ANNUAL MEETING OF THE COMMONERS’ OF ASHDOWN FOREST

Fairwarp Village Hall
19.30 Friday, 5 March 2010

All elected commoner Conservators were present: Mr Roy Galley, Mr Leslie Gillham, Mr Philip Glyn, Mr John Spicer and Mr Edward Stenhouse. Dr Hew Prendergast attended as Clerk to the Board and Mrs Rosalind Marriott took the Minutes. There were 58 commoners present at the start of the meeting.

1. Election of a Chairman for the Meeting: The Clerk to the Board of Conservators, Dr Hew Prendergast, opened the meeting and asked for nominations for a Chairman of the meeting. Mr Robert Watson was proposed by Mr Philip Glyn and seconded by Mr Henry Osborne.

2. Approval of the agenda: The draft agenda was approved by unanimous agreement.

3. Reading of the notice convening the meeting: Dr Prendergast convened the meeting and reminded the Commoners that this was his only official function at the meeting.

4. Apologies for absence: apologies had been received from David Cooper, Elka Crooke and Tony Reid.

5. Appointment of one Conservator, there being only one candidate:

5.1 Dr Prendergast announced that Mr John Francis had been nominated by Mr John Spicer and seconded by Mr Leslie Gillham. There being no other nominations, Mr Francis was appointed to the Board of Conservators as a Commoner Conservator for a period of five years, commencing on 1 April 2010. Mr Francis was invited to address the meeting.

5.2 Mr Francis said that he had lived next to the Forest for twenty eight years, first at Nutley and more recently at Duddleswell. His early memories of the Forest were of fires and scrub but the advent of grazing had transformed the Forest thanks to the hard work by all concerned; the Misbourne Valley, as an example, was an outstandingly beautiful area. He felt fencing was no longer an issue and believed grazing was superior to mechanical cutting as a method of conserving Heathland. He was pleased to be appointed and promised to do his best for the Commoners, particularly with regards to communications and wildlife conservation.

6. Minutes of the Annual Meeting held on Friday, 6 March 2009: the Minutes were agreed and signed as a true and accurate copy.

7. Matters Arising: there were no matters arising.

8. Report on the proposed Forest Rate for 2010/2011: Mr Galley announced that there would be no increase in the Forest Rate in the coming financial year and he drew the meeting’s attention to the Board’s accounts for the year ending 31 March 2009 which had been circulated with the Minutes. He confirmed that the time lapse was inevitable due to legal constraints but he reminded those present that the accounts were posted on the web site, www.ashdownforest.org, after they had been audited.

9. Short report by the Clerk to the Conservators: Dr Prendergast gave a Powerpoint presentation outlining the work carried out on the Forest during the past year. The future of the grazing project continued to be a priority for the Board. The Higher Level Stewardship grant also funded other conservation work on the Forest; the clearing of Braberry ponds, bridge maintenance which facilitated tractor access to Heathland areas, flora and fauna surveys and bracken mowing. The latter was an expensive but extensive exercise; an area of 266 hectares out of the 400 hectares on the Forest had been mown twice a year since 2000. The Rhododendron ponticum clearance funded by the Forestry Commission had now come to an end but volunteers continued to work at clearing this invasive plant. The Board had raised £40,000 to enable restoration of the Vachery arboretum and ponds, bought by the Friends on behalf of the Board in 1994. Routine meetings with the Village Road Safety Partnership, the Parish liaison group and the Deer Initiative were on-going. Fly-tipping continued to be a problem, in particular that of asbestos which had incurred the Board in significant expense. Other bye-law breaches such as encroachments and unauthorised wood cutting took up much Ranger time. The first memorial bridge had been built at the Garden of Eden and a disability access audit was about to be undertaken to make it easier for disabled people to gain access to the Forest from the car parks. The EU habitat regulations had had an impact on the local district councils who are required to make an impact assessment of developments near EU conservation sites. The Forest Ridge Project, funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund, was continuing. To date, a range of new walks leaflets had been produced, education facilities had been improved at the Forest Centre and modern technology had been used to enable the posting of archive material on the web site. The Forest had continued to be mentioned in the media throughout the year. The Board were reviewing plans to develop the Visitor Centre. Dr Prendergast encouraged the Commoners to visit the Forest’s web site where notice of work to be undertaken was posted and the Commoners had their own page. Signs warning Forest visitors of work being
undertaken were also displayed where appropriate out on the Forest. Finally, Dr Prendergast assured the Commoners that the Board regularly reviewed its own governance through its Standing Orders as it took its responsibilities for the safeguarding of public money very seriously.

