

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

1430, Monday 14 January 2008
Vachery lay-by (A22) for a field visit to the Shepherded grazing project
1530 at the Forest Centre

Present Mr P Glyn (Chairman), Mr L Gillham, Mr J Harding (Forestry Commission), Cllr M Hoy, Mr C Marrable (Conservation Officer), Dr H Prendergast (Clerk), Cllr R St Pierre, Mrs J Robertson (NE), Mr E Stenhouse and Dr A Tait (ESCC Ecologist).

Also present: Cllr J Barnes and Cllr F Whetstone.

The Chairman opened the meeting, welcomed the member of the public present and invited questions for 10 minutes from the floor.

The following notes on the questions/ answers are an aide memoire only and do not form part of the minutes of the Meeting of the Conservation Committee.

Mr Alan White

Regarding the clearing of rhododendron at Duddleswell, he had noted that the bushes were cut in such a way that stumps of one foot to 18 inches long were left. Would these stumps be treated with chemicals?

The Chairman thanked Mr White and asked the Clerk to respond. The Clerk stated that the stumps would be treated with herbicide in due course, either this or next summer, as part of the five year rhododendron control plan.

1/08 Apologies

Mr M Cooper, Miss L Hutchby (Natural England [NE]), Mr Caspar Johnson (ESCC Archaeologist), and Mr J Spicer.

2/08 Declarations of Interest

There was none.

3/08 Site visit to the shepherded grazing project

There was a short discussion regarding the earlier site visit to visit Louise Amos and the flock of Hebridean sheep on heathland by the Vachery. The Chairman asked Mr Marrable to remind the Committee why the project was happening. Mr Marrable said that the project was an important additional tool in heathland management; fencing was contentious and this method did not require fences to be erected. Mr Stenhouse responded by stating what he considered to be the limitations of the project namely that there were not enough sheep grazing for too short a period and that to rectify this a greater number of sheep were required. However, this would mean additional costs, increased transport and manpower requirements and this was, in his view, a serious problem.

The Chairman thanked Mr Stenhouse for his comments and said he was right to draw the Committee's attention to the limitations and logistical issues. He asked Mr Stenhouse what the alternatives were.

Dr Tait commented that Hebridean sheep were daylight grazers and that, compared with fenced livestock that graze where they will, close-herded sheep could be placed where they could do the most good. He went on to say the project was complementary to other mechanical efforts. The Clerk commented that Hebrideans were proven successful grazers of purple moor grass, bracken, birch and gorse.

Cllr Barnes asked how the project was being monitored and if samples were being taken. Mr Marrable replied that there was a full photographic record being compiled.

Cllr Barnes commented that cost effectiveness had to be measured against the equally expensive but objectionable alternative of fencing. The Chairman stated that there would be no further permanent fencing on the Forest in the foreseeable future and that the grazing project was receiving positive feedback from the public. Mrs Robertson commented that temporary enclosure fencing may be considered. Mr Marrable said that some deer fencing might be considered but that nothing was currently planned. Cllr Whetstone stated, that in his opinion, the grazing was not making any difference in creating more grassland and that more sheep were needed. He went on to say he was not sure if fenced grazing was working. In response Mr Gillham stated that it was never the aim of the Committee to increase grassland with grazing; rather, with the assistance of the Rousseau, grazing inhibited the re-growth of scrub, birch and gorse. He went on to say that grazing of the southern slopes of the Misbourne valley successfully demonstrated this.

4/08 Financial information for this cost centre

A document on Conservation Committee expenditure was tabled and Mr Marrable and the Clerk expanded on the document. There was then a short discussion regarding budgets. Cllr Whetstone asked why it appeared there was less budgeted for woodland and the Clerk responded that there would be less spent as rhododendron clearance had moved to spraying of re-growth rather than cutting. Mr Marrable reported that stump management continued and the archaeology project still had a little way to go before completion.

5/08 Woodland Management Plan

The Woodland Management Plan was circulated to the Committee at the meeting. Mr Marrable stated that the plan, only received at the end of the previous week, was not a draft but was incomplete. He drew attention to the objectives which were of particular interest and recommended that the proposals for management should be examined before the document was taken forward.

The Chairman asked Mr Marrable to describe the origins of the document. Mr Marrable explained that an application was made to the Forestry Commission to write the plan. The 1000ha of woodland on the Forest was important from a biodiversity and amenity point of view and it needed to be managed based on informed decisions. The writing of the Plan will be 50% funded by the Forestry Commission. He went on to say there was no immediate deadline as the current Woodland Grant Scheme runs out in 2010. However, ESUS, who were contracted to write the Plan, want it completed and signed

off before 2010. Mr Marrable asked that any comments on the plan be sent directly to him.

Mr Harding stated that the document needs to be certified in plenty of time in order to apply for the grant and to ensure funding continuity.

There was criticism, from some members of the Committee, on the standard of the document. Dr Tait reported that ESUS were well known specialists in small woodland management.

Cllr Whetstone asked the Clerk if the remaining 50% for the plan was budgeted for and both the Chairman and the Clerk responded that it was.

6/08 Winter conservation update

A plan of the winter work had been pre-circulated. There was a short discussion regarding the plan. Mr Marrable stated that area 'K' has been put on hold as there was a need to create access to the site; area 'D' was now shelved as it was too far gone and would be included in woodland management. He went on to explain that some work was a little behind schedule as a result of two Rangers' ill health and the poor winter weather.

