

## Minutes of the

### CONSERVATION COMMITTEE MEETING OF THE BOARD OF CONSERVATORS OF ASHDOWN FOREST

1430, Monday 2 April 2007

Trees car park, then Education Barn, Ashdown Forest Centre

Present Mr P. Glyn (Chairman elect), Cllr F. Brown, Mr M. Cooper, Mr L. Gillham, Mr J. Harding (Forestry Commission), Miss J. Mortimer (Natural England [NE]), Mr C. Marrable (Conservation Officer), Dr H. Prendergast (Clerk), Mr E. Stenhouse and Dr A. Tait (ESCC Ecologist).

Also present: Mr R. Thornely-Taylor and Cllr F. Whetstone.

Apologies: Mr C. Johnson (ESCC Archaeologist), Ms L. Hutchby (NE), Cllr R. O’Keeffe and Mr J. Spicer.

#### 1) Visit to Chelwood Vachery

The Committee walked to the lakes and Gorge stream. After outlining a brief history of the whole site, Dr Prendergast said that over the last couple of years ca. 1000 hours of volunteer work had cleared back birch, bamboo and *Gaultheria*; removed thousands of Tuley tubes from trees planted post 1987; removed fallen branches from the stream running through the lakes; and cleared pathways along the lakes. He showed some of the ornamental plantings that characterise the site and pointed out how the lakes were deep with silt. Since its acquisition of the site in 1994, the Board has done little work there. There is still the opportunity, however, to restore the whole site to some semblance of its former glory. To help with this Dr Prendergast has looked for outside support. British American Tobacco, the Vachery’s previous owner, has donated £25k via a donation to the Society of Friends to dredge the lakes, the Gavin Jones Limited, named after the designer of the Gorge, has provided landscape advice for the site development and the Sussex Gardens Trust has offered £1k towards the costs of a management plan.

The Committee returned to the Forest Centre and resumed its meeting at 1615. Mrs St Pierre said that the walk through the Vachery was excellent. Mr Cooper wondered how the site would be maintained after restoration work and if a separate body (e.g. trust) could be set up. Dr Prendergast said that was certainly an idea worth considering and that he would welcome any others.

#### 2) Election of Committee Chairman

Mr Gillham having stood down as Chairman, Dr Prendergast called for nominations. Mr Gillham proposed Mr Glyn, Mr Brown seconded him and members agreed the nomination by a show of hands. Mr Stenhouse thought that ‘fresh ideas’ were needed and did not support the nomination.

Mr Glyn then took the chair and welcomed Mr Harding and Mr Stenhouse to the Committee. The five members of the public present then asked questions.

#### 3) Conservation Objectives - Louise Hutchby (Natural England)

In the absence of Ms Hutchby, this item could not be presented.

#### 4) HLS update

Mr Marrable provided an update on the following.

##### a) Archaeology.

Three tenders, drawn up with Mr Caspar Johnson, the County Archaeologist, were sent out describing the proposed review of Forest archaeology; two quotes were received and interviews were carried out. Chris Butler Archaeological Services was selected.

Mr Stenhouse asked about 'best value' of the tenders. He thought that the Committee ought to see, and have responsibility for, the awarding of tenders. Ms Mortimer said that the County Archaeologist, Mr Marrable and she had been on the interviewing panel. Mr Glyn reminded the Committee that its last meeting had approved the archaeological project as part of the HLS Pro-forma and that taking it forward is the role of staff and outside expertise, not the Committee. Mrs St Pierre thought that there should be no undue delay in appointing contractors and Mr Stenhouse suggested that a decision could be made by email.

Mr Cooper said that there must be a barrier between the executive and non-executive and that decisions by committee are not necessarily good ones and may be inefficient; any use of the Urgency Committee was quite unnecessary. He added that the Conservation Committee would get embroiled in bureaucratic nonsense if it was not careful. This was a tender for a small contract and he had no hesitation to delegate the decision to the Clerk.

Mr Marrable said that timing was of concern. A three month delay until the next Committee meeting, and lots of paperwork, would prevent the project going ahead. To Mr Glyn's comment that the decision must be delegated, Ms Mortimer added that the interviewing panel in this case had comprised ESCC, NE and a staff representative. Mr Gillham said it was important to define the difference between management and policy and to clarify what is delegated to the Clerk. This should be done at the next Board meeting.

Finally it was agreed that Mr Marrable would email the Committee Mr Johnson's recommendation on the award of the tender and that the Committee would have to respond within three working days.

Mr Cooper said the decision was a nonsense and that the Committee should not be party to appointments. Mr Whetstone cautioned that no sums of money regarding tenders should appear in anything other than Closed Session.

##### b) Handling Forest arisings (disposal of waste product from scrub removal and bracken scraping).

A contract has been awarded to CLM Ltd, Withyham (contact: Anthony Weston). The final report is due at the end of April. The cost is £1650 + VAT.

##### c) Close-herded grazing project.

Interviews of three candidates were held on 23 March. An appointment has been made subject to acceptance. He described the qualities of the three candidates and said that this project was entirely innovative and under the gaze of other conservation organisations. Many aspects of the project are up to the appointed project officer to develop. He emphasised that it was a feasibility study. In response to Mr Cooper's question about similarities with the Hoge Veluwe (Netherlands) and the Luneburgerheide (Germany), Mr Marrable said that there were with vegetation – they being extensive areas of heathland - but that the pastoral/cultural association with sheep of those places does not exist here.

Mr Stenhouse said he wanted to see job descriptions and the candidates' applications. Mr Cooper said this was another nonsense and quite inappropriate for the Committee. Mrs St Pierre agreed as did Mr Gillham who added that Mr Marrable's summary had been very full. Mr Whetstone said this Committee was not an employment one.

