

**Minutes of the Residents meeting held at the Ashdown Forest Centre
on Tuesday, 14 July 2015.**

Present: Eleven residents signed the attendance register, four Conservators, and four members of staff attended the meeting.

The Minutes were taken by the Clerk, Mrs Rosalind Marriott.

Item 1 Welcome and introduction from Mr Roy Galley (Chairman of the Board of Conservators)

Mr Galley opened the meeting, welcoming all present and explained the order of the meeting and made it clear that there would be plenty of opportunity for questions to be asked at the end.

Item 2 Chairman's Report

Mr Galley stated that two major issues faced the Board at present, the expansion of the grazing project and the transition between the Higher Level Stewardship Scheme (HLS) and the new Countryside Stewardship Scheme (CSS). Managing the Forest had a number of challenges:

- Improving the heathland
- Managing the woodland
- General maintenance
- Balancing the budgets
- Preserving the Forest as an amenity and a place of quiet resort
- Inspiring and supporting the volunteers
- Providing a good education programme

The end of the 10 year HLS scheme in 2016 has resulted in much work being done in order to submit a bid to Natural England (NE) for increased funds by the end of July. It is anticipated that a bid for woodland management will also be submitted by the end of July.

The new bid reflects the requirement by NE to have the heathland area of the Forest restored to 100% favourable condition by 2020. This effectively means that there should be a balanced mosaic of heathland habitat across 60% of the Forest. Grazing is NE's preferred management tool. Currently a new approach is being trialled in the Chelwood Gate area using invisible fencing: a cable has been buried in a shallow trench, connected to batteries and the cattle wear collars which give a warning signal followed by an electric shock should the cattle get too near the cable. If the trial is successful, this method will be expanded to various sites around the Forest. Not all will be used at once.

The Forest Centre Development continues to progress . Planning permission was obtained for both the Visitor Centre complex and the tractor shed, workshops and operational area in the last year. Some improvement work has already been completed: solar panels have been put on the roof of the tractor shed and the Education Barn has had a thorough over-haul with insulation, double glazing and decoration throughout.

Securing long-term funding for the Forest is a major aim of the Board. It is working towards creating an endowment fund. As funds are raised, so work will be carried out.

The Education provision, funded by the Friends, continues to expand. Thirteen schools have visited the Centre and much outreach work has been done amongst local schools.

The Board are very grateful to the one hundred and twenty three volunteers who help in so many ways as Information Volunteers, Volunteer Rangers, Health and specialist Walk Leaders, Bird Group, Stock Lookers, Conservation Volunteers and the History Group. Their help is very much appreciated.

There were no questions.

3 The Conservation Officer's Report

Mr Alton explained in more detail what "Favourable condition" status meant. Heathland was often confused with moorland, an upland habitat. Lowland heath was a more diverse and unique habitat consisting of a mosaic of habitats and features. It is mainly confined to Western Europe and is scarcer than tropical rain forest. There is legislation that governs what can be done and NE has a scoring system based on the flora, fauna and habitat present. The Forest is an artificial habitat created by man over thousands of years. Modern management needs to replicate those processes of human activity that used the Forest as a resource in order to preserve the open landscape. Few Commoners exercise their rights today so conservation needs to replicate that human activity. The best example is grazing by sheep, cattle and ponies.

The Hebridean sheep are tough and eat birch seedlings but need over-wintering off the Forest; the Riggitt cattle can be left out all year, they poach the ground creating space for plants to colonise and fauna to inhabit; Exmoor ponies, which can also be left out over winter, are fond of gorse. Gorse can be a real challenge; past control involved mowing but this has left a low carpet of shrub gorse which the animals find difficult to walk over. Control of where the stock graze has been limited to the amount of land that can be fenced under the Ashdown Forest Act 1974. The introduction of invisible fencing may prove the answer to this problem. Finding a contractor who could do the work proved challenging due to the terrain involved. There were a few initial problems; the young calves were too small to wear collars and wandered beyond the cable but soon returned to their mothers. As they grow, collars will be purchased for them. The invisible fence has no effect on dogs or people; it cannot be used for sheep due to the thickness of the wool and the ponies are too adept at slipping the collars. The sites chosen to graze using this method are in less accessible areas. NE is very keen on this system and has granted special payments to help with installation.

The introduction of the invisible fencing has been publicised where possible using social media, signage and talks as it is felt that this is a very important message to broadcast.

Mr Alton repeated that the Forest is not a natural resource and has and needs to be managed and maintained by humans.

Mr Alton invited questions.

Mrs Hazel Carter raised the problem of out of control dogs worrying the cattle and the increasing practise of leaving bags of dog excrement in car parks and hanging on bushes. Mr Alton acknowledged the risk that dogs could run over the invisible fence but he added that the Board's "Every Dog Matters" programme was designed to educate dog owners to train and keep their dogs under control at all times and to clear up after their dogs and take the bags home. Mrs Buesnel, the Director, commented that the problem of dog excrement was frequently raised at the Parish Liaison meetings. Parish Councils had no funds to provide bins and the Board had no funds to cover the collection of the waste. However, the next campaign would be to recruit and support volunteers to put on events in the Forest car parks, encouraging and educating dog owners. Mrs Buesnel suggested the next phase of Every Dog Matters could also include dog training on the Forest..

Mr John Manthorpe asked if the invisible fencing could be extended to the existing fenced area that was used by the Commoners' stock and if any more could be done to control gorse. Mr Alton said that the area could be subdivided in order to target gorse by pony grazing, other control methods would be to scrape or burn. He explained that Commoners had been contacted and invited to express their interest in helping with the grazing project. In response to Lisa Masham's question, he explained that over thirty commoners had responded.

Mrs Rosemary Hammond expressed her concern that fewer Nightjars had been heard in her area this season. Mr Alton reported that he had not been informed by the Ashdown Forest Bird Group of any problem so far; indeed, two Nightjar walks had been held successfully with Nightjars being both heard and seen.

Mr Chris Cook expressed his concern of the soil damage done by heavy machinery being used on the Forest in wet weather. He reported that he noticed that little regrowth had occurred at sites that had been subject to tree cutting in the past, leading to stunted gorse and heather. Mr Alton replied that the management techniques were scrub clearance in winter and mowing in summer. The scrub control was localised and contractors were reluctant to put their vehicles at risk in very wet weather. The Forest had been used extensively by the army vehicles in the past and had recovered in time. Mr Cook was asked to supply location details of damage to the Forest Centre.

Mrs Caroline Potter expressed her concern at traffic speeds through the Forest. Mr Galley explained that speed control and enforcement was a matter for ESCC Highways and the Police. The Board had no powers to do anything but it sympathised with the need to educate people to drive more slowly. He advised those present that the Police and Crime Commissioner would be giving a presentation at Five Ash Down Village Hall on 29 July which would be a more suitable forum to discuss such matters.

There being no other questions, Mr Galley thanked everyone for coming and closed the meeting at 8.00pm.