

**Minutes of the
CONSERVATION COMMITTEE MEETING OF THE
BOARD OF CONSERVATORS OF ASHDOWN FOREST**

1430, Monday 11 January 2010
Lancaster Room, Ashdown Forest Centre

Present: Mr P Glyn (Chairman), Cllr N Bennett, Mr M Cooper, Mr L Gillham, Cllr M Hoy, Mr C Marrable (Conservation Officer), Dr H Prendergast (Clerk), Mr J Spicer, Mr E Stenhouse and Mr R Thornely-Taylor (*ex officio*). Cllr R Galley and Cllr F Whetstone were also present.

The Chairman opened the meeting and informed the Committee that Mr Stenhouse had requested a verbal report of the site visit made on 28 September 2009. Mr Marrable agreed to do so in the meeting. At the request of Mr Stenhouse, Mr Marrable had prepared a paper entitled “The extent of European gorse (*Ulex europaeus*) on Ashdown Forest”, CON 03/10 which was to be discussed under Item 6/10.

01/10 Apologies.

Apologies were received from Cllr J Barnes, Mr J Harding (Forestry Commission), Mr C Hewitt (County Ecologist), and Miss L Hutchby (NE), Mr C Johnson (County Archaeologist) and Cllr R St Pierre.

02/10 Declarations of Interest.

There was none.

03/10 Draft Paper – The future of grazing on Ashdown Forest Heathland CON 01/10

After some discussion about the layout of the paper, the Chairman stressed that the document was a first draft and the purpose of the meeting was to identify options and highlight any changes/additions required. Mr Gillham reminded the Committee that its duty was to consider and plan the best way to conserve the Forest in the future; the F&GP Committee would be responsible for the budgets. The following points were made:

- a brief summary of the history of grazing would be useful;
- appraisal of options to be included;
- future costings need to be addressed in detail;
- identify which options would be effective;
- identify which areas would be impracticable to fence and therefore grazed under the close herded shepherding project;
- project management and examples should be included. Compare projects around the country;
- professional/experienced advice should be sought with regards to type of stock for conservation grazing;
- consider the roads and traffic impact on stock;
- link paper to strategic plan;
- grazing should be regarded as a tool, the same as equipment;
- expand comparison between aesthetics of mechanical methods and fencing;
- sources of drinking water for stock need to be identified;
- need to consider post the end of the HLS in 2016;
- seek advice from Natural England as to the possibility of reducing the area of Heathland to be managed;
- where a fact cannot be stated, any comment should be qualified by the phrase “It is the opinion of ...”;
- the cost of the maintenance of both the existing and proposed fencing should be included;
- the extent of in-bye land available should be explored and identified;
- keep stakeholders, particularly the Commoners, informed of progress;

- add the Ashdown Forest Bird Group and the Friends of Ashdown Forest to the list of stakeholders.

Mr Marrable said that he would redraft the paper. It was agreed that a redrafted aim and a list of headings would be emailed to Board members and it was acknowledged that the paper would not be ready for presentation to the Board for some time.

04/10 Verbal update on winter heathland restoration work

Mr Marrable displayed a map showing the sites of winter work. He commented that the snow had delayed some contracts but work had been completed behind the Kings Standing Police Training Centre. In-house work had been concentrating on the Airman's Grave area where the tree line had been pushed back. The team had worked for four days in the Campfield Rough area, clearing scrub producing a very pleasing area of attractive heathland which will be accessed from Crest Farm for mowing purposes. The new scrub basher (Ahwi) had demonstrated its worth by clearing areas of gorse in the Poundgate area which had been very well received by local residents. It had also cleared gorse in the Roman Road car park area, restoring a popular view and had made a significant difference alongside the A275 where it had been used to clear the gorse after contractors had cleared the large scrub. A private contractor who had wanted some wood had cleared an area in the Hindleap area.

05/10 Financial information for Conservation Committee responsibilities CON 02/10

Mr Spicer queried the change in the in-house estimates. Mr Marrable explained that the estimates can vary as when the work is actually carried out, the balance between contractor and in-house as to who actually carries out the work may change. It was his practice to estimate high on the contractor costs and then fine-tune nearer the time when it was clearer what actually could be done.

06/10 Any urgent item for which the Clerk has notice in order to pass to the Chairman.

There was none.

06.01/10 Site meeting held on 28 September 2009 Mr Marrable gave a verbal report of the site visit which began in Millbrook East car park. The following points were covered:

- i) Discussion of bracken mowing and gorse scrub cutting east of the car park picnic area, particularly how management is enhanced by grazing and trampling.
- ii) Description of the 'pipeline' ride, created when a new water pipe was laid in the early 80s; discovery at that time of a Saxon iron furnace site.
- iii) Slight diversion to look at the herds of fallow deer in Pippingford Park; none visible at this time. Discussion of the impact of grazing, browsing and trampling by deer on the Forest heathland and an admission that the understanding of the impact was poor. More work was proposed.
- iv) Explanation of the ecology of marsh gentians on the Forest, with discussion of how gentians have coped with, and benefitted from, grazing since the enclosure of the area in 1989. Gentians are tending to become more widespread over the Millbrook area but not flowering in the same high numbers as previously. With one exception, gentians are declining in every colony outside the grazing area.
- v) Description of a large Forest fire in 1976 which burned from Old Lodge to Millbrook; dead pine trees remain standing from that fire. This event also gives the earliest dates for the strip of woodland north of the windmill on the Stonehill Road.
- vi) Explanation of LiDAR by Casper Johnson, while standing on some surface archaeology. Grazing is a preferred method of managing archaeological sites, maintaining a short turf and, through trampling, curbing bracken.
- vii) Discussion of sheep and cattle stocking rates: it was explained that it was difficult to state what the actual stocking rate was on this area as animals were removed temporarily for calving/lambing and other husbandry, removed permanently for sale, increased by young stock etc. Weather also has a major effect on plant growth, so the same stocking rate might lead to over-grazing in a hot, dry summer but under-grazing in a warm, wet summer. The impacts of grazing need to be reviewed over the longer term unless serious over-grazing is evident.

viii) Short discussion on Rhododendron, especially what mechanisms exist to identify and treat single outlying plants.

ix) The group crossed the A22 to look at a bracken mowing site which is not grazed. This demonstrated a site where the bracken was nearly eradicated, leaving a grassy sward which needs grazing to reduce dominant grasses and allow the heather to thrive.

06.02/10 The extent of European gorse (*Ulex europaeus*) on Ashdown Forest CON03/10

Mr Marrable presented his paper. He stated that the impression amongst the Rangers had been that the gorse was increasing but the vegetation surveys show that it had always been present. The age and height of the plants had led to some classification difficulties in the past. It was recognised that gorse grows in disturbed land and the Clerk commented that it was interesting to note the link between WWII activity and gorse. Mr Marrable replied to a question from Mr Gillham that fire had the effect of coppicing.

The meeting closed at 1635.