

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

14.30, Monday 9 March 2009
Ashdown Forest Centre

Present: Cllr J Barnes (in the Chair), Mr M Cooper, Mr R Galley, Mr L Gillham, Mr P Glyn, Cllr M Hoy, Cllr S Martin, Dr H Prendergast (Clerk), Cllr A Reid, Cllr R St Pierre, Cllr S Shing, Mr J Spicer, Mr E Stenhouse, Cllr R Stogdon, Mr R Thornely-Taylor and Cllr F Whetstone. Minutes taken by Mrs T Buxton.

The Chairman opened the meeting, welcomed the members of the public present and invited questions for 10 minutes from the floor.

The following notes on the questions/answers are an aide memoire only and do not form part of the minutes of the Meeting of the Board of Conservators of Ashdown Forest.

Mr Alan White

Heathland clearance was mentioned at the Commoner's meeting and there had been little opposition. However, there was still concern about the 'brutality' of the work and, in the future, that needed to be avoided. Some sensitivity regarding trees should also be shown. He went on to say that he had thought there was going to be a greater effort to inform the public about the work taking place and had noted that there were no signs posted at either Fairwarp or Campfield Rough. He commented that information could be handled better next year and that explanations should be given about why work was being done at each site. He also commented that work had been carried out on an area not shown on the maps and he was interested to see how that area would actually improve.

The Chairman replied that things could always be improved! Maps showing work had been provided at the Parish Liaison Committee and had been posted on the Forest website. Communications had been much better than those of last year. He agreed that areas looked rough immediately after works had been carried out but very quickly regenerated and that grazing with sheep did provide a softer approach. The Clerk said that the protocol was to post notices in work areas, however, many had been removed by members of the public and that was not at all helpful. The Chairman agreed that notices on site were a useful tool and the policy that the Board had adopted on trees should be put up on the website as a useful addition. The Clerk went on to say he would investigate the area not shown on the map and report directly to Mr White.

Mr Alan White

Were the deer notices erected on the A22 effective? They needed to be larger so that drivers could read them at 50mph and could they please be updated more regularly.

The Clerk replied that signs were erected and updated by ESCC and should have been done this week showing data up to December 2008. The size was dictated by the dimensions of the sign they were attached to. There was no evidence that they reduced accidents. The Chairman looked to Cllr Reid to take the matter up with ESCC. Cllr Reid replied that County was working increasingly closely with the Board, he agreed with the Clerk that signs do not have a profound impact on driver behaviour but he would assess the effectiveness and ensure they were regularly updated.

1/09 Apologies.

Apologies were received from the Chairman of East Sussex County Council, Cllr Lacey.

2/09 Declarations of any interest by Members of a Personal or Prejudicial Nature.

The Chairman commented that it had been previously agreed that there would be a Register of Interests that would include anything that would concern this meeting.

3/09 To receive the Minutes of the Board Meeting of 24 November 2008 and Matters Arising – BD 1/09.

- 3.1/09 The Minutes of the last meeting had been circulated and were assessed by the Board for accuracy. It was noted that in 32/08 ‘agreed’ needed to be amended to read ‘received’. The change was made and the Board agreed the minutes as corrected below.
- 3.2/09 Mr Cooper stated, regarding Board minute 34/05, that Airman’s Grave was not dealt with at the RPA meeting due to a very full agenda. It would be dealt with at a future meeting.
- 3.3/09 Mr Thornely-Taylor said that the budget estimates for 2009-2010 could not be agreed by the Board on 24th November because of the absence of full information.
- 3.4/09 In minute 35/08 it had been agreed that principle B would stand until the next Board meeting. The Chairman asked the Clerk if the legal opinion was available. The Clerk replied that the lawyers had not yet pinned down the wording and that the RPA committee would continue to monitor this issue.

4/09 To receive the Minutes of the Meeting of the Conservation Committee of 12 January 2009 – BD 2/09.

