

Minutes of the
ASHDOWN FOREST
CONSERVATION COMMITTEE MEETING

1430, Monday 4 July 2005

Ashdown Forest Centre

Present: Mr L. Gillham (Chairman), Mr M. Cooper, Mr F. Brown, Mr P. Glyn, Ms L. Hutchby (EN), Mr F. Marshall, Mr C. Marrable, Dr H. Prendergast, Mr A. White, Mrs J. Wirdnam

Apologies: Ms J. Mortimer (DEFRA) Dr A. Tait (ESCC), Dr A. Woodcock (ESCC)

1) New barn at Whitehouse Farm

Ms Hutchby said that EN could pay 50% of costs or up to a maximum of £25k; the funds must be spent by the end of March 2006. It was agreed that Mr Marrable should seek new quotes (the last ones were ca. £40k) and that he visit a local solicitor to start the legal process of land transfer. To recall, the Board has set aside £50k in case of funding problems; it will acquire the freehold of the land and barn; and the sole leasees will be Mr H. Osborne and his son.

2) Higher Level Stewardship update

Mr Marrable reported that Ms Mortimer had emailed to say that there were still no DEFRA maps available for the Forest. Maps are required for applications. The Forest has supposedly been fast-tracked although commonland generally is deemed to be of low priority compared with agricultural land. It is possible that applicants may be able to submit their own maps or that those made for CRoW access may be used.

The Forest's Farm Environment Plan has been completed. It includes, as it has too, an archaeology report; this was obtained from ESCC.

3) Monitoring

The team of entomologists is now looking at meadows, verges and hedgerows in the Forest area, extending the heathland work from last year. The report from that work is now all but finished, and is already attracting a lot of interest nationally; it may, for example, lead to a grazing workshop.

In answer to a question from Mr Cooper, Mr Marrable said that the interesting points from the report will be those that relate to management and that a précis would go into various media in entomological and ecological circles, i.e. the results will not be 'lost' for want of publication and dissemination.

Ant and seven butterfly transects are taking place this summer and the Bird Group is very active.

Mr Hutchby said that EN is writing a Conservation Objectives document for all SSSIs, suggesting how they might be managed. The documents will define favourable condition, and will specify what habitats look like rather than the means to achieve them. The Forest is complicated because of the range of species for which it is important. Guidance notes for birds have been written but

not yet for invertebrates. She was planning an autumn workshop with national experts to help develop a document for the Forest.

After a brief discussion on the subject, it was agreed that controlled burning should not be overlooked as a management option for the Forest.

4) Stakeholder consultation and conflict management training plus AF strategy development

Ms Hutchby explained that 'stakeholder' means anyone interested in the Forest. She added that getting public opinion on board would be vital for extending grazing on the Forest, especially if fencing is needed, and that professional help could be brought in to provide advice on preparing a plan of action. EN has funds for organising a training course in October. The course would help land managers prepare for their future actions (e.g. introducing grazing), how to defuse problems before they arise, and to resolve conflicts. A consultation strategy could be drawn up. When problems do arise, Mr Marrable said that it was important to use expertise that was demonstrably impartial, not from environmental organisations.

Mr Gillham said that it was important that Forest users are kept informed about changes on the Forest.

5) AOB

In answer to a question from Mr Glyn, Ms Hutchby said that she had not yet seen a copy of the EN report on fencing common land. Not all organisations will sign up to its recommendations and every application for fencing will probably need its own justification.

Mr Marshall agreed to contact the Highways Agency about fencing the A22 against deer and Mr Gillham, recalling questions made at the last Commoners General Meeting, asked that costs be obtained for cutting trees back from roads. When Mr Cooper suggested improving publication of news about the Forest, Dr Prendergast said that he had had initial discussion about this with the Friends. One idea was to build on the *Volunteers Newsletter* that he currently produces (the three issues of 2004/2005 contained ca. 9000 words; copies of the June 2005 issue were handed out to Committee members afterwards).

Mr Marrable said that Ms Hutchby and he went to a meeting in Surrey on the subject of shepherding sheep on heathland in the Netherlands and Germany. On the Luneburgerheide eight shepherds each have 200 sheep which, at night, go into a barn. He has submitted a project brief to EN to explore whether shepherding would be possible on the Forest. One advantage of shepherding is that it circumvents the need for fencing. There are many fields in and around the Forest that are ready-made enclosures for in-bye land at night; temporary enclosures might also be possible. Ms Hutchby thought that a trial would be very worthwhile, even if it just maintains the profile of grazing. Mr Gillham said that shepherding had been rejected in the 1990s because of costs.

Mr Marrable said about 600 sheep were on the Forest. He had encouraged Mr Osborne to reduce the numbers from last year and recommended that the Board should continue to pay him the usual rate even if he has fewer animals out.

The meeting closed at 1608.