

Minutes of the

MEETING OF THE BOARD OF CONSERVATORS OF ASHDOWN FOREST

1430, Monday 13 March 2006
Ashdown Forest Centre

Present Mr P. Glyn (in the Chair), Cllr J. Barnes, Cllr F. Brown, Mr M. Cooper, Mr L. Gillham, Cllr M. Lock, Mr F. Marshall, Cllr R. Parsons, Dr H. Prendergast (Clerk), Cllr S. Radford-Kirby, Cllr A. Reid, Cllr R. Stogdon, Cllr Mrs R. St Pierre, Cllr F. Whetstone, Mr A. White, Mrs J Wirdnam.

Minutes taken by Mrs R. Marriott.

The Chairman opened the meeting and announced that there was an addition to the agenda; the minutes and matters arising from the Urgency Committee meeting would be taken first as he was aware that this topic was of principle interest to the majority of the members of the public present.

ITEM 1 Apologies for absence

1.1 Apologies were received from Cllr Mrs R. O’Keeffe.

ITEM 2 Minutes of the Urgency Committee meeting of 20 February 2006

2.1 The Committee agreed for the Chairman to visit Cats Protection soon after the above date. The Chairman informed the Board that he and the Clerk had had a meeting on 7 March 2006 with Helen Ralston, Chief Executive of Cat Protection, and Dominic Sullivan, Head of Legal Services, at which it was agreed that both the Cats Protection and the Board should make a list of agreed and disputed items by 7 April 2006. This list would be looked at by an independent expert, appointed by the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors, who would then make a judgement, in writing, on the basis of valuation for a licence fee for access to the A275 and its subsequent review.

2.2 **The Board agreed that it would abide by the expert’s opinion and proceed accordingly.**

ITEM 3 To approve the Minutes of the Meeting held on 14 November 2005 and matters arising

3.1 The Minutes, which had been previously circulated, were presented by the Chairman.

3.2 2.1 The word “arbitration” was substituted with “expert opinion”.

3.3 For clarification, 5.6.1 was amended to read “Hunting The Chairman confirmed that drag hunting, i.e. the hounds follow a scent previously laid by a member of the hunt, is allowed on the Forest providing the law is observed and the participants comply with the Forest by-laws.”

3.4 6.3.1 was amended to read “Mr White expressed his concern over the potential of a cash flow difficulty, as it is the Board’s policy that the general reserve should amount to 50% of the annual salary and administration costs”.

3.5 It was agreed that the minutes of the FGP meeting of 20 February were incorrect in its assertion that the discount previously applied to riding permit charges for Commoners

outweighed the entire Forest Rate for the majority of Commoners. In fact it was only when the Commoner was also a member of AFRA that the two discounts outweighed the Forest Rate.

3.6 The Chairman moved the adoption of the Minutes with the amendments. This was agreed.

ITEM 4 To approve the Minutes of the Conservation Committee held on 16 January 2006

4.1 The Minutes of the last Meeting, which had been previously circulated, were presented by Mr Gillham.

4.2 Higher Level Stewardship Scheme

4.2.1 The Higher Level Stewardship Scheme (HLS) is not an equivalent of the single farm payment. It is a competitive grant of time limited specific payments for the heathland and has taken over from the Countryside Stewardship Schemes started in 1992. HLS is administered by DEFRA which will be amalgamated with English Nature and the Rural Development Agency in October 2006 and will be known as Natural England (NE). The HLS is designed to run for 10 years and currently there is no plan for its replacement. It is a vehicle which will enable the Board to comply with its obligations to achieve for the Forest, a Site of Special Scientific Interest, "favourable" or "favourable recovering" status.

4.2.2 Whereas the Countryside Stewardship Schemes related to specific tasks and grants covered 50% of the costs, HLS will support targets. NE will set generic objectives for heathland in England. The Conservation Officer, Mr Chris Marrable will liaise with NE to ensure realistic conservation targets; these may vary around the Forest but the type of work carried out will be a continuation of that which is currently done on the Forest. The maps, which had been mislaid by DEFRA, had now been found and should be available by the end of the week. It is hoped that Mr Marrable will be able to complete the paperwork for the application by 31 March, the cut off date. If successful, the Forest will be in the HLS by 1 October 2006 but the funds will not be available until February or March 2007. Should the deadline be missed, a further application can be made in three months time with a knock-on effect for admission and payments.

