

**MINUTES OF THE ANNUAL MEETING OF THE COMMONERS OF ASHDOWN
FOREST HELD AT FAIRWARP VILLAGE HALL ON FRIDAY 3 MARCH 2006 AT 8 PM**

All Commoner Conservators were present Mr Philip Glyn (Chairman), Mr Leslie Gillham, Mr Fred Marshall, Mr Alan White and Mrs Janet Wirdnam. Approximately 97 Commoners attended

- 1. Election of a Chairman for the Meeting** The Clerk to the Conservators opened the meeting and asked for nominations for a Chairman of the meeting. Mr Robert Watson was proposed by Mr Guy Hardy and seconded by Mr Douglas Campbell. He was unanimously elected.
- 2. Reading of the Notice Convening the Meeting** The Clerk to the Conservators read the notice convening the meeting.
- 3. Apologies for Absence** Apologies were received from Mr Eric Wade and Mrs Rosie Glover.
- 4. Election of two Conservators** The Clerk to the Conservators announced that Mrs Janet Wirdnam was retiring by rotation and that Mr Alan White was resigning. The Chairman explained that it was necessary for two separate ballots – one to select a Conservator to replace Mrs Wirdnam for a five year term and the second to select a Conservator to replace Mr White for the remaining two year period, both to run from 1 April 2006. He requested nominations. Two nominations were received for the five year term: Mr John Spicer and Mr Rupert Thornely-Taylor. Both candidates were invited to address the meeting following which Commoners were invited to vote using the ballot papers provided. The papers were collected and counted by Ranger Roger Beal. Mr John Spicer was elected 39 to 28 votes. Two nominations were received for the two year term: Mr Thornely-Taylor and Mrs Wirdnam. Mrs Wirdnam was invited to address the meeting following which Commoners were invited to vote using the ballot papers provided. The papers were collected and counted by Ranger Roger Beal. Mr Thornely-Taylor was elected 39 to 28 votes. The Chairman thanked Mrs Wirdnam for her hard work and love of the Forest and stated she would be missed.
- 5. Minutes of the Annual Meeting held on Friday 4 March 2005** The Minutes were taken as read, copies being available for all present. They were proposed by Mrs Moira Evans and seconded by Mr David Allen and adopted as a true and correct record and signed by the Chairman.
- 6. Matters Arising** Mr John Spicer stated he felt it was discourteous of the Conservators to pass resolutions at Board Meetings and not pass information onto the Commoners with particular reference to the horse riding permit discount to the Commoners which had been abandoned. Mr Philip Glyn stated that he felt that this was a mistake and apologised to the Commoners. Dr H Aitken asked when abbreviated copies of the Forest Bye-Laws would be displayed on the Forest with particular reference to cycling. Dr Hew Prendergast stated that this was in hand, but as it would be displayed in 50 car parks it was important to get it right. He was expecting a second draft this month and he stated that new signage would be in place within twelve months. Mrs Cleone Stenhouse commented that even AFRA was unaware of the discontinuation of the discount to Commoners in respect of the riding permit. Mr Glyn apologised again and stated that as an individual he shared her disappointment that the Board did not communicate the decision to the Commoners, but as the discount was more than the Forest Rate the Board felt that it had to be rectified. Mr Eddy Watters stated that he considered it would be an unpopular decision and that that was the reason why it was not made known. Mr Douglas Campbell raised the issue of deer being killed on the Forest roads and he asked what was the cost of cutting back the verges. Dr Hew Prendergast said the answer is somewhat like 'a length of a piece of string' depending on the size and density of trees. He gave examples of quotes for a 2 m wide, 550 m long roadside verge in a nature reserve elsewhere in Sussex which ranged from £600 to £2,495. The Forest obtained a similar spread of quotes for tree clearance between Wych Cross and the Goat crossroads in 2005 ranging from £1,880 to £6,000 (Ex VAT). Large individual trees elsewhere were quoted at £760 each (ex VAT).

7. Report on the Proposed Forest Rate for 2006 – 2007 Mr Alan White explained the Income and Expenditure for 2004 – 2005 as shown on the reverse of the Agenda. The increase in the Forest Rate as approved by the Secretary of State of 3.7% was proposed by Mr Brian Mead and seconded by Dr H Aitken. It was unanimously endorsed. Mr John Spicer asked the question where in the accounts were the monies paid to Mr Henry Osborne for keeping sheep on the Forest. Mr Alan White confirmed that this money was included within the ‘Stewardship Schemes’, was received as a subsidy and paid over to Mr Osborne.

8. Report by the Chairman of the Board of Conservators Mr Philip Glyn started by welcoming everyone to the meeting and paying tribute to Mr Alan White and Mrs Janet Wirdnam, the two outgoing Conservators. Mr Glyn gave his report aided by slides with projected information. He themed his report on the history of the Ashdown Forest illustrating 800 years of grazing and the subsequent need for fencing as a protection for the animals against traffic. He stated historically that the Conservators have been reluctant to fence and it has always been their aim to persuade the County Council to introduce traffic calming measures. He stated that after the installation of fencing, by 1998 the number of animals grazing the Forest had built up to 900 sheep and 100 cattle with five different commoners exercising their grazing rights. In 2005 there was only one Commoner grazier. In 2004 English Nature published the ‘Ashdown Forest Grazing Action Plan’ stating that the Forest exists only because of grazing over past centuries. He stated we must ask ourselves ‘what is the most effective and sustainable management system in the long-term, taking into consideration economic, ecological and recreational considerations’. He noted that there was no automatic conflict between conservation and recreation and with no management, whole areas would become impenetrable scrub leaving walkers and riders without views. The need for Rangers is to enforce bye-laws and protect boundaries. The Board is not seeking to encourage more visitors, but simply to get a higher proportion of the current visitors to come to the Centre.