Mr Cooper asked about how the NE Panel works. Ms Mortimer said, meeting twice a year, it is chaired by James Seymour (NE) and its other members are Jason Lavender (Joint Director, High Weald AONB Unit), a staff member of the RSPB (an organisation well-versed in heathland management) and Dr Tait. The Panel's role is to ensure that NE objectives are met, to provide technical advice and to see that funds are well spent. Mr Marrable and she, as the respective 'leads' for the Board and NE respectively, present to it what has been done and what is proposed. On most sites someone like she alone would fulfil the role of the Panel but the scale of the Forest's scheme has required something more.

Mr Cooper then asked what happens if there is a divergence between the Board and NE. Dr Tait said that the Panel is there to ensure that what the Board proposes makes technical sense. To Mr Thornley-Taylor's query at the role of the Finance and Resources Committee, he added that the Panel does not go down to '£ s d' level, but only sees that figures are reasonable and checks and approves the previous six months' expenditure. Mr Thornley-Taylor said that the use of HLS funds must be properly accounted for, to which Mr Cooper sought clarification that HLS funds are now being segregated, and Mr Glyn said he never had any doubts that HLS would work, that checks and balances already exist in the current team and anyway, after all, both NE and the Board are working in the same direction with respect to heathland management.

Dr Tait said that NE would not pay for expenditure only if the Board had made a wilful decision not to comply with the Environmental Stewardship Agreement, rather than if things merely go wrong.

d) Land acquisition in support of grazing project.

Ca 5.5 acres of land at Golden Castle (Chuck Hatch) have finally been purchased. The Society of Friends made the initial payment.

e) Tenders for bracken and rhododendron spraying contracts over the summer have been awarded.

## **5) AOB**

Ms Mortimer asked if 'English Nature' could be replaced by 'Natural England' on the Board's website.

Mr Stenhouse said that the Board had not taken the public into its confidence. He mentioned the Board's work that had led to the opening up of roads, the loss of little owls in trees, light pollution, noise, deforestation, the increased potential for flooding in Uckfield, and soil erosion. Also, he said, the 3KQ documentation is seen as presenting a plan and he demanded a moratorium on felling. Climate change was also an issue that needs to be taken seriously.

Mr Whetstone said that not everyone agrees with the global warming case. Ms Mortimer said that the Forest plan is under development and that the Board is on the right track although, she added, there could be more on the website.

Mr Gillham said that it is difficult to pick fact from fiction in Mr Stenhouse's statement. The Board is conserving heathland and much of this past winter's work was agreed in 2001. For the first time the Board now has resources to restore heathland. The cutting of trees always elicits protest yet, he stated, if the Board ever felt that the force of public opinion prevented it from felling trees in order to conserve or restore the heathland, then he would resign from the Board since this would mean that he could no longer fulfil his role as a Conservator. Mr Gillham added that he had served on the Board for seventeen years in order to try to achieve the restoration of the heathland of the Forest and that the letter published in the *Daily Telegraph* today was appalling and very inaccurate. Mr. Stenhouse replied that he had been on the Board too long.

Mr Glyn said that what was disheartening was the aggressive nature of people's expression of their views. There was little considered thought. The letter shows such a depth of ignorance it precludes any simple comment. If people are going to be educated, it must be an active process, and the Centre itself needs bringing into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. If education, including interpretation, is expensive, ignorance, he said, is even more so. Heathland exists on the Forest because of the past activities of commoners; now, however, the Board must get grants to conserve it. He wondered what NE thought about a Board that questioned the use of its grants. The *Daily Telegraph* letter was stupid.

Mr Stenhouse replied that, over the years, the Board has not taken the public into its confidence; many people are very angry. Mr Gillham said that this was quite extraordinary and bizarre: Mr Stenhouse turned up year after year at Commons' meetings and ranted about the management of the Forest. Then, despite being given the facts at those meetings, he had eventually attended a public meeting at Crowborough where he had taken the opportunity to disseminate untruths. Mr Gillham added that if the rest of the world appears to be standing on its head then Mr Stenhouse might just consider the possibility that it was actually him that was upside down. It was noted that Mr Stenhouse laughed at this comment. Mr Gillham asked him if he found the comment amusing; Mr Stenhouse replied that he did.

Mr Whetstone said that the Board has missed opportunities to obtain views from parish councils and suggested the setting up of a forum like that used on the South Downs. Mr Gillham thought this might emerge via 3KQ.

Mr Glyn asked the members of the Committee to take great care with the accuracy of the information they presented. He said that there is no evidence that heathland conservation causes global warming, indeed there is more carbon locked up in soil than in vegetation; that heathland is capable of absorbing water and that it is scaremongering to suggest that Uckfield gets flooded as a result.

At this point (1803) Mr Stenhouse left the meeting, saying that he would not be lectured by Mr Glyn and that the meeting had gone on too long.

Dr Tait said he had been on this Committee for 25 years. Through all that time the same issues have been coming to the fore and for much of it the Board had had very few resources. Only through HLS has it become able to go out much more to inform the public – this is an expensive process. Mr Harding agreed that it was important to get public input. There was a brief discussion of the merits or otherwise of holding a public meeting, as was done by WDC after the Uckfield flooding and by the Board in the run-up to fencing part of the Forest in the 1990s. It was acknowledged that the advice of 3KQ was not to hold such a meeting. Mr Gillham remembered that, despite the public furore at the time expressed at these meetings, few people objected to fencing now.

*The meeting finished at 1817.*