



Seadown Veterinary Group

Hythe, Totton and Lymington



IMAGE: Richard Dunwoody

Staff: full-time vets 21 • registered veterinary nurses 19 • administrators and receptionists 25 • **Fees:** initial consult £37 • follow-up £30

■ The New Forest is a special corner of England with a history stretching back through the mists of time to the first Norman kings and beyond. And for almost a century, its people and animals have been served by a rather special veterinary practice too, as *VBJ* discovered when we visited Hampshire last month ...

SINCE ITS FIRST days trading from a single room behind a residential house in 1923, the practice that would become Seadown Veterinary Group has been central to life in the New Forest.

One of the largest unenclosed areas of pasture and heathland in the UK, the forest remains a unique place where ponies, cattle and the odd donkey roam free.

Dotted with smallholdings and dominated by a way of life that, in many aspects, has remained unchanged for centuries, understanding its people, animals and the natural rhythms of the place has been key for Seadown and the generations of vets

that have worked there.

Still very much a mixed practice and staunchly independent, Seadown now has three sites: the main 24-hour, RCVS-accredited hospital hub in Hythe and two branches in nearby Totton and Lymington.

It is every inch a modern business, with a turnover in excess of £3.5 million a year, but, as senior partner Bob Bentley explained, while the practice strives to be progressive and forward-thinking in its approach, nobody is allowed to forget those deep forest roots. >



IMAGE: beataaldrifige / Adobe Stock

IMAGE: Richard Dumwoody



↑ Seadown partners (from left): Peter Tunney, Kate McMorris, Bob Bentley, Anna Jennings and Gillies Moffat

↓ Equine feed room

⏏ The equine facilities were recently upgraded with a new car park, trailer turning area, trot-up area, all-weather arena and hard lunge area

"We are a very modern practice and pride ourselves on offering the latest treatments to our patients, but we are, first and foremost, a forest practice, and that is



central to our DNA," said Bob.

"This is a unique part of the world and vets from this practice have been at the heart of the community for almost 100 years, and we feel privileged to still be in that position today.

"I have been at the practice since 1983 (barring a one-year break to travel in New Zealand) and between the other four partners, we have more than 100 years' experience here. I think that speaks volumes about the continuity of the practice."

The other four partners are Kate McMorris, Peter Tunney, Gillies Moffat and Anna Jennings. A broad spread of ages and clinical interests spans the five partners, as well as a deep understanding of what makes Seadown tick.

Kate said: "I came here in 2000 from Kent. I had already completed my ophthalmology

certificate and was seeing referrals there, but I wanted to progress surgically and, as there was already an ophthalmologist here – Ian Mason – with lots of experience, I came here to develop. My plan was to learn a few things and move on, but I loved it and am still here.

"In 2003, I became a partner and took over the cataract surgery when Ian retired. I now live in the New Forest on a smallholding; we have sheep, horses, ducks, chickens and geese.

"It is just a great practice and I think the diversity among our partner team is a real strength. We have Peter and Gillies, who have equine and large animal skills. Bob does a bit of everything, and Anna and I mostly concentrate on ophthalmology referrals across species, including equine.

"There is also a good age

range among the partners, which creates a very fertile environment for finding new ideas and ways of working."

The bulk of Seadown's work is small animal, but equine (20 per cent of total) and large animal (5 per cent) still represent a significant portion of turnover. Farm closures have hit hard when it comes to cattle and sheep work, however.

Gillies said: "In the boom a few years back, an acre of land was going for £25,000 – now you might pay £40,000 an acre for horse grazing. It's no wonder that, between the struggles farmers were facing and the price of land, the guys got out. The true forest community is ageing too and they are just not getting the next generation coming through to take on those farms." But as Peter went on to explain the equine side of

↓ Stables treatment room and yard



the business remains buoyant.

He said: "A lot of the commoners keep the tradition of ponies in the forest going; it is a way of life for them. If you own a property on the forest that has 'forest rights', you are permitted to let your mares run semi-feral on the forest with the proviso you have sufficient back-up land if they have to come in. The stallions are controlled.

"Seadown has been working closely with the New Forest Pony Breeders Society, which controls and promotes the breed, for many years and has real benefits to both organisations.

"We have to make decisions together on how the breed is managed, and also advise on certain conditions and whether they need to be controlled in some way with breeding. That engenders a lot of respect in the community."

Once a year, the stallions are examined by the Verderers Panel to check they are of the right type to thrive in the forest.

Following this, they – and any other potential privately bred stallions hoping to be registered – have to pass a veterinary examination.

Seadown also attends the annual breed show over the August Bank Holiday weekend and the point-to-point on Boxing Day – the only traditional point-to-point in the country where riders, adults and escorted children race across open heathland.

