

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

**Held on Friday, 7 March 2003 at 8 pm in Nutley Memorial Hall**

All five Commoner Conservators on the Board were present and the meeting was attended by 72 Commoners.

**ITEM 1 Election of a Chairman for the meeting** The Forest Superintendent opened the meeting and apologised for any confusion caused by the discrepancy between the meeting start time shown on the Forest Rate demand and that advertised in the Public Notices. He then asked for any nominations for Chairman of the meeting. Mr Gardner was the sole nominee and was unanimously elected. Mr Gardner 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 P Henry and Mr T Pentith and Mr Taylor.

**ITEM 4 Election of one Conservator**

4.1 The Forest Superintendent announced that Mr Alan White had retired by rotation and had been re-nominated by Mr Leslie Gillham and seconded by Mr Philip Glyn. There were no other nominations. The Chairman declared Mr Alan White to be elected to the Board of Conservators for a period of five years from 1 April 2003.

4.2 Mr White thanked the Commoners for their support and added that, with all the changes in hand, he hoped to offer a degree of continuity. There were no questions.

**ITEM 5 Minutes of the Annual General Meeting held on Friday 1 March 2002** 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.** There were no matters arising.

**ITEM 7 Report on the proposed Forest Rate for 2003 - 2004 and on the Forest's finances.**

7.1 Forest's finances for the year 2001/2002 and 2002/2003. Mr White had previously circulated a table of the Board's Income and Expenditure which showed audited figures for 2001/2002 and the figures for FY 2002/2003 to the end of February. He expanded on some of the significant differences, particularly the 15% drop in the number of Riding Permits and the sharp increase in Sundry Income, largely due to the introduction of the Perpetual Licence. He acknowledged the generosity of the Friends of Ashdown Forest for their purchase of capital items. The Board hoped to finish the year with a small surplus but he anticipated a deficit over the next three years.

## 7.2 Forest Rate 2003/2004

7.2.1 Mr White informed the meeting that following the resolution passed at last year's AGM, the Board of Conservators proposed an increase in the Forest Rate of 30%. This increase had been agreed by the Secretary of State at the Department of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to be effective from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2003. It was anticipated that such an increase will not be sought again for some time.

7.2.2 There was a brief discussion over the feasibility of changing the end of the Board's financial year so that it coincided with the calendar year. It was pointed out to the meeting that the Ashdown Forest Act required a meeting to be held by Commoners in March for the election of a Conservator, and the Act also specifies that the Board's year should begin on 1<sup>st</sup> April. Historically the Board have worked to the County Council's financial year as they are the principle source of funding for the Board. However, any member of the public may see the audited accounts and question the auditors at the time of the audit. The audit dates are advertised as public notices in the local press.

7.2.3 In response to a question over the amount held in the deposit accounts, the Forest Superintendent explained that it was the policy of the Board to hold a reserve of 6 months running costs.

7.2.4 Although not a financial matter considerable disquiet was expressed by a small number of Commoners over the state of the fire breaks after contractors had been clearing scrub in two separate areas. Mr Gillham explained that, given the conservation designations of the Forest, the scrub clearance work had to be done between October and the end of February, despite the weather conditions. He stressed that the work across the Forest was done on a cyclical basis which meant that only a very small part of the 81 miles of tracks were affected each year and that most sections recovered by the summer. Badly rutted fire breaks could be harrowed to reduce the ruts when the weather improved.

7.2.5 Although it was acknowledged that the Commoners could not influence the setting of the Forest Rate, Mr Brown proposed that the increase be approved and Mr Peter Stevenson seconded the motion. The meeting agreed that the Forest Rate should be increased by 30%. There were 6 against the motion.

## **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 to the Board in April 2001, acknowledged his appreciation for the support given by the Commoner Conservators: Mr Philip Glyn as Vice Chairman of the Board, Mr Leslie Gillham as Chairman of the Conservation Committee and Mr Alan White as Chairman of the Finance and General Purposes Committee. Mr Fred Marshall and Mrs Janet Wirdnam's local knowledge and expertise made them both invaluable members of the Conservation and Roads Planning and Amenities Committees.

8.2 During the year the Forest had received official visits from the Lord Lieutenant and the High Sheriff. Both expressed a great interest in and support for the Forest.

8.3 The Board's chief concern during the year had been the Forest's finances. The reduced grant from East Sussex County Council was crucial. The Board had looked for cost savings but there was little scope given the ring-fenced nature of much of the income. Some windfalls, in particular the increase in the BT wayleave payment, had prevented debit finances. The contribution made by the Commoners was very much appreciated.

8.4 The Board had continued to investigate the feasibility of introducing car park charges on the Forest. There was a wide difference in opinion and the results of a consultation exercise with the major bodies who have an interest in the Forest were ambivalent: the need can be seen but does it fit? The Board also felt ambivalent and felt it had to be persuaded that the introduction of charges would be the right course.

8.5 Mr Parsons then introduced Dr Hew Prendergast who had been appointed to be the new Forest Superintendent when Brig. Constantine retired. He wished him well in his new post and then thanked the Commoners for their contribution and constructive comments.

#### **ITEM 9 Report by the Forest Superintendent on Forest matters**

9.1 With the aid of slides, the Superintendent illustrated the effectiveness of the scrub clearance programme that had been carried out in the Misbourne Valley over the last few years. He spoke of the recovery of 165 acres of the west Chase following a large fire last spring, and showed slides of one or two problem areas including the pond and dam at Old Lodge Bottom and the fence line at Kings Standing which had been broken by seven separate car accidents since it was erected. He mentioned some of the fly tipping incidents and the dumping of two pigs, which ended up having to be shot as a result of the movement restrictions introduced following the 'Foot and Mouth' problems. Finally, he showed slides of an exotic fungus which had appeared on the South Chase, *Clathrus archeri*, a starfish shaped fungi that exudes a sticky foul smelling substance to catch blow flies which it digests and originated in the Far East..

9.2 The Superintendent thanked the Commoners for their support over the years.

9.3 There were no questions.

#### **ITEM 10 Any other business**

10.1 Mr Philip Glyn thanked Brigadier Constantine on behalf of the Commoners for his excellent work and contribution to the management of the Forest during his time as Forest Superintendent and wished him well in his retirement. The Commoners spontaneously showed their appreciation.

**ITEM 11 Date of Next Meeting** It was agreed to hold the next meeting on 5 March 2004 at Forest Row Village Hall at 8pm.

Chairman \_\_\_\_\_

5 March 2004