

MINUTES OF THE RESIDENTS' MEETING
Ashdown Forest Centre, 7.30pm
on Tuesday, 7 June 2011



Mr Galley, Vice-Chairman of the Board, opened the meeting and welcomed over sixty residents. He introduced the members of the Board present, Mr Francis, Mrs Hurrell and Cllr Whetstone and the members of staff, Mr Marrable, Acting Forest Superintendent and Mrs Marriott, Clerk, who took the Minutes. He explained that this was the first meeting for people who lived near or on the Forest and were interested in its management. There were already meetings for people who had rights of common over the Forest at the Commoners' Annual Meeting and for the local parish councillors at the biannual Parish Liaison meetings. He announced that 7 June was the first day of a new regime within the management of the Forest. Following the resignation of Dr Prendergast, the Board had taken the opportunity to evaluate the way forward. Mrs Marriott had already been appointed Clerk and would be responsible for the Board's official duties with regards to financial management and the Board's legal obligations; Mr Marrable, as acting Forest Superintendent for a period of six months, had overall management of the Forest staff and overseeing the conservation and management of the Forest.

Mr Marrable gave a presentation on the principle issues that impacted on the management of the Forest. They were the obligations of the Higher Level Stewardship scheme; the practicalities of grazing sheep on the Forest; the affect of the EU Habitat Directives on planning applications close to the Forest; access to the Forest for the million or so visits by local people and tourists to the Forest each year; the increase in the deer herd in SE England and its management; common bye-law breaches; Forest fires; the development of the Forest Centre and finally the challenges facing the Forest in the near future.

Mr Galley thanked Mr Marrable and then invited questions.

Legal Backing for Rangers Mr Toby Watson asked what powers the Rangers had at their disposal? Mr Marrable replied very little. The bye-laws allow a £50 fine. Special Constable training had not been viable as Sussex Police would require the Rangers to carry out duties beyond the Forest and outside their working hours. Mr Galley thought Charles Hendry, MP might be able to help.

Culling of deer Mrs Bardsley asked who could shoot deer on the Forest? Mr Marrable replied that shooting would only be allowed if it could be guaranteed to be safe and effective at contributing to reducing the population. By law, shooting could only be carried out in the hours of daylight. At present, no one is allowed to shoot on the Forest.

Fire It was asked if the Rangers ever caught fire-raisers. Mr Marrable said no; occasionally someone would confess that they had started a fire by accident but this was very rare.

Gorse clearance Concern was expressed over the amount of gorse cut back and the impact on wildlife. Mr Marrable replied that high, geriatric gorse had less wildlife value than lower growth. Gorse was only coppiced so that it would come back in time. There is evidence that the area of gorse is increasing; it likes disturbed ground and its presence can indicate evidence of archaeological feature.

Damage to ground during scrub clearance Concern was expressed over the damage caused to the ground during the winter scrub clearance, both by deep ruts and the ensuing erosion and the impaction of the soil by heavy machinery. Mr Marrable stated that, ideally, the work would be carried out between October and December, but this was not usually possible due to the amount of work to be done. The weather and the bird nesting season imposed constraints on when the work could be done. Smaller, lighter machinery could not be used due to the amount of work that needed to be done. Heathland benefits from bare ground, indeed, it is recognised that

some SSSIs fail due to the lack of bare ground which gives room for plants to grow and is an essential habitat for some invertebrates.

The cost of the re-development of the Visitor Centre Mr Robert Watson asked how much had been spent on the re-development of the Centre. Mrs Marriott was unable to give a definitive answer but said she would supply him with the figures as soon as possible. (NB: £50,910 on consultation and architectural plans to date). Mr Galley gave a brief history of the background to the development of the Visitor Centre. The project was now at the fund-raising stage and believed Dr Prendergast has left a list of possible donors.

Car parking charges for residents Mr Manthorpe commented that he was grateful for opportunities given by the meeting. He was very impressed by the web site, particularly the archives and the fact that the Board's and Committee's minutes were available. He had noted that the possibility of charging residents to park on the Forest had been raised and he asked what was envisaged. Mr Galley replied that everyone must understand that there was no proposal to introduce charges at the moment. A paper was being prepared as the Board had to look at future finances and all options had to be considered. He assured all present that every effort would be made to consult fully with local residents.

Erosion of firebreaks/rides A comment was made about the material used to fill in eroded firebreaks. The material became very boggy when wet and it was suggested that the ground be rolled when soft instead and top-soil be spread over. It was also suggested that heather cuttings be used to act as a covering. Mr Marrable replied that he had wrestled with this problem over the years. The material used was from a Forest quarry and was of variable quality. There was a common standard for the firebreaks and the Chase Rangers tried to meet this in various ways. In his view, firebreaks/rides should be safe to walk and ride on and enable vehicles to access all parts of the Forest as necessary. The Forest should not be regarded as a Country Park and there should be some acceptance of wet rides. Erosion was an ongoing issue but he recognised the problem although an ideal solution had still to be found. Rolling worked for the top two inches and he was considering allowing the vegetation to grow a little longer on some rides to see if this helped.

Fund-raising Mrs Bardsley suggested information about the Friends should be made available in the Forest car parks. Mr Burch, Treasurer of the Friends of Ashdown Forest, said that Friends leaflet dispensers had been purchased and would be placed in high profile car parks in the very near future.

The new Pooh Bridge car park Mrs Howell asked if damage had been caused to the ancient pale when the access to the new car park had been made. Mr Marrable replied that the archaeologists in the planning authority were aware of the sensitivity of the site and a ramp had been constructed over the pale to protect it.

Visitors Mrs Watson asked how many of the one million visitors who came to the Forest were anticipated coming to the Visitor Centre. Mr Galley replied that it was important to realise that the figure of one million related to the number of visits to the Forest in one year; many of these were individuals who lived locally and came to the Forest twice a day to walk their dogs. He stressed it was important to maintain a balance between visitors and the conservation of the Forest. The aim was to educate visitors at the Visitor Centre and hopefully, have an income stream from a café.

Forest Rights Mrs Hurrell thought some of those present might be interested to know a little more about rights of common over the Forest. Mr Marrable explained that rights had been established over hundreds of years and were first registered in 1885. The most recent re-registration was in 1965 when all rights had to be registered or they were lost for ever. When land is divided, rights are apportioned according to the acreage. The 2006 Commons Act has made relinquishing rights easier. Under no circumstances can rights be reinstated.

There being no other questions, Mr Galley thanked Mr Marrable and the meeting closed at 21.15.