

MINUTES OF THE ANNUAL MEETING OF THE COMMONERS OF ASHDOWN FOREST

Forest Row Village Hall on Friday, 7 March 2008 at 7.30pm

All commoner elected Conservators were present: Mr Leslie Gillham, Mr Philip Glyn, Mr John Spicer, Mr Edward Stenhouse and Mr Rupert Thornely-Taylor. Cllr John Barnes attended as Chairman of the Board of Conservators, Dr Hew Prendergast attended as Clerk to the Board and Mrs Ros Marriott took the Minutes. There were 73 Commoners present at the start of the meeting.

1. **Election of a Chairman for the Meeting** Dr Hew Prendergast 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 David Allen. He was elected.
2. **Approval of the Agenda** 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. Mr Rupert Thornely-Taylor commented that although his term of office as an elected Conservator had come to an end, he had resigned as a Commoner Conservator following his appointment as a Conservator by ESCC.
4. **Apologies for Absence Apologies** There were no apologies.
5. **Selection of one Conservator (NB No election as only one nominee)**

Mr Roy Galley had been nominated by Mr Anthony Reid and seconded by Mr Leslie Gillham. There being no other nominations, Mr Galley was appointed as a Conservator to serve for the next five years from 1 April 2008. The Chairman invited him to address the meeting.

Mr Galley explained that, although born a Yorkshireman, he had lived in Sussex for some time. Now retired, he had been both a historian and a politician during his working life and was now a Wealden District Councillor and a Maresfield Parish Councillor. Whilst familiar with the Forest both as a horse rider and a dog walker, he had no strong personal agenda in seeking office as a Conservator but was interested in the opinions of local people and would keep an open mind.

6. **Minutes of the Annual Meeting held on Friday 2 March 2007** were taken as read, copies being available for all present. They were adopted as a true and correct record and signed by the Chairman.

7. **Matters Arising**

7.1 **Deer** Dr Aitkin asked for a report of the Deer Management Group. Dr Prendergast informed the meeting that the Minutes of the Ashdown Forest Area Deer Group were on the Board's web site (www.ashdownforest.org). The Group consisted of local landowners, representatives from the Police, East Sussex County Council and the Deer Initiative, the British Deer Society, RSPCA and the British Association for Shooting and Conservation. Its main achievement had been to secure funding from ESCC for the Deer Warden Scheme, a county wide service to deal with deer road casualties. The Rangers would continue to cover Ashdown Forest when possible.

7.2 **Signage** Mr William King asked if there had been a response from the Board to the Commoners' disapproval of the new signage at entrances to the Forest. Mr Stenhouse replied that he had presented a paper to the Board which had decided to keep the signs. Mrs Smith asked why more animal warning signs had not been installed. Dr Prendergast stated that animal warning signs are put out along the C3 when grazing animals are present. The County Highways

Department had placed new high visibility deer warning signs adjacent to the A22 between Forest Row and Nutley but their effectiveness was limited as there had been no reduction in casualties.

7.3 Parish Council participation Mr William King asked what progress had been made to involve Parish Councils in the management of the Forest. Dr Prendergast replied that the Board had proposed at its meeting in June 2007 that liaison with Parish Councils be improved. The matter had been considered by the governance meetings with 3KQ which had reported approval for a Parish Liaison Panel which would enable intermediary contact. The recent meeting of the Finance and General Purposes Committee had proposed to the Board that the Parish Council Liaison Panel should include members from the Forest Parishes, Crowborough Town Council and the Parishes that bordered the Forest to the west. It was hoped the inaugural meeting would take place very soon.

7.4 3KQ Mrs Pat Davidson asked who was 3KQ. Dr Prendergast explained that 3KQ was a consultancy that specialised in the facilitation process. Mr Douglas Campbell queried the cost of 3KQ's part in the stakeholder consultation. Dr Prendergast replied that it was in the region of £24,000.