10. Update on conservation issues and fencing: Mr Glyn addressed the meeting. In June 2009, the Conservation Committee of the Board of Conservators accepted the recommendation of the Conservation Officer to consider ways of extending grazing beyond the current fenced 500 hectares. Dependence on mechanical management on the majority of Forest Heathland was proving to be neither sustainable nor delivering the highest conservation benefit of a mosaic of differing aged-structured vegetation. Events at Chailey Common, where a Public Inquiry was due to start on 17th March 2010 will be closely followed. The Board was in no doubt that the evaluation of options for extending grazing could not be hurried and would involve extensive consultation. As mentioned earlier Close Shepherded Grazing would continue and Mr Glyn invited owners of land close to or adjoining the Forest, to contact the Forest Centre if they were interested in making in-bye land available, with benefits to both parties.

11. Proposed changes in communications: Mr Spicer asked the Commoners to make sure that they informed the office if there was to be a change in the nominated voter or ownership of a property which had rights of common over Ashdown Forest attached to it. He reminded them that all the owners of a property should sign the nomination form so it was no good turning up at the Annual Meeting and asking to transfer the nominated voter if both property owners were not present. The process for obtaining a postal vote was described on the web site. It was proposed that a change to the Standing Orders be made in order to standardise the procedures for the elected Commoners with those of the County and District Councillors who have to sign a Code of Conduct on being elected. The Commoners will be kept informed, probably by a notice being included with Forest Rate demand. During the stakeholder consultation process, various ideas had been put forward which might help Forest residents feel more closely involved with the Forest. One suggestion had been to create “Associated Commoners”, another was to have a public meeting for local residents on an annual basis. The first suggested date for such a meeting is Tuesday, 8 June at 7.30 pm at the Forest Centre.

12. Questions and any other business:

12.1 The retirement of Mr Gillham from the Board Mr Watson invited Mr Glyn to speak on the occasion of Mr Gillham’s retirement. His speech is quoted in full as follows:

“In 1990 when Iraq invaded Kuwait, Nelson Mandela was released, Tim Berners Lee made the first World Wide Web page, there were Poll Tax riots and Margaret Thatcher resigned, Leslie Gillham was elected to the Board of Conservators. With the possible exception of the penultimate two, we believe these events were not related.

At last year’s Commoners Annual Meeting, an anonymous commoner demanded to know why Leslie had been a Conservator for an outrageous 19 years. ‘Because you will keep perishing well electing me’ came the reply.

In that time, Leslie has seen three superintendents, John Nichols, Mike Constantine and Hew and once proudly announced to me that he considered himself the first of the ‘non-toffs’ to join the Board. His attendance record has been outstanding in spite of the demands of his work, jet-setting to exotic remnants of the empire as he catalogued the dusty extravaganza of a previous age.

As one of very few born and bred on the Forest, he knows a large number of residents and commoners; his local and historical knowledge, gaining the trust of some of the more colourful residents and graziers, has been of huge value to the Board. Apparently, by his own admission, he used to bicycle all over the Forest. We believe this transgression has now been rectified.

At meetings, if he leaves his place briefly before the start, one can spot his papers a mile off; they are the ones neatly placed with various lines highlighted after his thorough preparation. His auctioneer’s voice rings out clearly even if less courteous members are speaking among themselves. Even those less able to hear do not ask him to speak up. He is clearly aware of the maxim ‘If you have nothing to say, say nothing’; he always has something and it is always worth hearing.

On field visits, he is instantly recognisable in all weathers by his suit, smart overcoat and Wellingtons. He can speak without notice or notes without hesitation and leave the listener in no doubt.

Most will know that in the late 1990s, as Board Chairman, Leslie took on the largest challenge for the Board for very many years: the extension of grazing from the experimental 40 hectares in 1989, increased to 82 hectares in 1996. The prospect of enclosing over 500 hectares brought out some alarming reactions from the public. Unsubstantiated opinions and wild allegations took the place of logic and at public meetings, bravely held to inform and permit feedback, an atmosphere of a Shakespearean mob rose to a menacing crescendo but failed to dislodge his nerve. He told me much later the he was
worried about the outcome at the time; if that is true, and I still doubt it, I never wish to play him at any game that involves bluff. In spite of cries for his resignation, a campaign of disinformation and bizarre letters to the press, he kept his resolve and the result is the Forest landscape that we now take for granted.

