

Minutes of the
ASHDOWN FOREST
CONSERVATION COMMITTEE MEETING

1430, Monday 16 January 2006

Ashdown Forest Centre

Present Mr L. Gillham (Chairman), Mr P. Glyn, Mr M. Knight (EN), Mr C. Marrable (Conservation Officer), Mr F. Marshall, Mrs R. O'Keefe, Dr H. Prendergast (Clerk), Dr A. Tait (ESCC), Mr A. White, Mrs J. Wirdnam, Dr A. Woodcock (ESCC).

Also present Mr J. Barnes.

Apologies Mr F. Brown, Mr M. Cooper, Ms J. Mortimer (DEFRA), (also Mr. R. Parsons).

One member of the public was present.

1) Update

i) Higher Level Stewardship (HLS). Mr Marrable reported on progress with the Forest's application to join HLS. The Rural Land Registry (RLR) have managed to lose the Forest entirely! They wrote to say that we had not registered the Forest land and that we must do so by the following day or miss the final deadline - this despite the fact that their Final Version maps had already been received here! Jane Mortimer was informed and has sent the RLR maps back to the RLR for copying. A digital copy of the Forest maps was also sent which *should* make re-creation very easy. The Forest has been issued with a new Holding Number (41/024/0302). This may cause some problems to those Commoners who have registered their common rights against the old Holding Number.

On funding, none will be forthcoming until the Forest has received the relevant maps. HLS will not pay for arrears. Dr Prendergast said that the "5th" Countryside Stewardship Scheme (the one withdrawn at Defra's suggestion because of the supposed imminence of HLS) contracts were costing about £40k (the exact figure is £39,872.30) and that the Weald Heathland Initiative will fund these to the tune of 33% - i.e. there will be a shortfall of ca. £7,000 (given that Defra grants effectively cover ca. 50% of costs).

There was some discussion about Defra's role in introducing HLS. Mr Barnes suggested contacting the Public Accounts Committee about Defra's lack of use of modern technology. Mr Glyn will contact Mr Charles Hendry MP about how to do this. He has already sent letters of complaint to Defra via Mr Hendry and received replies from the Minister, Lord Bach. The Committee agreed that it had received as much support as possible from Ms Jane Mortimer.

ii) English Nature conservation objectives. Mr Knight explained that EN has a programme to write conservation objectives and common standards for monitoring SSSIs across Britain. The standards are sets of guidance on habitats (e.g. lowland heathland) and species (e.g. certain invertebrates) that can be features of SSSIs. The work has been underway for 3-4 years and is now almost complete.

For an individual site, the aim is to establish the main features of interest as in its original notification as an SSSI. At present EN produces a generic document for these features then local conservation officers adjust it to make it site specific. One for the Forest is being developed in consultation with Forest staff and others.

The objectives specify a number of attributes and their parameters, for example the percentage of open space in woodland or, for lowland heathland, the amount of bare ground, the age structure of heather, the extent of tree cover etc.. The objectives do not specify management regimes such as (for a woodland) coppicing or clear felling. It is up to site managers to select how objectives will be met.

In answer to a question from Mr Gillham, Mr Knight said that the objectives will define the ratio of heathland/woodland. There is a degree of pragmatism. On the Forest, woodlands might be divided into three categories: those that existed at the time of notification; those that form part of what is otherwise a lowland heathland compartment (with an maximum extent defined in the objectives); and those that are part of the site 'fabric', having perhaps no particular interest. Conservation objectives for sites with EU status will follow the same format.

Mr Marrable said that the introduction of conservation objectives will help direct future spend across the whole Forest. Mr Barnes asked to what extent management is aimed at 'rolling back' the changes that have occurred in the landscape, for example with reference to woodland cover. Mr Knight said that it is likely that a maximum woodland cover (as a percentage of the Forest area) would be set, beyond which the Forest would then be deemed in 'unfavourable condition'. There is no classified ancient woodland on that part of the Forest managed by the Conservators.

Mrs Wirdnam asked about monitoring. Mr Knight replied that sites are divided into management units each of which is visited at least every six years. They are assessed as either 'unfavourable declining', 'unfavourable no change', 'unfavourable recovering' or 'favourable'. The EN Public Service Agreement is to ensure that 95% of SSSIs have a 'favourable' or 'unfavourable recovering' status by 2010.

Dr Tait said that the list of features is quite restricted and does not cover, for example, public enjoyment and other nature conservation aspects. Mr Barnes added that the conservation objectives are a sub-set of the Conservators' wider objectives and asked whether the former might conflict with, for example, heritage, landscape or archaeological features on the Forest. Dr Tait said there was no need for conflict. The conservation objectives are a strong tool to extract funding and represent a challenge to add on to other objectives. Dr Woodcock said that archaeological concerns are more about how objectives are achieved rather than what they actually are. Mr Marrable said that the Farm Environment Plan under HLS has a big emphasis on archaeology.

iii) Whitehouse Farm. A binding contract has been signed by the Osbornes and the Conservators and the land is currently being transferred to the latter. Contractors may start work this or next week. A legal licence for the use of the building will be drawn up as the building nears completion.

