Two Heritage grants for aspects of Forest life

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Two fundamental aspects of life in the New Forest are the subject of grants worth nearly £80,000 announced by the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF). One will study the history and work of the C, the other will look at the interwoven relationship between horses and humans.

Taken together, the two projects will shine a spotlight onto the unique communities, landscape and traditions of the area providing a wealth of information for residents, visitors and schoolchildren. Greater understanding, it is hoped, will underpin greater protection for the forest itself.

The New Forest Trust has been granted £29,130 for its project to record the memories of older New Forest Commoners whose way of life is based on the common rights that they exercise. Common rights in the Forest probably originated before the Norman Conquest and attach to private land. They include the right to graze livestock on the open forest and at present some 500 Commoners graze more than 7,000 ponies, cattle and donkeys on the New Forest throughout much of the year. Other common rights include collecting wood for fuel and the turning out of pigs during the autumn. The pigs feed on acorns which are poisonous to ponies and cattle.

Grazing has been crucial in shaping and maintaining the forest’s landscape and wildlife habitats, while commoning forms a central part of the area’s social fabric and cultural heritage. The Commoners' animals are very much part of the identity of the New Forest National Park and are one of the special qualities that are a key attraction for visitors.

A project co-ordinator will work with a team of volunteers to record reminiscences from 30 Commoners. Photographs and other information will be gathered and the material kept at the New Forest Centre and the Wessex Archive of Film and Sound.

Chairman of the New Forest Trust, Richard Manley, said: “We are very pleased to have been awarded this money by the Heritage Lottery Fund. We can now start to develop a greater understanding of the cultural background and history of commoning in the New Forest: how it has changed over past centuries and what it means to those who practice it today. We also hope to enable visitors and other Forest residents to understand how important commoning is to the survival of the place that they come to enjoy.”

The second project, which has received an HLF grant of £49,900 is Horses and Humans in History. Working with artists, filmmakers, historians and actors 45 young people with learning disabilities based at the Fortune Centre for Riding Therapy at Bransgore will take part in a project which is the brainchild of Poole-based White Lantern Film. They will create an education DVD to be distributed free to 50 schools in Hampshire and Dorset.

The relationship between horses and humans in the forest dates back many hundreds of years from the time the New Forest was created as a royal hunting ground by William I. For more than 700 years the forest was exploited by the Navy to provide timber for shipbuilding which changed the face of the landscape and the livelihoods of the Commoners. Their relationship with the land changed again during two world wars and with the technological advances since that time. At all these points the role of horses and their relationship with the human inhabitants of the Forest has altered. The project will also look at when the New Forest pony became a recognisable breed in its own right.

A key aspect of the project will include working with the local community to collect reminiscences from those that have lived and worked with horses in the forest throughout their lives. These memories will form on oral archive which, when completed, will be sent to the British Library National Sound Archives, the Screen Archive South East, and Hampshire County Council's Archives, as well as to the New Forest Museum.

For White Lantern Film, Managing Director, Adam Merrifield, said: "White Lantern Film is extremely proud to have the opportunity to run such an innovative and exciting historical project with the Heritage Lottery Fund and the Fortune Riding Centre. The New Forest is an important historical piece of land, which is tremendously important to the local community, tourists, and the south of England. We hope to engage a wide audience through the means of documentary filmmaking and enhance and educate young people as to the importance of the New Forest and the ponies that now graze the land."

Commenting on the two grants for the Heritage Lottery Fund, Head of HLF South East England, Michelle Davies said: "Taken together, these projects will illuminate fundamental aspects of traditional life and customs in a quite unique part of the country. By preserving the memories of the communities involved and disseminating these to a wider audience it is to be hoped that the way of life and the natural environment can be protected for the future."

Notes to editors

The Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) enables communities to celebrate, look after and learn more about our diverse heritage. From our great museums and historic buildings to local parks and beauty spots or recording and celebrating traditions, customs and history, HLF grants open up our nation's heritage for everyone to enjoy. Since 1994 the Heritage Lottery Fund has awarded over £378 million to more than 2,660 projects in South East England.

Further information

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