The Chairman asked if there had been many complaints and Mr Marrable responded there had been two or three; however, two residents had chosen to contact their MP rather than the Office. Cllr St Pierre commented that this was common practice and seen as a method of jumping the queue and with the best complaints system in the world it would always happen.

Mr Stenhouse stated that he had received two specific complaints and a dozen 'whinges'. He went on to say that he had asked, last year, for detailed plans to be made widely available to everyone who was likely to be affected by winter work, i.e. where access was going to be and where stacks were to be located. He stated that residents should be invited to make comments and that the information currently available was too generalist. He also stated that he had received complaints regarding smoke and that chipping would also cause complaints due to the noise. He went on to say that, in his opinion, people do not get satisfactory answers from the Forest Centre.

The Chairman responded that the Forest Centre do inform the public as much as possible with the website, posters at all sites etc. However, if the Rangers needed to knock on residents' doors and explain what is going on they should do so and that more detailed explanations should be publicised in parish magazines. The Clerk responded that parish magazines had not yet been contacted but all the Parish Councils had, that notices with Ranger contact numbers were up around all sites and that there has been a walk on site to explain what was going on.

Mr Gillham stated that the parish magazines were a very easy way of disseminating information and were closely read each month.

The Clerk responded that work for winter 2008 was being planned now and contracts would be signed up by early summer. Cllr Barnes stated that he thought a broad non-specific indication of work be given to residents at the earliest opportunity followed up by specific plans and encouragement to give opinions. However, it needs to be a flexible

and responsive document. The Chairman stated that if the document existed it should be made available now but should state that it is subject to change and that greater detail will be made known when available.

There was a short discussion regarding the level of detail on the pre-circulated winter work progress plan and Mr Stenhouse asked if the roads could be shown with scale and reference points. He also wanted to know who the Rangers were and the chases with their boundaries.

It was agreed that the schedule, with as much detail as possible, would be made available to parish magazines.

7/08 Preparation for HLS Panel meeting

7.1/08 Pond and Archaeology Surveys

Detailed documents were circulated prior to the meeting for information purposes. Mr Marrable stated such work had not been undertaken before and illustrated how much we have learned about the Forest. He went on to say there were two more stages to go and a potential publication. There was a short discussion on the validity of recording WWII archaeology.

7.2/08 CLM Green Waste scoping study

The Chairman commented that the document required some heavy editing. Mr Marrable commented that the document contained some very useful background material. Mr Stenhouse stated that he had read the document closely and found it to be very poor with no aims, no terms of reference, contradictory conclusions and technical errors. It was, in his opinion, a waste of money. He went on to say that he had had a great deal of experience dealing with this topic and, in his opinion, the terms of reference were wrong. Mr Stenhouse went on to explain how he would have handled the calculations and terms of reference.

Mr Marrable commented that the document gave useful indicators that could be worked on, there had been many discussions with CLM and there would be no subsequent document from them. The Chairman said that the Committee needed proposals and policy decisions in order to determine the way forward.

There followed a short discussion on the pros and cons of burning as it was recognised as being the fastest and most economical method of getting rid of brash and arisings. Cllr Barnes asked Mrs Robertson if NE were ruling out burning and she replied that that was not necessarily the case.

This was followed by a short discussion on the pros and cons of chippers and the recent chipper demonstration. Mr Marrable explained that it was important for the Rangers to see chippers working in the field and that they were looking very closely at what chippers were available. Cllr Barnes stated that even though the chipper demonstration had not been a success several important lessons had been learned and the idea of what specifications required had been improved. Mr Stenhouse stated he wanted to see something purchased that was tried and tested and see a document on chippers. After further discussion it was agreed a paper on options for chippers was needed as soon as possible.

Mr Marrable asked if burning would continue and/or chipping be explored as the Rangers needed to know in order to get the contracts out as soon as possible. Mr Marrable went on to say that as Mr Stenhouse has expertise in this area he would be very happy to work with him. Mr Stenhouse responded that he had contacts with the organisations involved in the Exmoor bracken work who would give their views for a fee. Cllr St Pierre asked that Mr Marrable and Mr Stenhouse work together to produce a paper, drawing on expert knowledge, to evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of both methods that could be presented to the Board.

It was agreed that Mr Marrable and Mr Stenhouse work together to produce a paper on the advantages and disadvantages of burning versus chipping to be presented to the Board.

It was agreed a paper on chippers and their specifications was needed as soon as possible and that it should be circulated via e-mail to members of the Committee.

8/08 Grazing project assistant shepherd

A job specification had been pre-circulated. Cllr Whetstone stated he did not like the presentation of the specification and queried the use of the term 'project'. Mrs Robertson responded that, in the conservation world, this term was widely used and understood. Mr Stenhouse stated that he did not see why an assistant was needed at all and was it costed. The Clerk responded that Miss Amos had explained this during the field visit and she was unable to work seven days per week without any breaks, plus carry on the background work. Cllr Barnes stated that the costings for the post had in fact been approved and the agenda item was to look at the detail of the post not the principle. Cllr St Pierre asked the post be advertised widely and Mr Marrable confirmed that it would be.

9/08 Any urgent item for which the Clerk has notice in order to pass to the elected Chairman.

There was none.

The meeting closed at 17.00