8. Report on the proposed Forest Rate for 2008/2009

8.1 Mr Thornely-Taylor drew the meeting's attention to the financial information which had been circulated. As had been agreed in previous years, the Forest Rate had been increased by the RPI plus 1%. The proposed increase had been submitted to the Secretary of State for the Environment and Rural Affairs for approval. He asked the meeting if there was a view to depart from the additional 1% increase in future years. There was no comment and the suggestion of Mr Watson that the practice be continued unless a change is requested by the Commoners was agreed. The meeting accepted the proposed Forest Rate for 2008/2009.

8.2 Income and Expenditure of the Board

8.2.1 Income Mr Thornely-Taylor drew the meetings' attention to the income and expenditure charts for 2006/2007. He explained the background to the Higher Level Stewardship grant. It had replaced all other DEFRA grants and gave a net increase of £100,000. Further income was obtained from a variety of sources and the Ashdown Forest Act 1974 required ESCC to meet the shortfall. Wealden District Council gave a voluntary contribution. The source of income for the Ashdown Forest Trust was rent from the Royal Ashdown Golf Club. The trust made a significant contribution to Forest funds.

8.2.2 Expenditure Mr Kevin Hawes asked for an explanation of the expenditure item "Input VAT disallowed". Mr Thornely-Taylor explained that several years ago, the Board had had a VAT inspection which had led to the Board being reclassified as an organisation that could only partially reclaim VAT. Despite lengthy appeals the situation remained unchanged with the result that the Board are now looking into restructuring its activities with a view to enabling a more successful reclamation of VAT.

9 Short talk by Cllr John Barnes, Chairman of the Board

9.1 Mr Barnes gave a brief résumé of his interest in conservation issues. He had first become a member of the Board when, as Chairman of the County Council, he represented the Ashdown Forest Trust as Lord of the Manor. Although not a local, he lives in the High Weald and is a long-standing member of the Rye Harbour Management Board which manages the internationally renowned bird sanctuary. The Ashdown Forest Act 1974 requires the Conservators to manage the Forest as an amenity and place of resort and to conserve it as a quiet and natural area of outstanding beauty. The Board is a body corporate and members are trustees under other legislation. Ashdown Forest is also affected by a raft of legislation, most involving conservation.

It was designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest under the National Parks Act 1949 and was re-designated an SSSI following the Countryside Act 1981. Most significant are the two European Directives; the Special Protected Area for birds (SPA) and Special Area of Conservation SAC which were brought into English law in 1994 and by 2007 the Forest had received both designations. The Board has to balance the interests of the Commoners and the general public, of whom nearly a million visit the Forest each year, with the needs of the flora and fauna. This is more so since 2000 when biodiversity legislation required the Board to work towards extending rare species and funds were made available for the regeneration of heathland and at the same time, created penal but vague sanctions. It invested English Nature, now part of Natural England, with setting the standards for conservation management. The Board have been required to develop a Management Plan which takes all the directives and conservation issues into account. If the Board fails in its objectives, Natural England could take over the management of the Forest.

9.2 Mr Barnes commented that the nature of the Forest was interesting; many people were under the illusion that it should be all wooded. However, even in Anglo-Saxon times it was never totally wooded. The Romans had been felling trees for charcoal for their iron works and grazing animals, both domesticated and wild, had always been present. As grazing increased, the upland vistas were created and when the National Park legislation was introduced in the 1940s, there were far fewer trees than at present; only 10% woodland and 90% heathland, indeed, by World War II, there had been 7.5 centuries of continual grazing. Now only two or three Commoners grazed their stock on the Forest. Two years ago, the Board decided to adopt a radical approach and, with the help of HLS funds, began an experiment to discover whether close-shepherding was feasible. A small flock of Hebridean sheep, which happily eat gorse and birch, have been introduced. If the project is a success, the flock will be increased, this method of heathland management being preferable to heavy machinery.