But the bulk of Seadown's equine work comes from the many recreational and competition horse owners that

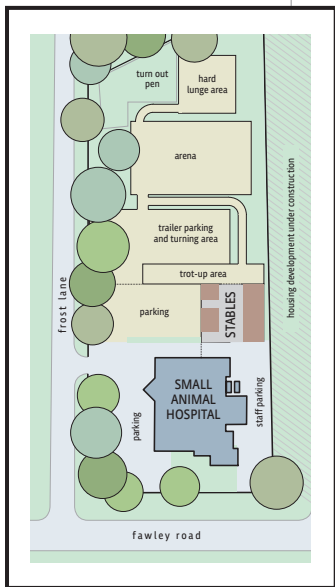


live in and around the forest.

When the nights become darker, these clients are catered for by equine-specific meetings hosted by the practice throughout the forest area. Small animal meetings are held too, but, as Gillies explained,

it is the equine events that often prove the most popular, with upwards of 200 people in attendance on occasions.

He said: "The equine client is keen to learn; they want to know more about the horse. It is a very popular leisure



SITE PLAN





↑ Reception; waiting area
with cat only area to rear

↓ Ophthalmology consult room

horse area that sustains four separate riding clubs, so it is important we are at the centre of that, and those meeting have proved to be very popular.”

To cater for its equine clients, Seadown recently completed a £160,000 upgrade of its facilities and the practice now boasts an all-weather arena, hard lunge arena, extended concrete trot up area and new car park.

Gillies added: “It was a challenge because of the gradient of that site, but

we managed to make the topography work for us in a tiered system as we were desperate for more car parking space.

“So, we moved the equine and lorry park down a level then we have used the tiers for the arenas, which meant we needed to take very little spoil off site as we just moved it down the hillside as we went. It worked very well.”

The practice has also strived to stay up to date with the latest procedures. “We have two of our vets who have gained advanced practitioner

status on the equine side, so they are always bringing in new ideas, which is just great,” added Peter.

“An example of that is using stem cell therapy for severe tendon injuries, which has proved very successful. We are also doing more standing surgery with the assistance of visiting surgeons.

“One of our vets [Laura Trigg] arranged for a surgeon to come in and do standing laryngeal surgery, which I didn’t realise was able to be done, and we did that in the treatment room.”

Client-wise, Seadown caters for a mix of London commuters, council estates and the commoners who have lived on the forest for generations. The largest oil refinery in England is also based in the area, with the Esso-owned site at Fawley a big source of employment in the region.

This disparate demographic means the vets at Seadown take a pragmatic, case-by-case approach when it comes to treatment, as Gillies explained.

He said: “It is all very good pushing for gold standard treatment, but, actually, there

is a point where you have just got to tell clients what you can do and then find out what their top end is. It sounds brutal, but that is just the way it is.

“When we saw one of our first cases of atypical myopathy that was recumbent and dysphagic, it was in a New Forest pony and that client’s bill was north of £7,000 by the time it went home. That is way, way more than the pony is worth, but the client could afford that and wanted that gold standard, but that is not always the case.

“Clients appreciate we will work with them as far as their finances are concerned. So it is vital for us to keep the client informed with exactly where they are with treatment and the cost of that treatment, and what other options are open to them. It is essential to involve them in those decisions.”

This approach means vets at Seadown pay as much attention to the prognosis as the diagnosis. Bob added: “As a profession, we do tend to get completely caught up in the diagnosis without discussing the prognosis with clients.





↑ Prep area; dispensary; laboratory; operating theatre
 ↓ Prep area

“We do all these tests to get an accurate diagnosis when, really, clients only want a prognosis. If you diagnose their dog with some bizarre disease after £5,000 of investigation, but you know at the outset the prognosis is pretty hopeless, then it is important the client is told that at the outset – regardless of whether the client is insured. We have to manage emotions, too.”

One of the things the partnership team is proud of at Seadown is the family atmosphere that pervades the practice, which, perhaps unsurprisingly, has a low rate

of staff turnover. Of the 60 staff employed, more than 50 per cent have been there for 10 years or more, something Kate believes is down to the way the practice looks after its people.

She said: “Staff turnover is good here, too, so we must be doing something right, especially in a climate where recruitment and retention is such a problem.

“One of our admin team has two daughters who work here. They came as after school helpers then joined as trainee nurses, then nurses, and they are both senior nurses. Our receptionist and her daughter work here, and there are others. We also have sisters working on the team and our longest-serving staff member, Jean, started here 52 years ago. We look after the team and that is rewarded by excellent loyalty, and the clients love that too, as it gives them continuity.”

Continuity is also important at boardroom level where the 20-year age gap between the youngest and the oldest partners illustrates a long-term approach to running the business.

Kate said: “So many independent practices end up in the hands of corporates because the partners all age together and there is no succession plan. We like to think that won’t happen here. “Anna is a good example –



she came as an assistant with an interest in ophthalmology. Her interests fitted ours as we do a lot of ophthalmology referrals, so we brought her in as a partner and she has been a wonderful addition.

“We have two types of partner here; there are the home-grown guys like Bob and Peter, and there are the guys and girls who have come in from other

practices. It’s a good mix that fosters a wonderful business with a proud and long history, and, hopefully, a bright future.”

NEW!
vbj Hear more from Bob Bentley and take a video tour of Seadown Veterinary Group by clicking on the ‘videos’ tab at www.vettimes.co.uk

