

### Sheep ban threatens ancient grazing rights

by John Bingham, social affairs editor

- 1 IT IS one of the oldest surviving commoners' rights in England, thought to date back beyond the Norman Conquest, but the custom of allowing sheep to roam free in the Forest of Dean, Gloucestershire, is set to become a crime.
- 2 Forest of Dean district council has drawn on controversial anti-social behaviour legislation to rule that anyone allowing sheep to "enter and remain" in Bream, the area's largest village, will now face a fine of up to £1,000. Introduced almost two years ago, Public Spaces Protection Orders allow councils to ban specific activities within certain areas.
- 3 But the Manifesto Club, a group that campaigns against hyper-regulation of daily life, has catalogued how the so-called "busybody's charter" is being used in some areas to outlaw lucky charms, chalk drawings, singing and even, in one case, carrying a golf bag. But if the penalties, now out for consultation, come in for Bream it is thought it will be the first time orders have been used to criminalise sheep.
- 4 After complaints of sheep nibbling rose bushes, baa-ing loudly and leaving droppings, the council set up an "Irresponsible Shepherding Scrutiny Task Group" to compile "evidence logs". However, local shepherds believe some complaints are from new arrivals in the area's "gentrification", many of whom ignore an unwritten rule to fence and gate their gardens. They fear it could spell the end of rights enjoyed for centuries which allow commoners in the "Hundreds of St Briavels" — the traditional name for the Forest of Dean — to "turn out" or graze sheep freely.
- 5 A protest is planned for Saturday.



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