4.2.3 The Clerk had been advised that all of the Forest's heathland should be included in HLS. However, some parts of the Forest are not yet shown on the maps produced by the Rural Land Registry. Existing Countryside Stewardship Schemes will continue until HLS begins.

4.2.4 The Board agreed that it was important that the conservation objectives should fit into the wider management plan for the Forest. Mr Marrable had installed new management software which would facilitate monitoring.

4.2.5 The funds could be withdrawn if the targets are not met. NE will audit the work carried out.

4.2.6 The Board agreed that it was important to keep the public informed of developments.

4.3 Whitehouse Farm Barn No date had been given for the completion of the barn but work was well advanced. Cllr Whetstone asked if other Commoners could use the barn. The Chairman explained that only one Commoner turned out animals to graze on the Forest. He had donated the land to the Conservators who had funded the construction of the barn. The barn would be leased to him for a peppercorn rent until it was no longer required by him or his son. The barn would then be available for other Commoner graziers.

- 4.4 Monitoring Cllr St Pierre asked if there were plans to monitor the impact of a drought. The Clerk replied that, with more manpower, it would be possible to monitor wet heathland plants. Both Queen Mary College, London and University College, London were monitoring the principal watercourses on the Forest and the Southeast Water monitored the water table.
- 4.5 Public attendance at Committee meetings **The Board agreed that the general public may attend Committee meetings but they would not be allowed to speak.**
- 4.6 Roadside Trees A query had been raised at the Annual Meeting of the Commoners about the practice of cutting back roadside trees. Cllr Whetstone confirmed that it was the duty of the landowner to manage dangerous and overhanging trees that interfered with traffic away from roadsides. The Clerk stated that a rolling programme of roadside tree management was underway. It was pointed out that the cutting back of trees does not necessarily make roads safer; deer often graze roadside verges and their unpredictable behaviour can still be a hazard to motorists.
- 4.7 There being no further comments, the Minutes were then approved and signed as an accurate record.

ITEM 5 To receive the Minutes of the Roads, Planning and Amenity Committee Meeting held on 6 February 2006

- 5.1 The Minutes, which had been previously circulated, were presented by Mr Marshall.
- 5.2 Planning matters
- 5.2.1 Cllr Parsons agreed to investigate further why the objections and comments put forward by the Board were not noted in past planning matters.
- 5.2.2 Disappointment was expressed that the new Forest signs were not in place. It was explained that the planning application process took about eight weeks, three of which had to be allowed for consultation. Comments can cause applications to be transferred from the delegated officer to the full planning committee.
- 5.3 Encroachments The Rangers are currently boundary walking. The Clerk had put one case of persistent bye-law breaching in the hands of the County Solicitor.
- 5.4 Ashdown Forest Village Road Safety Partnership The Clerk reported that the training of the volunteers to man the Speed Indicator Displays and the launching of the scheme was on target.
- 5.5 Memorial benches It was confirmed that any plaques removed from memorial seats that were replaced by the new seats would be displayed on a special board at the Centre for the public to view.
- 5.6 Ashdown Forest Life The Clerk reported that the project was on hold at present. The Friends were reluctant to commit themselves to more than one year's funding and were awaiting feedback on future funding possibilities. It was recognised that funding for pilot projects was frequently a problem.
- 5.7 Jessops Hill The matter of ownership of a small parcel of land at Jessops Hill that appears not to be registered has been put in the hands of County Council Legal Services for investigation. Cllr Barnes felt that the Board should claim the land as logic states that the land should belong to Ashdown Forest.

5.8 Access to properties It was agreed that a thorough investigation and review of all aspects to do with access to properties across Forest Land should be carried out once the Cats Protection issue had been sorted out.

5.9 There being no further questions, Mr Marshall moved the adoption of the Minutes. This was agreed.

ITEM 6 To receive the Minutes of the Finance & General Purposes Committee Meeting held on 20 February 2006

6.1 The Minutes, which had been previously circulated, were presented by Cllr Parsons.

6.2 Utility wayleaves The Clerk confirmed that the surveyor appointed to investigate whether the Board was receiving the correct payments was still in discussion with the utility companies.

