

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

1400, Monday 29 September 2008

Wrens Warren car park then Education Barn, Ashdown Forest Centre

Present Mr P Glyn (Chairman), Mr M Cooper, Mr C Johnson (ESCC Archaeologist), Mr C Marrable (Conservation Officer), Dr H Prendergast (Clerk), Mrs J Robertson (NE), Cllr R St Pierre (at Centre only), Mr J Spicer (at Centre only), Mr E Stenhouse, Dr A Tait (ESCC Ecologist).

There was one member of the public present.

The Chairman welcomed back Dr Tait after his leave.

29/08 Site visit with Louise Amos to see the effect of sheep on vegetation

The Committee met at Wren's Warren car park and, after an hour on site, returned to the Forest Centre. Members were able to see adjacent sites of unmown, mown and grazed mown areas. En route, Mr Marrable pointed out a Ghyll wood and reminded members of the contribution of their rare ferns and mosses to SSSI notification and their consequent management to promote required shade and humidity in contrast to management for heathland. The party also saw archaeological features including part of the 17th century pale around Wrens Warren and one of the many shallow quarries that provided road stone before metalling of roads became widespread. A typical marsh gentian site was also demonstrated to illustrate the ecological dilemma of providing the correct level of moderate disturbance to conserve this iconic species. The group also passed one of the winter work sites, H017, due for scrub clearance.

30/08 Apologies

Cllr J Barnes, Mr L Gillham, Mr J Harding (Forestry Commission) and Cllr M Hoy.

31/08 Declarations of Interest

There was none.

32/08 Discussion of site visit

The Clerk commented that key elements of the project had been clearly visible on site. It was obvious that the sheep were selecting certain plants such as purple moor grass. There was a clear difference between areas that had been mown to a uniform height and areas that had been grazed. It was also noted that Miss Amos is able to determine how long the sheep stayed on each site thus allowing grazing intensity to vary as required. The Clerk repeated a point made by Mr Marrable on site, namely that of the 1000 hectares of heathland that were currently ungrazed, only a certain proportion actually could or should be grazed. He went on to say that Dr Tait's report of Chailey Common putting forward an application to fence their perimeter was of interest and selling of a sheep a week from the Hebridean flock there may point to a future option on the Forest.

Mr Stenhouse stated that no PR value should be given to the project until it was proven what the sheep could do and what the long term benefits were. The Clerk responded that public relations were an intrinsic part of the project from day one and, even if the project was withdrawn, the PR was already outstanding.

The Chairman responded that the Board applied for HLS money to take the project forward and that it was a feasibility study that will not automatically be continued at the end of the trial. Selective grazing as a management tool was widely accepted as desirable and it implied to the public that the Board were doing their best for the Forest management in a sympathetic way. He agreed that this feeling was hard to quantify but was an important factor nonetheless. He also agreed that the project needed to be fully assessed at the end of the study. The Chairman also commented that the costs of mowing, with all its drawbacks, were substantial and quantified.

Dr Tait stated that close herded shepherding was feasible, there was no doubt that grazing was a practical management tool that worked and this was clearly being demonstrated by the project.

Mr Johnson stated that, from an archaeological point of view, he was delighted to see grazing. He went on to say that light grazing caused far less damage to surface features than mowing and that archaeological sites could be easily worked around and damaging tree growth successfully suppressed.

Mr Stenhouse stated that, after the site visit, the effect that a shepherd, dogs and sheep had was self-evident and went on to say that there should be thought given to electric fencing and grazing without a person and, if not against the Act, fixed fencing. He went on to say there were issues outside the physical effort that had not been addressed in the report. The Clerk responded that electric fencing might be considered and there was a short discussion regarding fixed fencing, electric fencing and the Commons Act. Dr Tait stated that electric fencing was not a cheap option but that it probably had a role. He went on to say all options had slightly differing benefits and problems; however, the prime benefit with herded shepherding was the high degree of control and the added benefit of its popularity with the public.

There was a short discussion regarding the grazing and fencing methods currently used and proposed at Chailey Common.

Mr Cooper commented that he agreed there remained questions to be answered and that it was important to consider public relations. He went on to say there had been recent improvement in the reputation of the Board and fully agreed that public perception of the grazing project, though not logical, had value in the overall consideration of the project.

33/08 Conservation Reports – CON 15/08

Butterfly transects and Plant Surveys

This document had been circulated. Mr Marrable reported that it had been a poor year for butterflies. The early marsh orchids had increased in numbers in all colonies, all of which are found in the grazing area. The fragrant orchids may have been picked or eaten by deer and though this was unfortunate, they should return next year. There were no new groups of marsh gentians spotted although a new site for royal fern had been found. An illustration of a royal fern on the Forest was circulated by the Chairman and it was agreed this was a spectacular plant.