- 4.1/09 The Minutes of the last meeting had been circulated and were assessed by the Conservation Committee for accuracy. No changes were required and the Board received the minutes. The Board Chairman asked that care be taken in recording *ex-officio* Committee members on future minutes.
- 4.2/09 Mr Glyn stated that the Committee had made a site visit in terrible weather and returned to the Forest Centre sooner than anticipated. The main meeting had thus commenced early and a committee member had been inconvenienced by missing a small portion of the proceedings. The Chairman reminded Mr Glyn that Committees needed to keep to the published start times for the benefit of members of the public and suggested that too much time was being allotted to each site visit.
- 4.3/09 Mr Glyn drew the Board’s attention to minute 4.4/09 regarding a project manager for the Woodland Management Plan. He reported that there were no resources available to hire a manager to oversee the project, that there had been an estimate of £12,000 pa and two days per week was considered not to be adequate to fully manage the project. He went on to say that it remained desirable to work towards the Management Plan but without the full certification.
- 4.4/09 Mr Glyn drew the Board’s attention to minute 7.4/09 on conservation objectives and reported that he and Mr Marrable were trying to produce a simplified document that would be presented to a forthcoming Conservation Committee meeting. Mr Glyn commented that the best time to visit a part of the Forest considered to be in favourable condition would be in June.
- 4.5/09 The Clerk reported that the Ashdown Area Deer Group were circulating a questionnaire and if any Board members were interested he would be happy to forward it to them. He commented that Mr Fred Marshall, in attendance as a member of the public, was heavily involved with the Deer Group and the questionnaire. The Chairman suggested that a press release to increase publicity regarding the questionnaire would be very helpful and topical.
- 4.6/09 The Chairman suggested that the committee document on tree felling on the Forest (minute 8/09) needs to become a Board policy and suggested if any Board members had any comments on it they should make them electronically.

5/09 To receive the Minutes of the Roads, Planning & Amenities Committee Meeting of 23 February 2009 – BD 03/09.

- 5.1/09 The Minutes of the last meeting had been circulated. No changes were required and the Board received the minutes.
- 5.2/09 Mr Cooper reported that the RPA committee were hoping to take firmer action on bye-law breaches and that a site visit had been arranged.

- 5.3/09 Mr Cooper reported that there had been a vexed discussion regarding the lack of progress with the licence for Cats Protection. The Clerk replied that the payment had now been received and the licence was with Cats Protection. Evidence of the establishment of good relations was their hosting of the Board's Hebrideans in a field that they had fenced and in which they had installed a mobile shelter. Lambing is planned to take place there.
- 5.4/09 Mr Cooper reported that the RPA Committee had met again with the mountain bikers and that the Committee had tried to maintain a civil and constructive dialogue with them. He went on to say that the RPA wanted Board approval to maintain the ban on cycling on the Forest but wished to keep the dialogue going.
- 5.5/09 Cllr Whetstone commented that he wanted to see further evidence on the effects of cycling from Malvern Hills. The Clerk responded that cycling was the second largest cause of complaint after dog fouling on the Malvern Hills.
- 5.6/09 Cllr Whetstone asked if it was correct that the issue would not be re-visited for six-months. The Clerk replied that he was correct in accordance with the standing orders.
- 5.7/09 The Chairman asked if the Board were in agreement with the RPA recommendation. There was a clear majority in favour; however, Cllr St Pierre abstained from the vote as she did not agree.
- 5.8/09 The Chairman asked the Clerk if any progress had been made at the Nutley Arms, as described in minute 6.1/09, and if not could the Clerk follow it up with a degree of urgency.

It was agreed that the Board's current policy on cycling on the Forest be upheld and that communication links should remain open.

6/08 To receive the Minutes of the Finance & General Purposes Committee of 16 February 2009 – BD 4/09.

- 6.1/09 The Minutes of the last meeting had been circulated and were assessed by the FGP Committee for accuracy. No changes were required and the Board received the minutes.
- 6.2/09 Mr Thornely-Taylor stated the FGP Committee would continue to keep the investment policy and cash reserves under review. He went on to say that HSBC may no longer be AAA rated bankers and, with the assistance of ESCC, that situation would also be kept under review.
- 6.3/09 Mr Thornely-Taylor reported that there was bad news regarding the increased HSBC bank charges and alternatives may be explored.
- 6.4/09 Mr Thornely-Taylor reported that the budget for 2009/2010 was only just completed. There would need to be some cuts made from RPA expenditure and this would be further explored.
- 6.5/09 The Clerk reported that the revised forecast showed £22,000.00 as an unspent figure as the grinder and trailer had not yet been purchased.
- 6.6/09 Mr Thornely-Taylor asked that the Board approve the estimates for 2009/2010 and approval was given in the light of the new estimates provided.

The budget estimates for 2009-2010 were agreed by the Board.

7/09 Access - Financial Recognition Policy – BD 5/09

The document, drafted by Mr Cooper, had been pre-circulated. The Clerk stated that Board members should be familiar with the concept as it was discussed in some detail at a recent RPA Committee meeting. It was being proposed that something should be put in place in order for the Board to receive financial recognition for new or reopened accesses across Forest land. Mr Cooper stated he was keen to see this proposal taken up by the Board as it was important that Forest staff had something to base their approach on.

7.1/09 Mr Stenhouse queried if there should be a limit of 50% on the uplift and there was a short discussion regarding assessed property value uplifts. He went on to suggest that the term 'access' be removed from the pre-amble and that it should clearly state there would be a charge if there was a change of circumstances. Mr Cooper agreed that Mr Stenhouse's changes were helpful and that the document would be amended accordingly. This was followed by a very short discussion regarding the concept of charging for 'access' across Forest land.

