

**Minutes of the Residents meeting held at the Ashdown Forest Centre
on Monday, 14 July 2014.**

Present: Twenty eight residents signed the attendance register, four arrived late and did not sign, ten Conservators, the Chair of the Society of Friends and three members of staff attended the meeting.

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

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

Mr Roy Galley welcomed 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 Short presentations from each of the Board of Conservators' Committees

Conservation

Mr John Francis began by introducing Steve Alton, the new Conservation Officer who was appointed in December 2013 following the retirement of Chris Marrable in September. Ranger Rich Allum had ably covered the interregnum.

During the year the Committee had continued to monitor the effect of grazing on the Forest. Mr Osbourne grazed approximately 900 sheep and 100 cattle in the fenced area to the south of the Forest whilst the Conservators' flock of about 300 sheep, 10 Galloway Riggitt cattle, 6 Exmoor ponies and 2 Welsh Mountain ponies grazed in targeted enclosures that were moved around the Forest as required. There is no doubt that livestock do a better job of maintaining the desired mosaic of heathland habitat when compared to machinery however, there has always been the problem of their keep in winter. Local residents have been supportive in offering sites for over-wintering the stock but the scattered nature of these sites had resulted in time-consuming travelling and stock movements and there had also been the problem of feed storage. It is hoped that both these problems will be resolved by the leasing of Hillsdown Farm. The farm has good facilities; two large barns and 86 acres of grazing. A successful week of haymaking last week in excellent weather had resulted in the Conservators being self-sufficient in hay and had even provided some for sale which would offset some of the costs. The support of many volunteers when stacking the bales had been much appreciated. Currently the lease is for one year but it is hoped that this will be extended, thereby underpinning the day to day management of the grazing programme.

Due to lack of resources, woodland management had been limited in the past. Discussions with a biofuel contractor may prove to be a cost-neutral way of improving the woodland.

The deer numbers remain disappointingly high despite a programme of culling by nearby landowners. The Committee are looking at the practicalities of culling on the

Forest; an estimate of the herd size is 3000 in the area. There is notable damage to woodland and some deer appear to be underweight.

John Ram later asked about the Board's deer culling policy. It was explained that the open access status of the Forest raised understandable concerns. It was thought that three herds in the area had combined and moved about, transferring to the Forest when culls were carried out on private land. Cllr Whetstone commented that experts advised that to preserve a healthy herd, about one-third should be culled each year. Mr Galley asked for the residents' views and information concerning road accidents and impact on gardens. The Board would need evidence on the impact of deer if a cull were to take place.

Forest Centre Development

Cllr Sylvia Tidy commented that although she had been on the Board for only three years, she was aware that the original plans for the development of the Forest Centre had been much more extensive. These plans had never materialised due to the EU Habitat regulations; the Conservators had been affected just as many businesses had been by the 7km restrictions.

The current plans are a much simplified, with improvements to the Education Barn being confined to better insulation; improved toilet facilities, particularly for the disabled; a new entrance to the complex to the front of the buildings incorporating a relocation of access to the car park to improve visitor safety; a relocated boiler room and a lift to the upper floor of the Administration Barn. The latter will be subject to significant reorganisation in order to improve staff facilities and ease of use for visitors.

Visitors to the Forest have remained fairly static over the last 20 years at approximately one million. The Board's aim is to encourage more of these visitors to visit the Forest Centre to learn and understand more about the Forest and its rare habitat. By so doing, it is hoped to preserve Ashdown Forest for future generations whilst reassuring local residents that no huge change is planned beyond an improvement in facilities and education of visitors. It will take at least two years to raise the £1.5 million through donations and lottery funding.

The second phase of the Centre development, which is focused on improvements to the operational side of the Forest management is about to start with the submission of plans to, amongst other things, expand the machinery store. Solar panels will be on the tractor shed roof which will start to produce an income for the Board within six to seven years.

Questions Annette Greenly asked if signage to the Forest Centre could be improved. Cllr Tidy said that she would look into this.

Finance and General Purposes

Mrs Diana Hurrell introduced herself as a Commoner Conservator who chaired the Finance and General Purposes Committee and also sat on the Forest Centre

Development Committee. The FGP Committee was more of an enabling committee, focussing on the finances, the human resources, policies and procedures of the Board for the management of the Forest. As a largely public funded body, the Board is fairly restricted by a lengthy document as to how it reports its accounts. A Statement of Accounts is published on the website but this can be a little dry and dull. An Annual Report has been produced which was available on the web site. This summarises the income and expenditure and provides other interesting facts about the past year. The significant contributions made by the Friends are much appreciated. Sadly it is not possible to generate much income from visitors to the Forest but grants from DEFRA, the local authorities and wayleaves from the army and businesses such as BT all help as does the contribution from riders, other licensed activities and commoners. The bulk of the expenditure is attributed to the payroll, thankfully now up to full compliment. As expected, the other major areas of expenditure are administration and conservation work. Large reserves are kept in hand as it is the Board's policy to maintain enough to cover six months salaries and administration. Due to the weather and staffing limitations, not all the planned work was able to be completed last year however, virtually all the policies and procedures are now in place.