9. Report by the Clerk to the Conservators on Forest matters Mr Douglas Campbell proposed that this report be omitted from the meeting due to lack of time for Commoners’ questions. The Chairman asked the meeting for a show of hands in favour of the proposal which resulted in the majority in favour of adhering to the Agenda.

Dr Hew Prendergast spoke about recent work looking after the Forest for residents and visitors. Staff had already this year spent 23 days picking up roadside litter in addition to fly-tipping that continues to bedevil the area. By far the biggest incident took place in December when an estimated 60 tons of spoil were dumped on the Forest near Forest Row. Now at the height of the fire season it was apposite that a training exercise for East Sussex Fire and Rescue Service (ESFRS) took place in late February below Roman Road car park. The Conservators have been further involved with ESFRS and Sussex Police in reducing crime, especially in car parks and with them and representatives of the six Forest Parishes on an initiative to reduce speeding on Forest roads to be launched on 16 May 2006 at 10.00 am at the Forest Centre. Reported deer casualties so far this year have reached unprecedented levels. The 63 in January alone were close to the annual figure for the mid 1990s. He said the 24/7 service for the Forest area provided by Forest Rangers, one of the best in the country, is provided without charge. He said that a lot of information had been gathered from visitors and residents of the Forest. Unsurprisingly walking, open spaces and views are valued highly, as is Pooh – which was the second greatest draw. Visitor surveys showed an unexpectedly large proportion in favour of extending grazing and objections to sensitively designed fencing were shown to be relatively low. He reported that after public consultation, an interpretation strategy was published in 2005 by the High Weald Unit. The mission statement arising was ‘over the next five years we will use interpretation to capture the magic of Ashdown Forest to foster understanding and responsible enjoyment of this special area’. The three themes of the strategy are based on the long history of the Forest, the need to manage and protect it and the irreplaceability of its heathland. At the Forest Centre a highly successful fungi identification day took place during the October half-term. The E H Shepard exhibition drew an extra 5,000 visitors and 250 Commoners, Forest residents and Friends attended the opening of an exhibition of Forest

maps and photographs showing the enormous change in the Forest largely due to the cessation of grazing by Commoners' livestock. Dr Prendergast reported that it was recognised that the Centre had many shortcomings and that the Conservators had appointed a Consultant to prepare a business plan for its re-development. Alongside this there has been a bid to the Heritage Lottery Fund to upgrade interpretation and bring in educational activities. Finally, Dr Prendergast spoke about the ongoing effort to improve the signage on the Forest.

10. The Chairman thanked the Chairman of the Conservators and Clerk to the Conservators for their reports and opened the floor for questions.

Mr Douglas Campbell asked about the barn, the cost and who would benefit from it. Dr Hew Prendergast replied that the cost was £80,000 and that it would be used by the graziers. Mrs Cleone Stenhouse enquired how much the grazier Mr Henry Osborne was being paid. Dr Prendergast replied that the headage payment from Defra's Countryside Stewardship Scheme is £10,000 p.a. for 1,000 sheep and 100 cattle. Mr Jack Hutchings voiced concerns about damage by vehicles. Mr Leslie Gillham replied that there was 136 km (86 miles) of rides on the Forest and only a very small proportion are used by vehicles. Dr Prendergast stated that the only time the contractors are permitted to work on the Forest is during the winter and if the weather is unfavourable they just have to get on with it. He asked the meeting to let him know where the damage is. Mrs Molly Smith expressed concerns of many wives present that in the absence of their husbands they were unable to vote. Dr Prendergast replied that it was a statutory duty for each household to nominate a person to vote. Mr Edward Stenhouse asked for more information in respect of the SSSI and commented that we would be hoisted by our own petard. Mr Glyn replied that it was not the Conservators who asked for the Forest to be declared a SSSI, but English Nature and we, therefore, have a statutory duty to comply with the requirements. Mr Stenhouse enquired about the proposals for an enlarged visitors' centre. He was aware that money had already been spent on consultants' fees and he felt that the minutes should reflect what is going on. Mr Leslie Gillham stated that he shared the scepticism and would wait for the report, in particular to see demonstration for the demand for an extended Centre. Mr Eddy Watters voiced concern about whether it was necessary in the grazed fenced areas to mow twice a year. Mr Glyn replied that the gorse is very persistent and to mow twice a year was better than overgrazing. Mrs Stenhouse commented that was it worth encouraging heather on the forest as she understood it grew prolifically in wet not dry conditions. Mr Glyn replied that there are two species of heather, one which indeed grows well in wet conditions and the other well in dry conditions as on the Forest.

11. Any Other Business Mr Douglas Campbell proposed that due to lack of time for the Commoners' questions that in future the annual meetings be started earlier at 7.00 pm. The Chairman asked for a show of hands and as a result it was declared that the next meeting would start at 7.30 pm.

There being no other business the meeting was closed at 9.50 pm

12. Date of the Next Meeting It was agreed to hold the next meeting at 7.30 pm on Friday 2 March 2007 at Nutley Memorial Hall.

Signed

Chairman

2 March 2007