number of local people in housing need. This situation may have long-term impacts on traditional land management as the younger generation of commoners and farm workers find it increasingly difficult to find accommodation and land in the area.

3 [M (newforestnpa.gov.uk)](https://www.newforestnpa.gov.uk/app/uploads/2019/01/New-Forest-National-Park-recreation-leisure-visits-RJS-Associates.pdf)

4 Privately owned land

**The rural economy**

There is a wide range of business activity within the National Park, with over 2,400 individual enterprises. Of these the tourism sector is one of the most important in terms of both employment and income generated for the local economy. It employs more than 2,800 people and visitors spend an estimated £175 million within the Park annually.

The success of the New Forest as a tourism destination is dependent on the quality and distinctiveness of the Forest landscape. It is therefore closely linked to the continuation of traditional land management, including commoning, woodland and forestry management and extensive systems of farming.

Although as a sector agriculture and forestry is no longer one of the major employers in the area, there are still more than 200 land-based businesses within the Park. These supply products directly to a number of larger businesses, such as Giddings sawmills, and also help support a growing interest in local food and high quality crafts.

The functioning of the rural economy has always been based on a co-dependence between the Open Forest and the surrounding enclosed lands, including a wider area beyond the National Park. Commoning depends on access to available back-up land and holdings, within or outside the Park, and also to other local employment (commoning alone rarely provides a viable income). The larger towns around the boundary provide markets for local produce, accommodation and other facilities for visitors, and contribute services and cultural activities for the National Park communities.

**Summary of key historic events**

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| **Date**  | **Historic Significance**  |
| 1079 - The designation of the New Forest as a royal ‘forest’ by William I  | Forest managed exclusively for deer and other game. Removal of all fences and introduction of Forest Laws. Common rights granted as recompense  |
| Act of 1542  | Creation of the post of Surveyor General of the King’s Woods to increase the commercial function of Crown woodlands. This new office was under the direction of the Exchequer with responsibilities for timber and ‘profit of the king’.  |
| 1698 Act of the Increase and Preservation of Timber in the New Forest  | First large scale afforestation through the creation of Inclosures. Conflicts with commoners over loss of grazing and imposition of Forest Laws. By end of 18th C Forest poorly managed and timber supplies declining.  |
| 1808 Act of the Increase and Preservation of Timber in Dean and New Forests  | Confirmed allowances of 1698 Act resulting in Inclosure of 6000 acres at any one time in a rolling programme.  |
| **Date (continued)**  | **Historic Significance** |
| 1845  | Opening of Southampton & Dorchester railway bringing artists, naturalists and other recreational users to the New Forest.  |
| 1846-52  | First drainage schemes to improve Forest for grazing  |
| 1851 Deer Removal Act  | Culling of deer in return for Crown enclosing 10,000 acres of open forest. Forest Laws of fence month and winter heyning still imposed which together with loss of grazing led to large scale revolts among commoners and gentry. Large scale introduction of conifers and drainage works  |
| 1877 New Forest Act  | No further creation of Inclosures permitted other than that granted under previous Acts. No further enclosure of Ancient & Ornamental woodland allowed. “Re-creation” of Court of Verderers to administer common rights and pastoral interests remote from Crown influence. Introduction of ornamental trees into Forest by Victorians  |
| The War & Inter War Years  | Forest intensively managed for timber production. Large tracts of land acquired for airfields, firing ranges and food supply.  |
| 1920’s-30’s  | Further drainage of the Open Forest  |
| 1924  | Forestry Commission takes over responsibility for management of New Forest from the Crown. National forest policy ensures that afforestation is vigorously pursued  |
| The New Forest Act 1949  | Revived Verderers Court and clarified responsibilities between Verderers and Forestry Commission. Act set out requirement for Forestry Commission to maintain drainage and scrub control for grazing interests. Led to significant drainage between 1965-1986. Creation of Verderers Inclosures in return for compensation payments. Enclosure of small areas of Ancient and Ornamental woodland allowed to secure future regeneration.  |