

**MINUTES OF THE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING OF THE COMMONERS OF ASHDOWN
FOREST**

Held on Friday, 1 March 2002 at 8 pm in Fairwarp Village Hall

Four of the five Commoner Conservators on the Board were present. In all, the meeting was attended by 79 people.

ITEM 1 Election of a Chairman for the meeting The Forest Superintendent asked for any nominations for Chairman of the meeting. Mr David Allen was proposed by Sir Freddie Sowrey and seconded by Mr Brian Hoath. This was agreed unanimously. Mr Allen thanked the Commoners for electing him and asked the Forest Superintendent to convene the meeting.

ITEM 2 Reading of the notice convening the meeting The Forest Superintendent read the notice convening the meeting.

ITEM 3 Apologies for absence Apologies were received from Mr LJ Gillham, Mrs S Knight, Mr T Pentith, Mr and Mrs A Crook, Mr and Mrs D Knight, Mr and Mrs M Wheeler, Mr P Cook, Mr and Mrs Clifford and Mr E Wade.

ITEM 4 Election of one Conservator

4.1 Mr Frederick J C Marshall retired by rotation and was renominated by Mr Allan White and seconded by Mrs Evelyn R Glover. There were no other nominations. The Chairman declared Mr Frederick Marshall to be elected to the Board of Conservators for a period of five years from 1 April 2002.

4.2 Mr Marshall thanked the Commoners for their support and added that over the past two years he had learnt that the management of Ashdown Forest was of a high order through careful judgement and consideration of all issues bearing in mind the 1974 Ashdown Forest Act. There were no questions.

ITEM 5 Minutes of the Annual General Meeting held on Friday 2 March 2001 The Minutes were taken as read, copies being available for all present. Approval of the Minutes was proposed by Mr Brian Hoath and seconded by Mr Henry Osborne. The meeting agreed the Minutes were a true and correct record and they were duly signed by the Chairman.

ITEM 6 Matters Arising. Mrs Lois Norton asked if many Commoners had sent in their e-mail addresses. There had been over 70 entries but some of the messages had been returned. It was agreed that the Board of Conservators' e-mail address would appear on the Forest Rate demand.

ITEM 7 Report on the proposed Forest Rate for 2002 - 2003 and on the Forest's finances.

7.1 Forest's finances for the year 2000/2001. Mr White had previously circulated a table of the Board's Income and Expenditure for 2000/01. He expanded on some of the factors which influenced the significant differences from the previous year, in particular the professional expenses which arose following the requirement of the Board of Conservators to seek legal advice for the drafting of a new licence for properties which had access across the land of Ashdown Forest following the Mortgage Lending Council's refusal to accept the old licence. He confirmed the Board's policy of only purchasing significant capital items when matched grants are available. He acknowledged the generosity of the Friends of Ashdown Forest in this matter. The Board had finished the year with a very small surplus.

7.2 Forest's finances for the year 2001/2002. The Board reviewed its current budget and drew up the estimated budget for the following year each November. This year the Board had been faced with a potential deficit of £17,000 with more in 2002/03. There were two major influencing factors; the decision by HM Customs and Excise to change the VAT status of the Board which meant that only a small

proportion of the Input VAT could be reclaimed and the proposed 10% cut in the grant from East Sussex County Council. The Board had recognised the need to raise as much as possible from its own resources and had reviewed all charges. A significant rise in Licence preparation fees, riding permits and other sources of sundry income had already been agreed.

7.2 Forest Rate 2002/2003

7.2.1 Mr White asked the Commoners to agree an increase in the Forest Rate commensurate with the Retail Price Index plus 1% as had been agreed in past years to help the Conservators finance the work of maintenance of the Forest. The Department of the Environment had authorised the increase. Acceptance of the increase of 2.7% in the Forest Rate for 2002 - 2003 was proposed by Mrs Mulady and seconded by Mr Peter Gardiner. The meeting agreed unanimously.

7.2.2 Mr Allan White asked the Commoners present to consider a one-off increase in the Forest Rate of 30% next year. Any increase would have to be authorised by DEFRA. A general discussion followed when other sources of income from visitors to the Forest were explored. Mr White confirmed that the Forest Superintendent would be writing to the Parish Councils which bordered the Forest inviting them to contribute and a feasibility study of the introduction of car parking charges had begun. On a show of hands, the majority of the meeting agreed that an increase in the Forest Rate should be considered.