6.3 Time Sheets The Clerk confirmed that the time sheets will facilitate the allocation of staff costs to other budget heads in addition to conservation.

6.4 There being no further questions or comments, Mr Parsons moved the adoption of the Minutes. This was agreed. The Board moved to a Confidential Session.

ITEM 7 Confidential Session

7.1 As there were no queries on the Confidential Minutes of 20 February 2006, the Chairman moved the adoption of the Minutes. This was agreed.

ITEM 8 Minutes of the Urgency Committee held on 20 February 2006

8.1 There were no questions or comments so the Chairman moved the adoption of the Minutes. This was agreed.

ITEM 9 Any other business

9.1 Deer casualties

9.1.1 In answer to Cllr Whetstone's query about the identification of blackspots and the installation of more deer warning signs, the Clerk replied that there had been 97 deer deaths since 1 January 2006, a fact which would appear in the Ashdown Forest Village Road Safety flyer.

9.1.2 He had been in correspondence with Dr Langbein, the deer specialist, who has been working with the Highways Authorities country wide. He has produced maps which show that the A22 north and south of Pippingford and north of Wych Cross are the principal blackspots on Ashdown Forest. Deer signs do exist that include sensors warning motorists that a deer is approaching the roadside verge but the motorist still needs sufficient time to stop. Mr Marshall stated that the only solution is for traffic to reduce its speed significantly.

9.1.3 It was acknowledged that the casualties were a high cost to the insurance companies and ultimately to the country. It was suggested the Clerk should write to the local MPs to seek their support in looking for ways to reduce the deer numbers.

- 9.2 Burning as a management tool The Board agreed to support the Clerk's response to a letter which had appeared in the local press.
- 9.3 Development of the Forest Centre
- 9.3.1 The Board agreed that the development of the Centre was potentially such a significant financial commitment to future Board expenditure that it merited careful scrutiny at committee level over the next year. The presentation by the consultants would be an initial opportunity to view ideas and raise questions but no decisions should be made in haste.
- 9.3.2 It was agreed that some low-level improvements could be initiated, for example the introduction of vending machines, an extension of the opening hours and improvements to the car parking.
- 9.3.3 The appointment of a Visitor Centre Manager would ideally be someone with experience whose time was dedicated to the task. However, the appointment would be considered at the next RPA Committee.
- 9.3.4 Some concern was expressed that the development of the Centre would increase traffic on the local roads and the Highways Department would need to be consulted on the impact on traffic flows. The Clerk explained that the aim was not to increase tourism in the area but to encourage those who visit the Forest to come to the Centre as a first point of information. The impact of the new signage would be an indicator of success.
- 9.3.5 Cllr Parsons thought it important that the presentation by the consultants and the subsequent discussion should be recorded.
- 9.4 There being no further questions or comments, the meeting closed at 1735.

Chairman _____
19 June 2006

Clerk _____

Minutes of the
**ASHDOWN FOREST
CONSERVATION COMMITTEE MEETING**

1430, Monday 3 April 2006

Ashdown Forest Centre

Present Mr L. Gillham (Chair), Mr F. Brown, Mr M. Cooper, Mr C. Marrable, Ms J. Mortimer (Defra), Mrs R. O’Keeffe, Mr J. Spicer, Dr A. Tait (ESCC)

Apologies Mr J. Barnes, Mr P. Glyn, Dr H. Prendergast, Dr A. Woodcock,

Also present Mr F. Whetstone,

1) Election of Chairman

Mr Gillham was proposed by Mr Cooper and seconded by Mr Brown. There were no other nominations and Mr Gillham took the Chair.

2) Progress on HLS application

Ms Mortimer informed the Committee that the HLS scheme was in operation, with first round applicants already receiving grants. In Sussex, these were concentrated around the Pevensy Levels. The Ashdown Forest application had been received in time to meet the March deadline; if successful, it would be the first lowland heathland scheme in the country. Ms Mortimer said that the Forest application scored sufficient points to be successful but it is a competitive process. She explained that the next stage was for Defra to set prescriptions for management guidance and indicators of success for the Forest. These conditions would be agreed with the Conservators and would also be designed to fit with EN’s condition assessment targets. Mr Spicer asked whether this additional funding from Defra would lead to a reduction in contributions from the County Council. Mr Whetstone thought that this was a reasonable supposition. Ms Mortimer stated that more work would be expected in return for the additional funding and that Defra targets would be onerous; money could be withheld if targets are not being met. Mr Cooper stated that any money from Defra should be ring-fenced for heathland conservation projects.