9.3 The special protection given by the various designations brings duties and obligations, principally the regeneration of the heathland and the preservation of biodiversity. Tractors will always be necessary if the Board are to meet the 40/60 split between woodland and heathland. Mr Barnes acknowledged that the Forest's woodland needed more work. Another project in progress was the restoration of the garden at Chelwood Vachery for which funds had been obtained. Other outside pressures on the Forest have been recognised by the Mid Sussex Scoping Study, which examined the impact of development close to sites of European conservation significance such as the Forest. Finally, Mr Barnes acknowledged that the restoration of the heathland was the most controversial aspect of the Board's work but it had a legal obligation to bring the heathland into a favourable condition whilst preserving the quiet beauty which most had come to love and value and to resist encroachments.

9.4 Mr Watson thanked Mr Barnes for his enlightening talk and also paid tribute to Mr Glyn, the previous Chairman of the Board, who had done so much to lay the foundation of the current conservation programme.

10 Report by the Clerk to the Conservators

10.1 The Clerk gave a powerpoint presentation which illustrated the work carried out on the Forest and at the Visitor Centre during the past year. He began with an aerial photograph which showed the Wrens Warren area in 1927; the marked lack of trees was evident. He continued with illustrations of birds and plants which were significant in the Forest's European designations followed by examples of mechanised management. Approximately 200 hectares of bracken are under active management and rhododendron clearance continues.

10.2 Stakeholder meetings had taken place in a number of Parishes. The Mid-Sussex Scoping Study had highlighted the consequences of development near the Forest; Wealden had yet to produce a report. There had been a significant archaeological study of the Forest, funded by HLS which would prove invaluable to the understanding of the Forest. A vehicle counter had indicated

that there was probably many more than the one million visitors to the Forest each year. A programme of replacing old seats on the Forest with memorial seats, locally designed and built especially for the Forest, had proved popular. The Visitor Centre had had an excellent exhibition of paintings of the Forest's flora and views and the event days had been a huge success, particularly the Fungi Day in October when people from far and wide had brought samples of fungi for identification.

10.3 Volunteers had given well over 100 hours of help to begin the restoration of the Vachery gardens. These had not been part of the Forest for 300 years and following their purchase in 1994 had been allowed to decline. £36,000 had been raised for the renovation. Natural England had given permission for the Sussex Ornithological Society to put up nest boxes for Redstarts which like the altitude of the Forest, a pair had even nested at the Visitor Centre last summer.

10.4 The Forest has had its fair share of dramatic events during the year. The Air-ambulance was called twice for riding accidents and the floods in June, particularly on the golf course, would be remembered for some time. Deer casualties remained unacceptably high with the Rangers attending approximately one per day, despite reduced cover. A speed reduction scheme for the villages and Forest roads had been introduced.

10.5 It is hoped that the production and distribution of the Ashdown Forest Life to all Commoners and local residents who live on the Forest would help to keep local people informed about Forest matters. The web site had also been developed to assist with information.

10.6 The Board had acquired a field at Golden Castle thanks to the generosity of the Friends of Ashdown Forest. This was being used, in conjunction with other land around the edge of the Forest, as in-by-land for the Hebridean flock. The shepherd, Louise Amos, brought the sheep onto the Forest most days and welcomed members of the public approaching her and the flock to talk about the project. Clear signage indicated where the flock were grazing and the location could be found on the web site.

10.7 Finally, Dr Prendergast asked the Commoners for their help for the next exhibition to be mounted at the Visitor Centre towards the end of April entitled "The Forest in times of conflict". Any artefacts, pictures or reminiscences would be much appreciated