2) Monitoring

Mr Marrable reported on plans for this year.

i) Birds. The British Trust for Ornithology is organising national surveys of the Woodlark and Dartford Warbler. The Ashdown Forest Bird Group is co-ordinating work locally. The Group will

also continue to survey all Forest birds but it is hoped that recording will be streamlined by their sending of data directly to the Sussex Ornithological Society and the Sussex Biodiversity Record Centre (housed at the Sussex Wildlife Trust), rather than have them processed at the Forest Centre first (as happened in previous years).

ii) Reptiles. Following a training course carried out last summer (paid for by the Weald Heathland Initiative and attended by Forest Rangers and others), two sets of reptile surveys will be set up. One will establish the presence/likely absence of reptiles for each kilometre square of the Forest and the second will be a long-term trial using refugia (corrugated tin and roofing felt which attract the animals) to determine, for example, the impact of grazing. It is hoped that most of this new work will be undertaken by trained volunteers.

iii) Invertebrates. Nine ant and seven butterfly transects will continue. It is anticipated that Richard Allum will take over the long-term transect run by David King.

3) Opening Committee meetings to the public

Mr Gillham said there was no ruling on having meetings open to the public but they certainly were at the time of the first fencing proposal.

Dr Prendergast said that he had always understood that Committee meetings were closed to the general public and/or that it was not always explained clearly to the public that they were open. He suggested a need for increased transparency.

Mr Marrable said that last summer he attended a training workshop for stakeholder analysis. With EN, who have offered support, there have since been discussions about creating a means for approaching anyone interested in Forest issues. The current idea is to employ someone to plan how local people are consulted and informed, for example by setting up some sort of forum. Mr Gillham welcomed any initiative that improved communications and Mr Glyn welcomed the allocation of resources from EN. Mr Barnes said that it was important to have a clear set of objectives.

Mr Marrable briefly described the CMS software package developed by the Countryside Commission for Wales for making management plans that are accessible, systematic, detailed, and all inclusive, covering all the issues just discussed as well as, for example, future workloads and budgets. He is attending a second course on the use of CMS in Wales next week.

Mr Glyn commented that such an innovation will help dispel any lingering perception that the Board is stuck with working with legislation from 30 years ago.

4) AOB

i) In answer to a question from Mr White, Dr Prendergast said that staff were happy with the work done by contractors (and funded by the Forestry Commission) on Rhododendron control in Tabell Ghyll and down Priory Road. He said that the aim is total eradication although this will be difficult to achieve.

ii) Dr Prendergast reported said that Rangers have dealt with 24 deer RTAs in the week beginning 9 January (at 0830), the highest ever (half the annual total of ca. 20 years ago). He said that, because of the impact on other Forest work, a limit will have to be set to which areas will be covered. Half the RTAs were along the A22 at Pippingford/Chelwood Vachery – a

particularly bad area due to the combination of traffic volume, speed and headlight glare, and proximity to the extensive private areas in the middle of the Forest.

Mr Marshall said that he had discussed a deer warden scheme to deal with RTAs in the county with ESCC and Sussex Police but that the key staff there had left their posts and momentum had been lost. In 2005 the Police sent out letters to local stalkers saying that they were obliged to work 24 hours/day. This they found unacceptable and now there is only one stalker in the area (apart from Forest staff) where once there were five or six.

Mr Gillham suggested that Mr Barnes informs the ESCC member for planning and transportation about the failure of the discussions with the Police and how Forest staff are having to cut down on their geographical coverage because of the numbers of deer involved. He added that there is still a perception that the Forest owns the deer and reminded the Committee that the Forest has no obligation to work on deer RTAs. Mr Glyn said that local veterinary practices used not to charge for wild animal work.

Mr Gillham said that at the Commoners Annual Meeting last March it was stated that the Forest does not fell woodland alongside road-side verges simply in order to increase visibility of deer. Dr Prendergast said roadside felling required special H+S procedures, the use of traffic lights and a large number of personnel. A contract awarded in 2005 to fell dangerous trees along Hindleap Road would give a good idea of the costs involved. Mr Marrable said that the wide verges by the Ashdown Park Hotel, that attract deer, did not prevent that area being one of the black spots for RTAs. It is at night that most accidents occur.

The Committee agreed that it would be a good idea to issue a press release about the numbers of deer casualties on the Forest. [NB. The morning after the meeting the RSPCA attracted wide publicity having already issued a press release about Forest deer casualties. Considerable media coverage followed.]

iii) The Committee discussed calls for meetings from Crowborough and Maresfield Parish Councils for meetings about the extension of grazing. The Committee felt that nothing could be done without funding for fencing or other management options and that no decision would be taken without public consultation.

The meeting finished at 1619.