ITEM 8 Report by the Chairman of the Board of Conservators

8.1 Mr Ray Parsons, who was appointed to the Board of Conservators by Wealden District Council and was elected as Chairman last April, commented on the support given to the Forest by the Board, the Commoners and the Friends, all of whom support its maintenance and conservation. He reminded the meeting that the Chairman of the County Council sat on the Board as the Lord of the Manor. All the local authority councillors are appointed to the Board but the Commoners have five elected members who are, therefore, a close link to the electorate. The five Commoner Conservators recently had a meeting to discuss their concern over the funding from East Sussex County Council which, as a proportion of income, had been gradually reduced over the years. Their views will be considered by the Board at its next meeting.

8.2 Last year had been difficult for the Commoners as they had been deprived of their Rights during the Foot and Mouth Disease closure of the Forest and subsequent rulings; those Commoners cutting their estovers had been allowed to complete their cut in October but it had taken some weeks and much paperwork before for the graziers could turn out their stock and then at the end of the season, remove them from the Forest. Other problems had been travellers, garden waste dumping, fly-tipping and abandoned cars and Mr Parsons asked the Commoners to help the Rangers by reporting to them any suspicious activity.

8.3 Mr Parsons acknowledged that the year ahead would be difficult financially. The Board would continue to look for additional or replaced income. Among proposals to be considered is the introduction of car park charges. Although reductions in expenditure would be sought, there would be little opportunity to make cuts. The prime aim would be to continue with the conservation and maintenance of Ashdown Forest and the support of the Commoners was crucial.

ITEM 9 Report by the Forest Superintendent on Forest matters

9.1 With the aid of slides, the Superintendent illustrated some of the work that had been carried out on the Forest during the past year. The Rousseau grinder had cleared many hectares of scrub at a fraction of the cost of a contractor would charge. The benefits from grazing could be seen with the improved vigour of heathland plants such as the Marsh gentian and the reappearance on the cleared land of birds such as the wood lark and plover. The lengthening bird nesting season has meant that the heavy winter work has to be carried out in all weathers between October and February often with localised damage to firebreaks. Repairs could always be carried out in the summer if necessary.

9.2 Foot and Mouth Disease The impact of the closure of the Forest and delayed reintroduction of grazing had set back the heathland restoration programme. The 100 acre site fenced in the Misbourne valley had enabled some stock to be turned out while excluding the general public and this same site had been used to carry out a trial of winter grazing this year. However, the fence would be removed this summer, weather permitting.

9.3 Vegetation Survey Ranger Chris Marrable had completed the survey. The Global Positioning System used had helped to produce an extremely accurate and detailed record which would prove an invaluable management tool.

9.4 Questions arising from Items 8 & 9

9.4.1 County Councillors Mrs Norton asked if the County Councillors had a conflict of interest when sitting on the Board. Mr Parsons confirmed that Councillors were not mandated to speak as Councillors on the Board, rather were required by the Ashdown Forest Act to put the interests of the Forest first. Under the new local authority legislation, the County Council had chosen a structure which gave a portfolio holder sole authority to determine the expenditure. Councillors had to declare an interest, particularly when they stood to make a financial loss or gain.

9.4.2 Forest Rate Mr Gair did not support the proposed 30% increase in the Forest Rate. He asked if people could become commoners. Mr Parsons replied that the 1965 Commons Registration Act did not allow this but he was aware that a number of property owners would like a closer association with Ashdown Forest beyond the Friends. Mrs Glover reminded the meeting that Commoners' Rights were attached to the land.

9.4.3 Car Parking Concern was expressed that the introduction of car park charges would result in the roadsides becoming blocked with parked cars, as had been the case before car parks were introduced.

9.4.4 Riding Fees Mrs O'Grady recognised the need for the increase in permit fees but she hoped some of the income would be spent on improving the rides for winter.

9.4.5 Grazing The Forest Superintendent confirmed that an assessment of the success of the reintroduction of grazing would be carried out by English Nature as an independent expert. The intention was to review the situation every five years. Mr Osborne asked that householders who lived in the grazing area should be particularly vigilant over the disposal of garden waste. Many garden plants are extremely toxic, particularly when dried. This was confirmed by Mr Glyn.

ITEM 10 Any other business

10.1 Sheep worrying Mr Osborne asked for support in keeping a neighbourly watch for dogs worrying sheep.

ITEM 11 After some discussion about the possibility of moving the date of the Annual General Meeting, it was confirmed by Mr White that the 1974 Ashdown Forest Act states "The election of one person to take the place of the elected Conservator going out of office on 31 March in any year shall be held by the Commoners at a meeting to be held in that month". As a result the next Annual General Meeting will have to be held at 8 pm on Friday, 7 March 2003 in Nutley Memorial Hall. There being no further questions, the meeting closed at 10.00 pm.

Chairman _____

