

PONY EXPRESS

Welcome to the Spring issue of 'Pony Express', the new title for the SPGCT newsletter.

Pony News

The ponies have all come through another challenging (weather wise) winter; the periods of snow meant that Monty had to auxiliary feed with hay at times, not an ideal situation given the current price of fodder. 'Eyeball' the half-breed pony who was struggling to keep condition whilst on the Ashdown Forest seems to have fared better at Deep Dean on the South Downs. The ponies sometimes proved difficult to find on the South Downs this winter as both sites have dense thickets of gorse which the ponies seemed to like to hide in amongst, and coupled with periods of mist and low cloud the lookers often had a near impossible task.

The ponies will commence their summer grazing jobs in late April. The 12 ponies from Deep Dean will rejoin the rest of Herd 1 on Pippingford Army Training Area whilst Herd 2 will be split between multiple heathland sites as previously. 10 ponies will return to Old Lodge Nature Reserve, 2 ponies to South Heath, 5 ponies to the Sussex Police Training Facility at Kingstanding and 4/5 (possibly including Eyeball) ponies will graze a new site at Owlbeech Wood near Horsham. This last site was originally part of St. Leonard's Forest which in turn was part of the ancient forest of Andradswald, the 'wildwood' which stretched 100 miles from east to west and from the North to the South Downs (and from which the Weald derives its name). In the past Owlbeech Wood was dominated by heathland with small blocks of broadleaf trees but was planted with Scots Pine in 1970 by the Forestry Commission as a commercial crop. The crop was never harvested and the land was sold to Horsham District Council in 1989. The trees remained unthinned until 2005 when the Council decided to return the land to heathland. Our ponies will be helping with this valuable task of regenerating lowland heathland.

Annual General Meeting

The Annual General Meeting took place on the 26th March and for the benefit of those of you who were unable to attend, here is a brief outline of proceedings.

In his Chairman's report, Alan Skinner warmly thanked Frankie Reynolds, who is standing down as Secretary, for her five years service to the Trust.



Alan Skinner presents Frankie with a framed photo of the ponies.
Photo: Wendy Muriel

As a token of appreciation for all her hard work the Trust presented Frankie with a framed photograph of the ponies on the South Downs.

In her presentation of the accounts, Alison Smith reported that the Trust was in a good financial position even though our income had been reduced last year owing to a grant from SITA coming to an end.

Under the Trust's constitution Wendy Muriel and Michael Squires were required to resign as Trustees but were willing to stand again and both were formally re-elected. In addition Moira Barnard, Neil Baker, Tony Clarke and Alison Smith who joined the Committee during the year were formally elected as Trustees. Michael Squires wished to stand down as Vice-Chair and Wendy Muriel was elected in his place.



Alison looks sceptical while Monty explains his expenses claim? (Only joking!)
Photo: Wendy Muriel

After the official business was completed all those attending were invited take refreshments sponsored by the Tesco Store at Hampden Park, Eastbourne as part of their scheme to support local community charities.

New Secretary

The Committee welcomes Susan Suleski who has agreed to take over the job of Secretary, a role she is well qualified for as before she retired she had a lot of administrative experience working for the Citizens Advice Bureau and in social services. Susan was raised on a farm and has always loved animals, ponies in particular. She enjoys being outdoors and has been a looker for over five years.



Frankie shows Susan the ropes!

Photo: Wendy Muriel

Ponies on Ancient Landscapes

Lookers on Castle Hill National Nature Reserve, which Herd 2 grazed until March this year, may have wondered how it got its name as there are no buildings or ruins in the vicinity. The 'Castle' actually refers to a rectangular enclosure, defined by a ditch and bank, thought to date from the Iron Age (800 BC to 42 AD), that is clearly visible on the crest of the hill behind the clump of gorse where the ponies (in my experience) were most often to be found. The site is important enough to have been designated a 'Scheduled Ancient Monument' which means it is protected under law from deliberate damage by metal detectorists etc. (I don't know if the pawing up of the ground by the ponies also counts!). This feature has never been properly excavated so its purpose remains uncertain, but a possible house platform, visible within the boundary bank, suggests it may have been a small settlement (Ref. East Sussex Historic Environment Record).

The immediate area was clearly the site of intense human activity in prehistoric times. Lookers accessing 'Castle Bank', where the ponies briefly grazed after coming off the nature reserve, will have walked over and along a 'cross-ridge dyke', another Scheduled Ancient Monument which is an earth bank, unfortunately now badly eroded in places by the footpath and farm traffic. These structures are thought to be possible boundary markers or defensive features between adjoining settlements or tribes. It is most clearly visible running along the edge of the field that lead to the ponies.

Exmoor Pony Society Show

If any of you would like to see Exmoor ponies in show condition then the South East Area Exmoor Pony Show is taking place on Sunday 19 June at Bunces Farm, Rookery Lane, Rushlake Green, Heathfield. It is being organized by our equine expert, Lisa Clarke, and starts at 9.30am. There are several classes including dressage and jumping. This is an opportunity to see what a well turned out Exmoor pony can look like (as opposed to our 'au naturel' ones).

Pony Pics on the Web

Monty has put some of his best photos of the ponies on a website for all to enjoy. To view go to www.flickr.com/photos/sussex_exmoors and also <http://rxwildlife.org.uk/author/andy/page/3> to see a video of the ponies being moved to Brakey Field in April 2008.

Brian Miles Donations

In the last Newsletter we announced that long time supporter Brian Miles, who died in December, had requested that donations be made to the Pony Trust in preference to flowers at his funeral. This realised a sum in excess of £500 which the Committee have decided to put towards the cost of producing a new information leaflet, which will be dedicated to Brian's memory.

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