

The New Forest Point to Point

by Lyndsey Stride



Boxing Day Point-to-Point from 60 years ago...the start of the children's race.
Starter Len Mansbridge and Assistant on foot Charlie Dovey. *Photo courtesy Pip Hickman.*

The New Forest Point-to-Point marks the end of the commoning year, a day when commoners come together with the wider Forest community and celebrate the Forest and its traditions. For the rest of the year commoners go about their business in a quiet and almost invisible way. Whilst seeing ponies, cattle, pigs and donkeys roaming freely is often the highlight of a visitor's trip to the New Forest, most have no idea that the animals are owned and cared for by a community of people who have been in the New Forest for a long time. Many of the ponies and their owners have family trees which stretch back over many generations. As with all communities, people come and go but the strength and heart of the place remains the same. The ponies and cattle and the commoners who own them have shaped this landscape which they know and love passionately, the flora and fauna of the New Forest are dependent on this ancient tradition continuing in to the future.

The Boxing Day races sees commoners pit their wits and their riding ponies and horses against one another. The horses and ponies they ride are their work horses, having spent the past year working on the drifts and alone to catch and observe the ponies and the cattle. The races are unique and designed to test the rider in many ways. It is a test of local knowledge; riders don't know the course until the day of the races so cannot plan their route at all. It is a test of horsemanship; both horse and rider must be at the peak of their fitness and able to cope with the uneven and changeable terrain. It is also all about family. In the youngest children's race for children' aged 10-13years the first three places went to members



of the same family, won by John Lovell on his forest bred pony Ipersbridge Whisper, closely followed by his brother Isaac on Nightingale Woodsman and cousin Honor Humble on Burley Hallmark. Six of the nine children racing were young commoners, their parents and grandparents having ridden in the same race generations before them, these same children are serving their apprenticeships on the drifts, learning from their family and the wider community how to ride on the Forest and where to be to make sure the ponies get to

the pound. Above all it is a celebration of New Forest ponies, many of the ponies in the races are bred by commoners and are born on the Forest. These ponies are intelligent, loyal and sure footed, able to carry children as young as 10 and adults as old as the hills!

The Open Race, known in commoning circles as the 'Colthunters' race is the race to win, in this year's race it was a battle of fathers and sons with Jake Moore riding Woottonheath Romeo taking the glory over his father Colin on Longslade Skipper. All of the horses in the Colthunters are New Forest part bred. Overall glory however went to Mark Adams, riding homebred Woottonheath Herbie, winner of the Heavyweight race and first over the line in front of the colt hunters. Sisters Judith Cutler and Anita Smith both won their races...Judith riding in the Veterans race on Yewtree Stroller, a part bred pony and Anita riding in the Open on Janesmoor Jasper Conran.



For some commoners the races are their reward for the days spent working hard on the drifts in the rain and cold. For others it is simply fun. What else would commoners do on Boxing Day and what would you talk about over Christmas dinner?

Photos :Lyndsey Stride apart from the presentation one taken by Kerry Dovey-Whiting