11 Questions and Any Other Business

11.1 Mr Watson thanked Dr Prendergast and invited questions to either Mr Barnes or Dr Prendergast.

11.2 Communication Sheila Van Maurik commented that she had attended the Hartfield Stakeholder meeting and reported that the locals felt disempowered. The perception was that the Board went ahead with woodland clearances before local people had been made aware of what was to happen. Mr Barnes admitted that communication with the local people was not as good as it should be. Information was put on the web site and it was hoped that the soon to be implemented Parish Liaison Panel meetings would help. He also hoped that Parish magazines would be prepared to have regular articles and Parish Clerks could be encouraged to participate in regular two-way communication. Local newspapers had proved inconsistent in their willingness to cover Forest matters. A suggestion to seek a regular column was well supported. Mr Spicer said that the Board welcomed the public's attendance at Board and Committee meetings and also welcomed written questions. However, the take-up had been poor. He pointed out that there had been no election as only Mr Galley had put himself forward to stand as a Conservator. Mr Stenhouse said that he had received numerous complaints about the lack of communication in the past but recently, he had received fewer emails and letters. He did not like the document produced by 3KQ. Mr Hawes asked if an email group could be set up for bringing the Commoners' attention to notices on the web site. Dr Prendergast pointed out that this had been

tried in the past but a problem arose when people changed their email address and did not inform the office. A significant majority of the meeting had access to the internet.

11.3 Stakeholder involvement Mr Guy Hardy declared that he did not consider the 3KQ report satisfactory. Mr Stenhouse stated that the Board was considering a paper that he had produced about the report. Mr Watson thought that 3KQ had misunderstood comments made by a contributor to the stakeholder meetings. Mrs Madeline Campbell asked what confidence the Commoners could have if the report was not accurate. Mr Barnes felt that the first stage of the stakeholder consultation process had been good. He queried the efficacy of the second stage and the Board had decided to abandon the third stage.

11.4 Heathland clearance Mr John Van Maurik stated that many people were distressed by tree felling, particularly when it led to cars being seen from the Forest. He sought reassurance that insensitive cutting would stop. Dr Prendergast commented that opinions varied about the removal of trees. It would be very difficult to use aesthetics as a basis for management. Mr Stuart Crichton asked if the visibility of cars was important. Mr Gillham admitted that tree felling caused great unrest. If there was heathland on either side of a road, trees were cleared in order to link the two heathland areas, thereby assisting conservation. However, a screen of trees can be left around houses. This year, it is hoped to publish the winter management plan as early as possible on the web site so that comments can be made early on. It was pointed out that Tree Preservation Orders could be put on special trees. Dr Prendergast pointed out that there are very few old trees on the Forest. It was queried if age was the only criteria for making a tree special.

11.5 Bracken mowing Mr Henry Osborne asked what was the optimum height for cutting bracken. Dr Prendergast replied that it was best cut as low as possible but the nature of the terrain meant that an even cut was impossible. Mr Osborne was concerned that sometimes bare earth was exposed. He was reassured that this was not a problem.

11.6 Mr Stenhouse informed the meeting that he has had a 2 hour meeting with Natural England officers. He had put many questions to them and had manoeuvred them to consider people. Mr Glyn pointed out that Natural England did not manage the Forest. There is a Public Service Agreement that requires Natural England to have 90% of SSSIs in a favourable or unfavourable but recovering condition by 2010. Natural England's job is to define the technical aspects and it is their statutory duty to provide advice.

11.7 Mountain biking Mr John Francis asked why the Board objected to mountain bikes on the Forest. Mr Gillham explained that the Board had visited the question on several occasions. A representative from Natural England, a keen mountain biker herself, had advised against allowing mountain biking. She had predicted that the Forest would be inundated by mountain bike groups who would be difficult to control. Mr Hawes suggested a permit system to which Mr Gillham replied that the problem would be compliance. Mr Francis suggested a trial area which might be made available which would encourage young people to use the Forest. A show of hands indicated little support for the introduction of permits for mountain bikes.

12 Agreement to hold the next Annual Meeting at 19.30 on Friday 6 March 2009 at Hartfield Village Hall This was agreed.

There being no further questions, Mr Watson thanked the Commoners for their attendance and drew the meeting to a close at 9.25 pm.

Signed
Chairman 6 March 2009