

Minutes of the

FINANCE AND GENERAL PURPOSES COMMITTEE MEETING OF THE BOARD OF CONSERVATORS OF ASHDOWN FOREST

1430, Monday 12 June 2006
Lancaster Room, Ashdown Forest Centre

Present Cllr R. Parsons (Chairman), Mr P. Glyn, Dr H. Prendergast (Clerk), Cllr R. Thornley-Taylor, Cllr F. Whetstone (arrived at 1444)

Also present Mrs R. Marriott (Office Manager), Mr F. Marshall, Mr J. Spicer

1) Apologies

Mr M. Cooper, Cllr A. Reid, Cllr R. Stogdon

2) Accounts 2005/2006

On being asked about the introduction to the accounts, Mrs Marriott said that it follows suggestions made by the auditors who may, later, want to change them. The auditors have yet to pass last year's accounts. Some minor corrections were made to the text.

It was agreed to transfer into the Asset Register the purchase of Whitehouse Farm and the construction there of a barn. Mrs Marriott said she would contact Zurich about the question of insuring the barn against any damage before full payment has been made for it.

In answer to a point from Mr Whetstone, Mr Parsons said that it should be possible to compare expenditure against estimates, but not as part of the management accounts. Mrs Marriott said that neither auditors nor accountants have commented on this. Mr Glyn said that actual and variance columns could be used to check whether targets were being met.

Mr Thornley-Taylor asked whether it is certain that the Board is not required to pay tax if there is an operating surplus. It was agreed that the Board's accountants, DMC, should be asked. Mr Thornley-Taylor pointed out that the 1974 Act was made at a time when the ESCC grant was 80% of the Board's income – rather than the ca. 30% it is now. It stipulates that deficits should be made up by ESCC and surpluses returned to it.

Mr Parsons asked whether the Board is required to use the District Auditor even though, as Mr Spicer pointed out, this is covered by the Act. The Committee, taking into account the fees of the District Auditor and knowing that Mrs Marriott and DMC do much of the accounting work as a preliminary to the audit, wondered whether DMC rather than the District Auditor could be used.

3) Forest Centre development

Dr Prendergast pointed out that the last RPA Committee meeting had "recommended that FGP and the Board act on the first four points of the *Plan* (702, p. 102) and

recognise the necessity of improving visitors services and the educational side of the Centre”.

Dr Prendergast thought that implementing some of the recommendations in the *Plan* was premature. The key tasks to be taken forward now were: the acquisition of a cash till (ca. £300.00), getting and training up more volunteers in order to increase opening hours of the Information Barn, and updating the website – all items that would, in time, come within the remit of a Visitor Services Manager so strongly recommended by the Parkin *Plan*. He added that Rich Allum and he are discussing volunteers this week and that a new website, developed by a volunteer for free, is almost ready to launch (the *Plan* estimated the cost of this to be £2,500).

Mr Glyn wondered at the Board’s position vis-à-vis education and stressed the importance of having a Board that was sufficiently forward-looking to look at the subject. Dr Prendergast suggested that the Centre has been hosting school visits for many years – although less than previously because of the needs of teachers for site-based resources linked to the National Curriculum – had an Education Barn (‘Centre’) erected for the purpose in 1992, and has an Information Barn that is the only site of information about the Forest to help visitors understand the area, enhance their enjoyment of it, and plan their walks. If the Board had had no interest in education, in the broadest sense, then it would have saved a lot of money, and reduced staff commitment, by closing both these buildings. Dr Prendergast pointed out the widespread support for a Centre development among consultees approached by Parkin Heritage and Tourism.

Mr Spicer said that the Board has not yet reviewed the Parkin report and remarked that the 1974 Act says nothing about education.

Mr Parsons said it was the duty of the Board to conserve, and to educate more than children alone. It would be a sad day, he continued, were the Board to move in another direction. He recognised that local people might resent more visitors to the Forest, and that it was right for the Board to consider the Parkin report carefully. He welcomed the fact that a cash till, increased opening hours due to increased availability of volunteers, and increased retail offer would all contribute to new funding for the Forest. He also welcomed the high quality of exhibitions and progress on the website and thought the introduction of drinks machines a good idea; it is incontrovertible that people expect refreshments nowadays.

Mr Whetstone wondered whether Dr Prendergast was taking on too much with so many things “on the boil” at the moment, not just the Forest Centre development, but also the entering into Higher Level Scheme and the still unresolved access issue on the A275. Dr Prendergast thanked Mr Whetstone for his concern and said that Chris Marrable is effectively leading on the process of introducing HLS and progress on the other two issues has not been held up by his own time constraints over the last year or so.

The Committee supported the introduction of a cash till and the increasing in opening hours of the Information Barn through employing more volunteers.

Mr Thornley-Taylor said increased visitors to the Forest Centre will make an impact on the Forest and suggested that an Environmental Impact Assessment is needed for the Forest.

4) Access issues

Mr Glyn and Dr Prendergast updated new members of the Committee of the last few months of discussions with Cats Protection. The latest situation is that Mr Tim Raikes had sent a letter on 26 May to Cats Protection containing the Board's input into an application form for the appointment of an Expert by the RICS. CP acknowledged the letter on 31 May but there has been no news since.

Mr Parsons said there are other access issues on the Forest; from this one the Board can learn lessons and apply them elsewhere.

5) Urgent business

i) Mr Spicer asked if Commoners could regain their discount on the price of riding permits and if summer permits could be re-introduced. He said that some people have chosen, as a matter of meanness, not to ride on the Forest or not to obtain a riding permit; they do not feel that there is enough justification to do away with the discount whereas AFRA members get one.

Mr Glyn said he was initially concerned about the doing away of the Commoners' discount but now considers that there is inherently something unfair about one group being favoured over another. He said that more non-Commoners than Commoners live on the Forest, and that more Commoners live off (away from) the Forest than on it. He added that he personally would like to see the return of the summer permit; this might improve compliance with the bye-laws (about having a permit when riding on the Forest). Mr Spicer welcomed a return of permits to cover the school summer holidays. Mr Thornley-Taylor wondered what happened to any such horses that were ridden in the summer only and thought they would surely still need exercising during the rest of the year.

Mr Glyn said it is cheap to ride on the Forest compared with elsewhere but suggested looking again at summer permits if they were not difficult to administer.

Mr Marshall explained that discounts were offered originally to AFRA members because a strong organisation was deemed useful to the Board. It was assumed that Commoners would join. Commoners who did join then effectively got a double discount that was greater than the Forest rate they paid as Commoners. Dr Prendergast said that, of the roughly 33 Commoners who ride on the Forest (with a permit), just one had written in to complain about the loss of a discount.

The Committee agreed to revisit the two issues of Commoners' discount and summer permits.

ii) Dr Prendergast reported that court proceedings are being started against the owners of a property in the East Chase for the erection of a fence on, and the enclosing of, Forest land and for persistent parking on the Forest. The owners have not replied to any of a series of letters sent to them.

The meeting finished at 1700.