3) Early results of species monitoring

Mr Marrable reported that: i) three reptile transects have been set up, monitored mainly by volunteers. Adders and common lizards are already being recorded, indicating the locations of hibernacula; ii) seven butterfly transects are in operation, using Butterfly Conservation methodology (no butterflies have been recorded yet); iii) the nine ant transects continue; they will be recorded once in July; iv) the AF Bird Group are contributing to national surveys for Woodlark and Dartford Warbler, as well as continuing their *ad hoc* recording over the Forest. A new data collection system is in operation, run by a member of the group.

4) Construction of barn at Whitehouse Farm

Mr Marrable reported that the construction had stalled due to a shortage of the reinforced fibre cement roof panels. The latest news is that these should be available in the week beginning the 10 April. Problems with the groundworks will be resolved once construction is complete.

5) Stakeholder analysis

Mr Marrable gave a brief review of the position on stakeholder analysis, beginning with the training course held at Sussex University in October 2005, sponsored by EN and WHI. Three members of Forest staff attended. The current position is that the company which carried out the training (3KQ) have put forward a proposal to carry out a scoping study, involving interviews with several Forest stakeholders, to determine 'the need and potential for a stakeholder engagement process'. EN and the Conservators have some queries regarding the proposal and we are awaiting a reply to these queries before we proceed. Mr Gillham said that the Conservators were not trusted by the public and that they were considered remote and undemocratic. It was essential that engagement with the public was done properly and that the Conservators required professional help. Mr Spicer said that engagement should be carried out sooner rather than later. Dr Tait said that any costs would be recouped by the savings made by having good community relationships. There was some discussion on how information should be disseminated, including through parish magazines. Mrs O'Keeffe offered to gather information on the parish magazine network.

6) AOB

There was no other business.

7) Field visit to Lintons carpark

The Committee were shown an area of heathland which had been cleared of trees and scrub during the winter. There was a general discussion about heathland management, including the role of fire and the necessity for bare ground. The Committee visited a new pond, dug in 2005, and were told how important open water can be in heathland areas.

The meeting closed at 1630.

Minutes of the

ASHDOWN FOREST ROADS, PLANNING & AMENITIES COMMITTEE MEETING

1430, Monday 24 April 2006

Ashdown Forest Centre

Present Mr F. Marshall (Chair), Mr R. Beal (Ranger), Mr F. Brown, Mr P. Glyn, Mr R. Parsons, Dr H. Prendergast (Clerk), Mr Simon Radford-Kirby, Mrs R. St Pierre, Mr J. Spicer, Mr R. Thornley-Taylor

Apologies Mr L. Gillham

Also present Mr J. Barnes, Mr F. Whetstone (arrived 1447)

1) Matters arising from last meeting

i) *Ashdown Forest Life*. Dr Prendergast reported that how to fund a new newsletter for the public from the Board remains an issue. In order to maintain momentum with the idea, he has used the format and design developed so far to produce a new (four page) Spring 2006 newsletter for Forest Volunteers (for whom newsletters are done anyway), and has ordered a run-on of 400 copies to trial out for sale in the Centre. Successful sales might indicate the financial sustainability of the newsletter and allow for its expansion.

Mr Barnes commented that, once a small charge is put on, some businesses might like to hold a stock if they get a free advertisement. It was agreed that a minimum price of 50p be imposed, leaving people to give more if they wish.

ii) Jessop's Hill, Bell Lane, Nutley. Dr Prendergast said, after contacting both the Land Registry and ESCC, he has found that a small band of land at the site is apparently unregistered. He has taken steps to register the land in the name of the Board.

Mr Parsons said that the Board has learned recently about the value of small portions of land and Mr Barnes added that a lease, rather than sale, of the land would be worth considering or the use of a protective clause in the event of any subsequent development.