7.2/09 The Chairman stated that the Board may have to wait to see if there was a legal challenge and that he was happy to wait and see. He went on to clarify that what the Board was charging for was the state of the track rather than its existence. He continued by saying property owners needed to make a very clear case, the Board would not alter its practise for *gratis* and would consider land in exchange. The policy dealt with very rare exceptions to the norm and in the end it was up to legal experts if the policy was ever challenged.

It was agreed that the Financial Recognition Policy in regards to access be adopted by the Board.

8/09 Forest Centre Development – BD 7i/09 & BD 7ii/09

The documents, prepared by Mr Stenhouse and the Clerk, had been pre-circulated. The Chairman thanked Mr Stenhouse and asked if everyone had read the documents and then asked Mr Stenhouse to speak to his document.

8.1/09 Mr Stenhouse said the document had been a difficult one to write as much had already been said on the subject and there were many pre-conceived ideas about what should happen. He stated he had come up with points that appeared not to be covered. He went on to say he was sure that any visitor centre should be run elsewhere or franchised out to reduce the Board's liability. He queried how many people would come and that it would be unlikely to make any money.

8.2/09 The Chairman asked the Clerk if he had anything to add to this paper and the Clerk replied he did not. The Chairman asked for comments from the other Board members.

8.3/09 Cllr Martin listed many highly successful visitor centres in the Wealden area that had grown from small beginnings and prospered. She noted that the sites she had described had not conducted endless visitor surveys but they began in a small way and just got on with it. She reported that tourism brought £4 million into the local economy. Even though the current Forest Centre was not widely advertised or promoted it attracted 15,000 visitors per year. She went on to say that she had lived on the Forest since 1964 and the only thing that had changed was the move to the Forest Centre from Forest Row. She made it clear that she did not want a brash tourist centre, she wanted to see children and adults educated, improved facilities, low key catering, suggesting that the development of the Centre was a simple re-invention and re-use of the current buildings and she fervently asked the Board to move forward.

8.4/09 Cllr St Pierre strongly agreed with Cllr Martin. She stated she was very disappointed that so few of the Board took up her invitation to visit Seven Sisters Visitor Centre at Cuckmere, a site very similar to the Forest Centre. She briefly described her impression of the management of conservation, tourism, riding and the needs of different visitor groups. She went on to describe how funds were raised from parking charges, how that was managed and the arrangements for catering with local produce being used and advertised.

8.5/09 Cllr Whetstone reported that he had also made the visit and had found it very interesting, however, it was entirely different from the arrangements at the Forest Centre; the site was a country park, the Rangers had a different remit and there were two car parks compared to 48 on the Forest. He went on to say that Cllr Martin was quite right and it was possible that the Centre would build up as an attraction after spending a great deal of money but, in his opinion, people came to the Forest for the quiet.

8.6/09 Cllr Hoy understood Cllr Whetstone's comments and agreed there was a difference between the Forest and Seven Sisters but that a decision had to be made and he proposed that the Board go

ahead and get on with it, finance allowing. He went on to say there was a need for people to find the right information in order for them to have an appreciation of what they were looking at.

- 8.7/09 Mr Spicer stated he remained unsure regarding timescales and costings. He was concerned as to where the funding was coming from and asked that the Board obtain costings and an idea of timing and work from that point. The Chairman replied that costings had been obtained but were now out of date.
- 8.8/09 Mr Gillham started that there was nothing new in Mr Stenhouse's paper. Phase 1 had already been agreed in principle, subject to costings and nothing makes Phase 2 impossible. He went on to say that a full feasibility was required for Phase 2.
- 8.9/09 Mr Cooper tabled a resolution for discussion and stated he was willing for the wording to be improved. The Chairman replied he would, with the Clerk and Mr Cooper, amend the wording outside the meeting. *Amended resolution attached to the end of these minutes.*
- 8.10/02 Mr Stenhouse commented that it was important to ensure the new boiler met the needs of the Centre and any future developments as well as health and safety concerns. There followed a discussion on the potential site, size, format and energy efficiency of a new boiler. The Chairman asked the Clerk to enter informal discussions regarding the possible siting of the boiler without prejudicing good relations with the landowner.
- 8.11/09 Mr Galley commented that there did not seem to be agreement about what the developed Centre would be like and that there were contrasting visions; one a wooden palatial site with bus loads of visitors, the other more modest with improved toilets and renovation of tired buildings. It was his view that the Board should get Phase 1 underway and not jeopardise Phase 2. Mr Cooper replied that the Board was attempting to react and anticipate visitor numbers rather than promoting the Forest.
- 8.12/09 Cllr Stogdon commented that the Visitor Centre was not going to be a major tourist attraction and that the Board needed to consider carefully. In his view the franchise option was key as running a Centre was not what the Board was charged to do.
- 8.13/09 Mr Glyn commented that a recurring theme of the last ten years was the lack of commitment shown by the Board to visitors to the Forest. The Board had agreed Phase 1 two years ago and the fact it was still under discussion with no action or funding was frustrating.
- 8.14/09 Cllr Reid acknowledged that the current facilities were substandard. Mr Spicer agreed with Cllr Reid and Mr Glyn and asked that the Board get on with it.
- 8.15/09 The Chairman commented that there was Board agreement around Phase 1 and that the way forward should be explored. He went on to say it was inevitable that visitors would have to be managed, even if many of those visits were recurrent. It was likely that due to the recession more holidays would be taken in the UK. The Board had, in the past, discussed and rejected zoning and the provision and non-provision of car-parks. It was acknowledged that education was limited but more publications and leaflets were now available to help rectify this. HLS came with a contractual obligation to educate and it was unlikely that any future grants would be forthcoming without an educational component. HLF was funding the refreshing of the current education component. It was important that the Board explored anything that could offset its costs and it must be remembered the Board needed an HQ building and that would always cost money. He went on to say it was agreed that an 'all singing all dancing' Forest Centre was not what was wanted and that visitor management and education were at the core of the development. The site needed to be attractive to visitors, it needed good toilets and simple refreshments (from vending machines in the first instance) that could at a later day be contracted out. The Hurst Concept was less bold in terms of footprint than its predecessor; it takes the existing buildings for granted and links the HQ to the other buildings.