During a field visit to ground overlooking Misbourne Valley not long after it had first received mechanical clearance under Countryside Stewardship, he declared that until this work took place, he believed he had seen the last of this spectacular open landscape; he thought this vista of his childhood had gone forever. What he modestly failed to add was that only his perseverance had enabled heathland renaissance on this scale. He had effectively reversed the selective amnesia of those who only ten years earlier had driven past sheep grazing in open Forest. His forward looking success is testament to the fact that change happens whether we like it or not and adapting to it may be difficult but is essential.

Mr Gillham responded. He commented that he had seen a huge change in the Forest and its management since he first joined the Board in 1990. Then, the Board had few resources and the best it could hope for was to manage the Forest’s decline. Now, thanks to HLS funding, huge measures could and were being taken which, he hoped, would preserve the Forest for future generations. He thanked all his colleagues on the Board and the Commoners who had supported him over the years and finished by saying that it had been an honour to serve on the Board.

Many are blessed with the talent of a raconteur, many can be depended upon to raise anything from a smile to a raucous laugh and yet others can retain the deadly serious analytical mind essential in that high pressure situation where a clear head wins. Very few can do both; Leslie is one and for my part, he will be sadly missed by a Board which will never be the same.”

Mr White asked about casualty numbers. Dr Prendergast replied that the number dealt with by Rangers had decreased due to health problems. The overall picture had not improved and there was no evidence that the signs on the A22 worked. The number of 266 did not include those handled by the Police and the Deer Warden scheme. Wealden District Council was responsible for clearing dead deer from the highway verges and their figures gave further information. The Deer Warden Scheme was beginning to highlight black spot areas. There was a general agreement that the newer Forest signs were not as effective as the large, old green ones that gave a warning to motorists of the potential hazard of...
meeting deer and grazing animals.

Gorse  Mr Osborne, a grazier, commented that the mowing of the gorse had resulted in the gorse forming a thick mat on which the animals found it difficult to walk. He asked if there was an alternative to close mowing. Dr Prendergast replied that burning was an option and it had been hoped to have a controlled burning exercise with the Sussex Fires Service but the weather in February had prevented this. Mr Osborne suggested that the gorse be mown less frequently.

Tree felling  Mrs Davis, who had recently moved to the area, expressed her concern about the tree felling that had been carried out alongside the A275 and asked if the area would be extended. Mrs Bashen, commented that the area was treeless about 40 to 50 years ago and this was confirmed by Dr Prendergast who added that since WWII, the openness of the Forest had disappeared; woodland had increased from 5% to 40%. The Board’s management policy is to prevent the natural progression of woodland and ultimately to reach the stage when tree felling can stop and grazing would be sufficient to control the scrub. Mrs Bashen commented that her concern was for the security of stock.

Hunting  Mr Flintan asked if the Board allowed hunting on the Forest. Dr Prendergast said the Board’s policy fell in line with the national law. A Hunt is allowed to traverse the Forest but cannot give chase. The Hunts are aware of the regulations but unless the office is made aware of infringements as they happen, there is little that can be done. Mr Thornely-Taylor pointed out that a Hunt may follow a trail.

Communication  Mr White asked if more notice could be given for the Annual Meeting and asked if Higher Level Stewardship funds could be used to improve communications. Mr Spicer explained that the HLS grant was ring-fenced for conservation purposes and asked Mr White for suggestions to improve matters. Mr White suggested a newsletter. The Chairman thought the onus was on the Conservators to give more notice of the meeting.

Fencing  Mrs Hammond asked, if the fencing was extended, would the deer be able to jump in and out. Dr Prendergast confirmed that the deer would, and commented that deer don not eat bracken, rhododendron or trees but do eat the grass on the firebreaks. Mr Osborne commented that he had witnessed the deer eating the gorse shoots during the hard winter.

Date of next meeting  It was confirmed that the next annual meeting would be held on Friday, 4 March 2011 at Nutley Village Hall, starting at 7.30 pm.

The meeting closed at 9.10 pm.