

MINUTES OF THE ANNUAL MEETING OF THE COMMONERS OF ASHDOWN FOREST

Nutley War Memorial Hall, Friday 2 March 2007

All commoner elected Conservators were present: Mr Philip Glyn (Chairman), Mr Leslie Gillham, Mr Fred Marshall, Mr John Spicer, Mr Rupert Thornely-Taylor. There were 101 Commoners present.

1. **Election of a Chairman for the Meeting** The Clerk to the Conservators, Dr Hew Prendergast, opened the meeting and asked for nominations for a Chairman of the meeting. Mr William King was proposed by Mr Guy Hardy and seconded by Mr Alan White. He was elected.

2. **Approval of the Agenda** Mrs Maureen Watson asked why there was no item for reports by the Chairman of the Board of Conservators and the Clerk to the Conservators. Mr Glyn replied that the elected Conservators, responding to last year's meeting, wished to give the Commoners more time for questions. The draft agenda was approved by a show of hands.

3. **Reading of the Notice Convening the Meeting** It was agreed that the notice convening the meeting should be taken as read.

4. **Apologies for Absence** Apologies were received from Mrs Ann Turner and Mrs Rosie Glover.

5. **Election of one Conservator** The Clerk to the Conservators announced that Mr Fred Marshall was retiring by rotation. Two nominations were received: Maj. Edward H Stenhouse (Commoner) and Mr Roger R Street (non Commoner). Both candidates were invited to address the meeting following which Mr Richard Baldwin and Mrs Janet Wirdnam posed a question to both Candidates to which they replied. Commoners were invited to vote using the ballot papers provided which were collected and counted by Ranger Roger Beal. At a request from the floor, the Conservators present introduced themselves.

6. **Minutes of the Annual Meeting held on Friday 3 March 2006** were taken as read, copies being available for all present. They were proposed by Mr Alan White and seconded by Mr Philip Glyn and adopted as a true and correct record and signed by the Chairman.

7. **Matters Arising** There were no matters arising.

8. **Result of the Election** Maj. Stenhouse was elected by 56 votes to 17 for a term of five years from 1 April 2007. There were two spoilt papers.

9. **Report on the proposed Forest Rate for 2007/2008** Mr Thornely-Taylor stated that the Forest Rate for the coming year was proposed at an increase of 4.6%; it had been submitted to the Secretary of State but not finally approved. He suggested that, if there was a wish by the meeting for a change in the traditional RPI +1% increase, that could be done for next year.

10. **Questions and Any Other Business** a) Mrs Moira Evans asked how much the Riding Permits would cost for the year starting 1 April 2007 and whether there would be a half year permit. Dr Prendergast replied that the adult rate would increase to £85 and child rate to £42.50 and confirmed that there would be a half yearly permit. Mr Glyn pointed out that Commoner representations to the Conservators had been helpful in re-establishing the half yearly permit. It was commented that a bye-law stated that Commoners had the right to ride a mill horse over the Forest. Dr Prendergast replied that there was a right to graze a mill horse on the Forest but it applied only to Commoners who owned 50 acres or more of commonable land. Mrs Rosemary Hammond said that she owned five acres but had such a right.

b) There was an enquiry about the fact that the new Ashdown Forest signs did not state anything about livestock and whether that was a Board decision. Dr Prendergast replied that the reason for the new signs was manifold – of the old signs one was missing (at Poundgate), others were in bad condition and all were

very large and contained misleading information. He commented that the old signs were very large (6' x 5'), with too much information, some of it misleading, that was difficult to take in from a passing vehicle. The deer warning symbols on them were a fraction of the size of the standard Highways ones. Mr Henry Osborne was concerned that there were no sheep warning signs and he stated that the old signs which were removed said beware of sheep, deer and horses for 6 miles and riding not allowed without a permit. He further stated that people need to know this. Dr Prendergast stated that Highways were soon to install new deer signs. Mrs Chris White commented that we did not need to be told what was on the Forest and that we were all aware it was heathland. Mrs Cindy Smith stated she felt the old signs were very imposing and brilliant and disagreed that there was too much information – they gave an idea what was on the Forest and she disliked the sanitised 'country park' new signs. Dr Prendergast replied that the old signs did not work and that there would be new sheep signs before livestock were put out on the Forest. Mr Dave Flinton stated that the new signs did not mention mountain bikes. Dr Prendergast replied that there were other signs for this. Mr Tony Grubb added his voice to the dissent and stated that he liked the more traditional signs. The chairman asked for a show of hands about contentment with the signs and a majority showed they were not content.