2) Encroachments/bye-law breaches

Mr Beal showed a picture of Yew Tree Cottage, Fairwarp with a sweeping lawn outside on Forest land. Whereas property owners may, with consent, have a 10 m wide fire-break if adjacent to heathland (not applicable in this case), the lawn is now 60 m wide and has been planted with trees. Mr Beal said property owners will not respond to requests for them to cease breaking bye-laws and that in certain situations only action will have the desired effect. The Committee agreed with the suggestion of Mr Barnes that it would be good practice for a letter to be sent to the property owners asking for the trees to be removed and only when this is ignored for staff to do it.

Mr Beal also showed pictures of Hobgoblins, Duddleswell where not only are vehicles associated with building development being parked on the Forest but larger ones are also being backed onto it leading to rutting. The property has no licence for a turning circle. Mr Beal said that it is his job to protect the Forest through enforcement of bye-laws, one of which prohibits the driving of vehicles onto Forest land. He has therefore inserted dragons teeth to prevent it. Neither prior permission nor a deposit licence was obtained from the property owners. He has also inserted more dragons teeth outside the nearby property of Paynes Hill where a turning circle has developed larger than what is permitted.

Mr Marshall said he had visited the properties. The problem at Paynes Hill is the difficulty of WDC's waste trucks (and also, potentially, fire engines) in turning round. Mr Beal said that he knew of properties on the Forest to where WDC sent smaller trucks that could turn easier.

Mr Marshall said that the owners of Hobgoblins said that they might claim prescriptive rights over parts of the Forest. Mr Barnes said these rights cannot be obtained if they are contested and added that it would be worth approaching WDC to ask for the imposing of conditions regarding use of the Forest when planning permission is granted for development for properties on the Forest.

Mr Marshall said that there is an attitude that, once planning permission has been granted by WDC, then the Forest has no problem.

Mr Beal said he had been threatened three times for trying to enforce the bye-laws. What Rangers would find difficult is to take action, such as installing dragons teeth to prevent bye-law infringement, and then be told that the action should be undone.

Mr Glyn said that the Board is charged with enforcing bye-laws and must support staff action. It is important to be non-exceptional, i.e. not pick and choose which bye-laws should be enforced.

Mr Whetstone said that people nowadays expect to be consulted.

Mr Parsons said that the Board cannot expect to sort out all problems, but focus on the big ones. Historically the Board has not dealt with problems early enough. Major issues have to be dealt with by the Committee and in support of staff. Dr Prendergast agreed about prioritising which problems to tackle: at any one time there are so many infringements of the bye-laws that taking court action can only be taken with the more serious and intractable ones.

Mr Radford-Kirby said that it was important that Conservators "sing from the same hymn sheet as officers". The Committee agreed that it was still supportive of the idea of an environmental byelaw officer, Mr Spicer adding that he has now come round to it after initial doubts.

3) Forest Centre development – review of the Parkin *Business plan*

The Chairman asked members to express their views on the *Plan*.

Mrs R. St Pierre said that her perspective was not that of a local person. She was very supportive of the *Plan*. It seems to have taken on board the lesson that it is vital to get as many people as possible to become stakeholders. She liked the education side of making the Centre a place to attract young people and to encourage ecotourism and the development of responsible use of the Forest. She thought the *Plan* ambitious and something to work towards and liked the idea of a café.

Mr Glyn asked members to focus on the responsibility of the Conservators. He judged that those who supported the *Plan* were also supportive of conservation and education; those were not were not so involved. He said that it was crucial that, if there were no vision for the future of the Centre,

someone else will develop perhaps a much more commercial view; the Board must retain control and involvement. He thought the *Plan* thorough, that it pulled no punches and took into account uncertainty. It was vital, he said, to manage visitors. Mr Marshall agreed.

Mr Thornely-Taylor asked about the “do minimum costs”, i.e. ensuring compliance with the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA). Dr Prendergast said that, while a full DDA report for the Centre had been done in 2004, it contained no costings. The top priority remedial actions had been taken.

Mr Parsons said that, if challenged about incomplete compliance with DDA, it was sufficient to demonstrate that reasonable steps had been taken. The *Plan* takes into account full DDA compliance. He thought that the executive summary did well in setting the scene. He had started his reading of the *Plan* needing to feel convinced about the development but he now understands why people interested in the environment support it. At the same time he can see the other view that the Board has enough staff already and should not get more. However, life and funding and life have changed. He thought that the presence of a café is almost to be taken for granted nowadays for attracting people but sees that volunteers would not be able to run it. The *Plan* introduces some very interesting ideas and describes what looks to be a very coherent development.

