

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

1430, Monday 25 September 2006

Warren car park, Wych Cross

Members present: Mr L. Gillham (Chair), Cllr F. Brown, Mr M. Cooper, Mr P. Glyn, Mr C. Marrable (Conservation Officer), Mr F. Marshall, Ms J. Mortimer (Defra), Cllr R. O’Keeffe, Dr H. Prendergast (Clerk), Mr J. Spicer, Dr A. Tait (ESCC), Dr A. Woodcock (ESCC)

Apologies: Mr M. Knight (EN)

**1) Site visit – behind Warren car park**

The Committee met at Warren car park to look at an area of heathland re-creation (TQ 419322), cleared of trees in winter 2005/2006. Some of the land, behind the ‘Dump’, had been used up to ca. 30 years ago for burying rubbish found on the Forest.

Mr Marrable pointed out a (possibly WWI) trench system. According to Dr Woodcock there was no *documentary* evidence of archaeological remains in the area and recommended that old aerial photographs be scrutinised (NB. A previous search had in fact found nothing). At the bottom of the cleared site was a restored pond, that had filled well with water, and beyond it a stretch of young pines that were due to be cleared in order to connect two currently separated bits of heathland. For the sake of long-term mechanical management, Mr Marrable emphasised the importance of removing stumps that would otherwise harm machinery. Without HLS the heavy input required to put in place a sustainable management system would simply not be possible.

Out on Hindleap Heath, to which the area behind the Dump would be connected through selective tree felling, Mr Marrable spoke of how the ‘landscape’ look of a site needs to be considered, for example through leaving trees or groups of trees in the heath, and having scalloped rather than straight woodland edges beside heathland. Dr Tait remarked that the heath, although a tiny part of Ashdown, would anywhere else in the county be considered a large one!

1530, Ashdown Forest Centre

**2) Higher Level Scheme (HLS)**

a) Progress on the heathland management plan

Mr Marrable reported that he had met EN and Defra the previous week. They had agreed that a full-blown plan was not achievable by 1 February 2007, because of limited time for stakeholder engagement. Instead he had produced a draft *Ashdown Forest Heathland Management Protocol* which would, in finished form, and agreed by the Board, be perfectly acceptable to Natural England (NE, coming into being on 1 October 2006). NE will be happy to have an ‘unconsulted’ management plan as long as the consultative process is embedded within it. The production of the *Protocol* will have fulfilled the Board’s obligation to have a document by 1 February 2007.

Mr Marrable emphasised, repeatedly, that the *Protocol* spells out what *has* to be done, i.e. the non-negotiable targets set by HLS. The *Protocol* does not spell out the 'why', 'when', 'where' and how' – i.e. the process – by which the targets will be achieved. It is these that are at the core of the consultative process. Mr Marrable said that the only overall outcome is that the Forest's heathlands are in 'favourable condition'; this will have to be achieved whether or not there is an HLS agreement in place. 'Favourable condition' is not negotiable.

Ms Mortimer confirmed that funding for Ashdown Forest has been safeguarded at ca. £300k/year for ten years. She added that management over the next ten years will be geared towards easing subsequent management – i.e. aiming at the establishment of a sustainable system – although the Environmental Stewardship Agreement, under which the Board entered HLS, does not specify what should happen after the ten years. The *Protocol* expands on what is written into the Agreement by adding who is responsible for various activities and lists the projects that have been agreed, e.g. a grazing feasibility study (*not* grazing itself) to start in Year 1 of the Agreement, a composting study, and an aerial vegetation survey of the Forest's heathlands. Dr Tait said that the whole of the county had recently been photographed for the first time since 1999.

Mr Marrable once again emphasised that the *Protocol* was about the end-product of HLS; the more detailed management plan will list the options and form the basis of the consultative process. It is important that this process starts soon. Dr Prendergast said that the next step in this is a planning meeting with 3KQ on 4 October.

#### b) Implementation of HLS

Ms Mortimer said that NE was due to come into existence in the following week. One person in the new organisation will deal directly with each agreement or site holder. At present it appears that she will be the official person, and Ms Louise Hutchby (EN) will be an adviser. Mr Michael Knight will be working in another team.

Ms Mortimer said that she and Mr Marrable had been arranging a time-table for when discussions will take place: one week in each quarter will be set aside, as well as both of them attending Conservation Committee and HLS Panel meetings. The Panel itself will comprise NE staff: Mr J. Seymour or Mr M. Smith as the Chair (and budgetary controller), an historic landscape specialist, Dr I. Alonso as heathland ecologist (currently with EN) and other specialists in natural resource protection, and public access and understanding.

Mr Cooper said how much he welcomed the positive attitude of Ms Mortimer and Mr Glyn gave credit to Mr Marrable on his contribution to progress so far.

#### c) Progress on English Nature Conservation Objectives

In the absence of Mr Knight Mr Marrable said that he was due to meet Ms Hutchby this week to discuss the finalising of Conservation Objectives. They were also due to simplify mapping units and harmonise them with woodland and heathland habitat boundaries.

#### d) Progress on protection of the historic environment

Dr Woodcock reminded the Committee of a detailed project proposal, done two years ago by Chris Blandford Associates, on research, conservation and management of archaeological features on the Forest. On getting an historic environment input into the HLS management plan, he said that he would welcome a rapid survey (in winter) looking at new sites, drawing their boundaries and coming up with broad guidelines on how they need to be protected. He estimated the cost of using an

external consultant at ca. £2000. More detailed work could be done if the bid made to the Heritage Lottery Fund by the High Weald Unit (in its so-called Forest Ridge project) is successful.

Dr Woodcock agreed to write up a brief for this winter's work and send it to Mr Marrable.

e) Staffing responsibilities for Ashdown Forest under Natural England

This subject had already been covered.

Mr Marrable showed a draft document showing staff needs for delivering HLS objectives in Year 1.

Work with 3KQ will need administrative support from Forest staff. It had previously been suggested that the post-holder could start on a one-year contract then, as 3KQ involvement declines, gradually take over as the 'capacity builder'. It was agreed that getting this post filled was a priority.

The archaeological and 'by-product' (including bracken composting) projects could be contracted out. The 'grazing feasibility study' will need one person for at least three years. The drawing up of the pertinent job description, person specification and advertisement, as well as making contact with likely interested parties (all 'cost-neutral' activities), can all be done to take advantage of the first tranche of payment from Defra in February 2007.

How many posts, either staff or contractors, are needed for the delivery of biodiversity targets is not yet known, especially as the EN Conservation Objectives have yet to be finalised. All staffing requirements will need to go before the review group being set up for the purpose.

In answer to a question about funds being carried over from one year to the next, Ms Mortimer said that they can, for example if they need to be set aside for a big project years later. Defra's funds are based on an area payment and are performance-based, i.e. based on the Board having done its best to achieve objectives. The £150k will arrive every six months and it is up to the Board to manage how to spend it. She added that it vital that the funds are ring-fenced.

Dr Tait said that the environmental budget of ESCC (out of which the grant to the Forest comes) is being reduced, with projections being made for a 25% cut.

Mr Gillham remarked on the massive contrast between the position now with when he first became involved with the Forest 16 years ago. Then there were no funds available and the Conservators were effectively 'managing' the decline of the Forest. Now the Conservators are tussling with huge new opportunities and with getting the best of options available to them!

### **3) AOB**

Mr Marshall recommended members to have a look at the new barn at Whitehouse Farm.

Dr Woodcock announced that he is retiring on 13 October; his successor will be Caspar Johnson. On behalf of the Committee Mr Gillham thanked Dr Woodcock for his input into the Forest over the years.

The meeting closed at 1719.