c) Mr Andrew Hawker asked about the speeding problem on the Forest roads and wanted to know what influence the Board had over the Highways authority. Dr Prendergast suggested that those Commoners who had not already committed themselves to the 40 mile an hour speed limit take home a leaflet and sign up to the scheme. Following East Sussex County Council and the Board's concern over speeding two years ago, an initiative, the Ashdown Forest Villages Road Safety Partnership, was launched last May 2006 with the Sussex Police, Sussex Fire and Rescue Service and the six local Parish Councils. A leaflet was produced and volunteers manned speed indicator devices over a three week period, recording speed and measuring the impact of the campaign. Average speeds were reduced by a few miles per hour. Next month there will be a similar campaign. Mrs June Turner asked whether the speed limit on the more minor Forest roads could be reduced further. Dr Prendergast replied that this could only be done through the County Council Highways Authority. The Chairman informed the meeting that the County Council had a four year survey under way, which would assess all roads for their appropriate limits; country roads and lanes would be low on the hierarchy of assessment; changes were unlikely until the survey was complete.

d) Mr Alan White commented about the make-up of the Board of Conservators, stating that he thought there were nine representatives from the County Council. He stated that in 1974 the County Council was the major contributor of finance for the Forest, but as their contribution had fallen to below £100,000, 10% at most, he felt that the Parish Councils should also be represented. Mr Glyn thanked Mr White for his interesting point and commented that he had discussed this with Cllr John Barnes from the ESCC, reminding him that the 1974 Act allowed for the ESCC appointment to the Board of non-County Councillors. His view was that there should be another mechanism by which Parish Council liaison committees should be sought whereby Conservators would talk to Parish Councils; this had been accepted at a recent committee and awaited Board approval.

e) Mr Douglas Campbell asked a question about 3KQ engagement and wanted to know how much it had cost to date and what it had achieved. Dr Prendergast stated that 3KQ costs were up to £750.00 per day per person and that the last stakeholders meeting would have cost about £2,150.00. He went on to say that the process had just started. Following the first Stakeholders Meeting in January this year, there would be side meetings to take forward issues that had been highlighted. The eventual product of this process would be a Forest Plan. 3KQ had enormous expertise in the field of involving public opinion. Mr Glyn commented that it was a dynamic process to establish an acceptable way forward that could give everyone a say and a view on how to manage the Forest. Mr Hardy asked how certain could we be next year about the success with this perception of Blairite-type consultation. Maj. Stenhouse commented that he did not believe we achieved very much and that the stakeholders were not told about the scope of the process and that there was to be a Forest Plan. It was not a good start. Mr Glyn replied that the first meeting's aim had been to hear the range of views and identify the types of people's opinions, not to generate a specific Plan. The next meeting, planned for June, will develop this process. Mr David Allen

commented that it was an expensive process and not one to continue and hoped that there was a sensible cessation date. Mr Smith asked whether the stakeholders meetings were open meetings. Mr Glyn replied that this was not an open-ended financial commitment and at the moment participants were by invitation and if Mr Smith would like to be invited he was most welcome to approach 3KQ.

f) Mrs Mary O'Grady asked a question about public consultation and suggested it was only undertaken because HLS (Higher Level Stewardship) obliged the Board to go down that route. Mr Glyn answered that the Board had strongly wished for such a level of involvement by interested parties for many years but only now had received adequate funding for it via HLS.

g) Mrs Sue Barr stated that trees were being cut down but debris and mess not tidied. Dr Prendergast said he was aware that tree felling made a mess but that it can be done only at this time of year. The tree cutting process had not been finished and sites would be re-visited when weather was drier and repairs to ruts would be carried out. Mr Jack Hutchings commented that the state of the Forest was a disgrace. Ruts and rides over the whole Forest were deep mud and were never repaired. Mr Leslie Gillham replied that he walked on the Forest every week and could not recognise that description. He agreed that there was localised damage and that that was justifiable if we were to conserve the heathland. We achieved SSSI status because of our heathland and local properties were more valuable because of our heathland. We initially had complaints when we cleared the Misbourne Valley but we did not have any complaints now. We were going to cut down trees and make the sites muddy; if we were doing our job trees had to be cut down. Mrs Wallis said that nobody minded heathland but it was being extended. Mr Gillham replied that people walk on the heathland, so rolling back the scrub was increasing the amenity value for people. Mrs Wallis further commented that residents were not asked what they want and it was a shock for residents who live deep in the Forest and felt it was absolutely appalling.