Mr Radford-Kirby said that, if the basis of proposals is money-making, then the middle option does not succeed and even the big one struggles to break even. There is a big change, financially, but a lot for the Forest as well.

Mrs St Pierre said that one cannot avoid the fact that many more people will come to the Forest, for example because of new housing and the current emphasis on health. The issue is to be able to direct visitors to where we want to.

Mr Glyn agreed that an accountant’s view might well be that, if money-making was the main goal, then it would best be done in other ways. The Board should be looking at the bigger picture, then look at how to finance it.

Mr Whetstone said it was not sensible to set up anything that is going to make a loss. He was anxious about the amount of work required to undertake, on top of the HLS application, yet another major project.

Mr Spicer said he cannot be “enthusiastic” about developing the Centre; the thought of 100,000 visitors in this part of the Forest would be “disastrous”. He suggested that change be restricted to doing the minimum to keep the Centre going.

Mr Barnes said that the full development is going to require major funding, for which there is no plan yet. While a longer-term vision is important, focus is needed on the short-term, on maximising the way people use the Forest and on making them more aware of the Centre’s existence. The toilets need to be upgraded quickly, meeting DDA (and possibly environmental health) requirements. The sooner the catering problem is tackled the better, especially since vending machines should not lose money. He was unsure if the Board could do without a Visitor Services Manager (VSM).

Dr Prendergast expressed concern about the long-term, continuing decline in ESCC funding. He observed that, while conservation on the Forest will be funded if the bid for HLS is successful, the amenity side of the Forest, by contrast, brings in little funding; among Forest users the main income is provided by riders with permits. Mr Spicer commented that taxes pay for the public use of the Forest.

Mr Barnes was less pessimistic about ESCC reducing its support and emphasised the importance of an annual report to educate the ESCC Cabinet. There is a big future for eco-tourism which is seen as beneficial to the county. Local businesses (e.g. those in the Ashdown Forest Tourism Association) see this too. The Board needs to focus on education (many Forest users simply do not see the conservation issues), walking and the improvement of buildings, for example the entrance to the Information Barn. Increasingly visitors will come with a purpose, e.g. to watch birds, and it will be important that flexibility is built into planning. He thought that a VSM could also be an education officer.

In reply to a question from Mr Barnes, Dr Prendergast said that the Centre has already been viewed by the High Weald Unit as a possible site for staff if its bid to the Heritage Lottery Fund is successful (the bid will be made by the end of September 2006). Income from hosting staff could be useful.

On the sort of person needed as a VSM, Mr Parsons thought that there would be a difference between when the development was starting and when it was established and underway. Mrs St Pierre said it would be important to get a good person for the set-up phase, and to accept that he/she would then, the set-up phase completed, want to leave for career opportunities elsewhere.

Mr Glyn said it was important not to forget that the Centre currently loses money. He asked what plans are in hand to deal with DDA compliance. Dr Prendergast said that a new access from the car park into the Centre would both deal with known DDA issues and improve the Centre – a case of hitting two birds with one stone.

Some discussion followed about surfacing the Centre car park with grass-crete (as at Hever Castle).

Mr Radford-Kirby wondered at linking income from car parks with development of the Centre.

Mr Barnes said that the Board needs to have a longer-term idea of the bigger project even if it does not sign up to it at the moment. The full development is not yet feasible, a point with which Mr Glyn concurred, but nothing should be done that is prejudicial to it – a stepping stone approach. He goes for the 100,000 scheme (as on p. 58 of the *Business plan*).

Mr Glyn said there was nothing wrong with a vision that looks beyond the foreseeable future.

Mr Marshall said that Mr Leslie Gillham had reported to him that he liked the plan although could not see how 100,000 visitors/year could be attracted to the Centre.

After some discussion, the Committee recommended that FGP and the Board act on the first four points of the *Plan* (702, p. 102) and recognise the necessity of improving visitor services and the educational side of the Centre.

After Mr Radford-Kirby's departure, the Committee asked Dr Prendergast to ask him for advice on retailing and vending machines.

4) AOB

There was none.

The meeting finished at 1735.

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.