Questions Mrs Sylvia Martin asked what steps had been taken to enable work to continue after the end of the current Higher Level Stewardship agreement in 2016. Mrs Hurrell confirmed that the Board was working closely with Natural England and she was confident that something would be in place. Mr Galley and Mrs Buesnel are due to meet Natural England in September. Mr Galley commented that Mrs Hurrell had done much work to streamline financial controls. The policies had added importance as it was important they should be in place because of future fund-raising.

Roads, Planning and Amenities

Mr Galley spoke on behalf of the Committee Chairman and Vice Chairman, both of whom had been unable to attend the meeting. During the past year, with help from the ESCC Legal Services Department, a clear Encroachment Policy for the future had been produced. It was almost ready to be adopted. An approach to DEFRA had also been made to increase the breach of Bye-law fine from a maximum of £100 set in 1974 to £500 in line with Scale 2 fines used in current legislation. This Committee also looked at any planning applications that might impact on the Forest. The EU Habitat regulations had had some impact on the number of applications and are responsible for the air monitoring that is about to start. Discussions had taken place with ESCC Highways over signage and road repairs. Litter, always a problem on the Forest, had been cleared by staff and he made an appeal to residents that if they saw someone drop or deposit fly-tipping, they should take the car registration if it was safe to do so.

Item 3 The Birds of Ashdown Forest – a short illustrated talk by Mr Philip Glyn

Mr Glyn focussed on the special nature of Ashdown Forest and the importance of preserving its habitat. He demonstrated through maps produced by the Sussex

Ornithological Society that the Forest, although constituting only 1% of East and West Sussex combined, provided the habitat for a large percentage of threatened birds.

Questions Sally Harris expressed her concern at the dangerous nature of the junctions at Duddleswell crossroads and asked if their status could be changed from “Give Way” to “Stop”. Mr Galley referred her question to Cllr Whetstone who was asked to seek advice from ESCC Highways Department.

Clare Risby commented that she had been sent a flyer about the expansion of Gatwick Airport and the possible change in flight paths. She asked if the EU Habitat regulations would have any impact on the proposed changes. Mr Galley replied that ESCC and WDC had been in favour of the expansion and some local MPs against. A report on air quality on Ashdown Forest had stated that only 1% of nitrogen deposits came from aeroplanes. At Mrs Martin’s request, he later confirmed that the information came from the Mott McDonald report to WDC. He confirmed that any planning application for the development of the airport would have to produce a habitat assessment. Mrs Risby expressed her concern that an air corridor was proposed. Cllr St Pierre stated that work was in progress to evaluate the pros and cons of the proposal and she understood that different routes were being trialled. Don Bradbury, a retired pilot, commented that most planes flew higher than 3000 ft over the Forest.

Don Bradbury asked if there was any truth in the article published in the local press about giant, genetically modified super rats on the Forest. Steve Alton replied that the press had grossly exaggerated a research paper from a Midlands university on the resistance to rodenticides found in rats over a large range of England. Ashdown Forest had featured at the end of the list and it was likely that the rats were found on neighbouring farms rather than on the Forest itself. Cllr St Pierre was concerned about the effect of dead or sick rats on owls. Mr Alton replied that rat poison is an anti-coagulant. Any drop in the population of owls or other birds of prey is more likely to be due to loss of habitat.

Helen Bardlsey requested that some work be done on the woodland rides. In places the vegetation was restricting manoeuvrability. Mr Alton asked for a list of areas of particular concern.

Roy Galley mentioned that the thinning of some of the “Clumps” had been raised and Mr Alton commented that the work would be done in the autumn.

Susan Howe thanked the Board for the Dog Initiative and the work being done to reduce the number of dog attacks on sheep.

Item 5 A short introduction to the Friends of Ashdown Forest

Mrs Pat Arnold, Chair of the Friends of Ashdown Forest, thanked Mr Galley for the opportunity to say a few words about the Friends. The Society had been started in 1961 and it would soon celebrate its 54th anniversary. It had developed over the

years and now had a membership of 900 households. Some people continued their membership when they moved away or even went abroad, keeping in touch through the Friends magazine. All contributions were gratefully received and as an independent charity, all the volunteer Committee members are trustees of the funds. Over the years, the Friends had contributed nearly £750,000. Purchases for the Board had included machinery, vehicles and most importantly, land purchase, including 50% of Chelwood Vachery, some land at the Isle of Thorns and more recently an area called Charles Smith Wood in Chelwood Gate. The Friends are also keen to support education to increase the understanding of the conservation and importance of Ashdown Forest. Two films, the first about the flora and fauna of the Forest and the second about a year in the life of the Forest, now available on You Tube, showing in the Information Barn and available for purchase on DVD, have been funded by the Friends.

Membership had fallen since a big publicity drive in 2007 when membership had increased to 1200. Mrs Arnold made a plea for new members and stated that it was hoped to encourage membership amongst the younger members of the community too.

Item 5 Closing remarks by Mr Galley

Mr Galley thanked all the volunteers for their important contributions. He also thanked the residents for attending the meeting and suggested that if they had issues they wanted addressed, they could contact the office or feed issues to the Parish Councils. These could then be raised at the Parish Liaison meetings which were held four times a year.

The meeting ended at 8.20pm.