h) Mr Guy Hardy asked about the land on the other side of Poundgate Road below Kings Standing, which was always high in heather, and suggested that this should have been in the fenced area. Mr Gillham replied that this area was considered but that Misbourne Valley was included because of the logistics of having a grazier in that area; his ideal would be one big fence around the whole of the Forest but felt that, due to traffic speeds in some areas, this was not feasible. Maj. Stenhouse stated that he thought the Board should remember that they have the Act to conform to. Cutting down trees contributed to global warming and was also contributing to flood risk in Uckfield and increasing traffic noise. Mr Glyn replied that it was a myth about increasing global warming by removing trees on heathland; tree invasion would dry out wet heath permitting production of methane, a much worse greenhouse gas.

i) Mrs Christine Robinson asked what was to be done about rhododendrons that had grown up after diggers had been used against them. Dr Prendergast replied that for some years on the Forest rhododendrons had been cut down with difficulty by volunteers; a grant had been obtained from the Forestry Commission that allowed hiring of contractors for mechanical removal. Ranger Michael Yates confirmed that in the first or second summer after mechanical cutting or removal, herbicides would be used.

j) Mr Dave Flinton commented that if the trees were left unmanaged they would encroach on the heathland. Dr Prendergast agreed that if no work was done, heathland would disappear. Vegetation surveys show that between 1965 and 1995 the extent of woodland on the Forest had increased by 1,000 acres, at the 'expense' of heathland. It was not difficult to estimate the rate of loss of heathland if no management was carried out.

k) Mrs Tamsin Timson asked whether it was true that the Rangers were no longer shooting injured deer on the Forest and asked if this was a new policy by Conservators. Dr Prendergast replied that this was untrue, subject to geographical limits (i.e. deer were not dealt with at all beyond a certain distance from the Forest). Mr Richard Baldwin stated that deer culling was carried out on the New Forest and asked why it was not done on the Forest. Mr Fred Marshall replied that the New Forest was an unfragmented area, unlike Ashdown Forest and therefore culling deer by shooting was viable. Ashdown Forest he described

as a shell around a privately owned yolk. The deer move out from there to feed, often at rush-hour times. Additional deer populations had become established on the outside of the Forest. We were not able to control deer on privately owned land. The Forest was not a safe area for using high velocity rifles. Land-owners had the right not to cull. There was a tremendous herd of fallow deer, with roe and muntjac deer increasing also. He was asked whether the Conservators had ever asked private land-owners whether they could cull on their land. Dr Prendergast stated that in May 2006 the Ashdown Forest Area Deer Group was formed and had held three meetings so far. The aim was to reduce deer casualties and maintain a healthy, viable deer population. Although the 'cull' on the roads was known, we did not know how many deer were culled on privately owned land. He agreed that everyone was appalled by the carnage. Mr Glyn thanked the Rangers for their diligence in the often thankless task of turning out at all hours to attend to injured deer and this was supported by the meeting.

l) Mrs Garrett commented that although the lack of communication by the Conservators was discussed last year, nothing had been done and could the meeting now have the assurances of the Board that this would improve. Mr Glyn replied that the public were now admitted to all committee and Board Meetings and were given ten minutes for submissions at the beginning of each. The dates of the meetings were publicised on the Forest web site. Mrs Garrett felt that communication through the web site was not a sufficient means of communication. Mr Glyn commented there was a bi-annual newsletter Ashdown Forest Life, distributed to all volunteers and also available to anyone who asked the Centre for a copy. Dr Prendergast further commented that, as well as going to ca 130 volunteers, it was also distributed in local shops, libraries, council offices etc. The next newsletter was being produced now and would be distributed to every Forest resident, although this would be a costly exercise. Mrs Chris White asked Dr Prendergast why it had to be on glossy paper. He replied that he felt that a plain paper version would not attract attention in the first place and would likely be quickly discarded afterwards. Mr Peter Stevenson asked whether it would be an option to use email. Dr Prendergast said that there were difficulties maintaining a large email list but this was certainly an idea worth considering.

m) Mr Glyn returned to the subject of the HLS main objectives. He felt that there was unjustified fear of the effects of HLS which replaced the original task- and site-specific Countryside Stewardship Schemes. The main objective of HLS was to get the Forest heathland into 'favourable' condition by 2010. He further stated that HLS funding was an enormous opportunity to get this beautiful area back to heathland, to roll back the tide of many years of non-grazing and leave behind heathland for our children. If it was not for the heathland this area would be under roads and housing. This heathland was our protection against development and we were the appointed managers.

n) Mr David Cornwell thanked Mr King for his efficient and effective chairmanship and this was supported by the meeting.

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

11. Date of the Next Meeting It was agreed to hold the next meeting at 7.30 pm on Friday 7 March 2008 at Forest Row Village Hall.

Signed
Chairman 7 March 2008