34/08 Financial information for this cost centre – CON 16/08

The document had been pre-circulated. The Chairman reported that the financial reports were complex and presentation varied according to who wanted to look at them and why. He had been concerned that there was a lack of clarity. He thanked Mr Thornely-Taylor and Mrs Temple for their time and assistance and he hoped now to be in a position to explain the financial update to the Committee. The Chairman spoke to the document and drew the Committee's attention to page 3.

Woodland conservation – related to rhododendron control and was non-HLS. *Monitoring* – this was for woodland and not heathland. *Materials* – included herbicides (such as Asulox used on the East and West Chases as spray or stump treatment). There was a short discussion regarding spraying and bees and Dr Tait commented Asulox tended not to be sprayed where bees were present. *Stakeholder engagement* - project was now finished and the figure shown was a remaining invoice. *Heathland restoration* - related mainly to winter work and so only 3% had been spent so far. *HLS fencing* - an estimate covering repairs to fences and gates all of which were now nine-years-old. *Chipping* - enabling a chipper to be purchased should the opportunity arise, however, there was still a debate ongoing about how to handle with arisings and this figure was a contingency. *Pond survey* - a document that was complete and for internal use. If Committee members would like a copy they should contact Mr Marrable. *Archaeology* - related to Chris Butler's 90 page catalogue which is also an internal document available to Committee members electronically. There was a short discussion regarding this forming the basis of a publication. *Green waste scoping study* - this was not currently moving forward but the market may change. *Grazing payments* - it was noted these were made in February. *Grazing project* - it was reported that this would be re-budgeted, however, the Chairman

thought the budget somewhat pessimistic. *Staff training* - this covers the trailer test for shepherding assistant. *VAT* - the Chairman reported that this was a very complex area that made the production of an accurate cash flow forecast not possible. *Software* - this covered CMS7 and GIS support.

The Chairman drew the Committee's attention to the HLS non-conservation portion of page 3 which covers the publication of Ashdown Forest Life and other outsourced expenditure. It also includes wages, PAYE on-costs and use of buildings. *Heathland restoration* – covers bracken and ride mowing, tractor driver work, grazing project work and some management time.

Mr Stenhouse asked if the funding shortfall issue had been resolved and the Clerk replied it had, however, the cheque had not yet arrived. Mrs Robertson stated that the error had been an NE internal mistake and offered apologies to the Board. She went on to say a system had been put in place to reimburse the Board and a cheque would be on the way.

Mr Stenhouse stated that there had been a paper on chipping some time ago which indicated more work was needed. There followed a short discussion on chipping and the chipping contingency in the financial update and it was agreed that chipping should be removed from the financial update. There followed a further discussion regarding contingency funds in general and it was agreed that the Committee was happy to see the word 'contingency' used in the accounts.

The Chairman drew the Committee's attention to page 4. There was a short discussion regarding the possibility of work parties of probationers undertaking rhododendron clearance near Fairwarp for which £6000 was currently budgeted and other long term projects with up to 10 people working six hours per day. It was agreed that such work would require a professional follow-up. The Clerk commented that rhododendron work, for which funds are available through HLS, should not be given to work parties as a priority.

There was a short discussion regarding the items '*grazing*' and '*sheep*' and the Chairman explained '*sheep*' related to the purchase of animals while '*grazing*' referred to other costs such as feed and vet bills.

The Chairman asked if the Committee was now happy with the new format of the financial update and it was agreed the presentation was much improved.

35/08 Woodland Management Plan by ESUS – tabled

The document was tabled. The Chairman stated that the paper was an improvement on the previous version. He asked the Committee to read the papers at their leisure and the item would be the focus of a structured discussion at a future Committee and recommendations made to the Board. Mr Stenhouse asked if terms of reference could be provided and Mr Marrable agreed to do this.

36/08 Any urgent item for which the Clerk has notice in order to pass to the elected Chairman.

Mr Spicer asked about the situation with wood permits this year. Mr Marrable explained that enough felling licences had been obtained to allow the process to be the same as previous years. Those requiring a wood permit should contact the office and appointments would be made by the Chase Rangers to meet with Commoners and the public, on site, to mark up the trees. Mr Spicer commented that he had applied for, and had been granted, his own felling licence and the Clerk responded that it would be useful for the office to be aware of this.

The meeting closed at 17.00

Chairman _____

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