8.16/09 The Chairman proposed, that Phase 2 be fully explored without prejudice. He went on to recommend that the Board re-affirm Phase 1 going ahead, based on Mr Cooper's proposal, and that the Clerk should, with the assistance of the Working Party, obtain fresh costings and seek funding.

8.17/09 Cllr St Pierre stated that she seconded Mr Cooper's proposal. The Chairman stated that Mr Cooper's document was the agreed policy for going forward and a position statement would be drafted. *Post Meeting Note: Re-drafted position statement attached to these minutes.*

It was agreed that Phase 1 would go ahead and Phase 2 be fully explored without commitment.

16.35 Cllr St Pierre and Cllr Shing left the meeting.

9/09 Report on the Commoners' Annual Meeting of 6th March 2009

Mr Gillham gave a verbal report of the Commoner's Meeting. All the Commoner Conservators were present. The Meeting was chaired by Mr William King and many Commoners were attending their first meeting. Mr Glyn stood for election, seconded by Sir Freddy Sowry and Mr Leslie Gillham. Mr Nigel Manger also stood, seconded by Mrs Stenhouse and Mrs Clarkson. It was noted that Mr Manger did not attend the meeting. Mr Glyn addressed the meeting and Mrs Stenhouse did so on Mr Manger's behalf. Mr Gillham was asked to speak regarding Mr Glyn and he did so. Mr Glyn was elected 74 votes to 31. The minutes of the last meeting were agreed. With the official business over there were presentations from Cllr Barnes and the Clerk that were well received. There were also questions from the floor about direct debits, riding permits and income, deer, traffic, anti-cycling feeling, litter and Airman's Grave ceremony. There was criticism that the summary of finances was not attached to the rear of the agenda. Mr Stenhouse complained about the state of the Commoners Register and he was informed that the Commoners needed to have better communicate with the Office. There was criticism that the procedure was not user friendly and it was explained that this was due to the Act. There were several complimentary comments about how the Forest was looking and appreciation of the work being done.

9.1/09 Mr Spicer asked about the election procedure in relation to proxy voting and the state of the electoral register. The Chairman replied that postal voting was introduced with the Ashdown Forest Act 1981 and that proxy votes were now regarded as a route to corruption. He went on to say that the problems with the electoral register were not the responsibility of the Board and Commoners should take steps to ensure their register is up to date, however, the Board wanted to be helpful.

9.2/09 There was a short discussion regarding what assistance could be given to the Commoners. The Clerk reported that a Commoners page on the website was under development. Mr Glyn asked if voting reminders could be sent out with the Forest Rate. Mr Gillham suggested parish magazines as a means of communication. The Chairman suggested the Commoners resurrect the 'pre Commoner Meeting' meeting.

10/09 Cash flow statement to 27 February 2009 – BD 6/09

Mr Thornely-Taylor presented the cash flow statement. He drew the Board's attention to May 2009 and stated that the FGP Committee had discussed this in some detail. He and the Clerk would be assessing what could be done to ease through the situation. Mr Cooper asked if it was due to the timing of HLS funding and Mr Thornely-Taylor replied that it was.

16.40 Mr Thornely-Taylor left the meeting.

11/09 Any Urgent Item of which the Clerk has notice in order to pass to the elected Chairman

There being no other questions or comments, the meeting ended at 16.55.

Chairman _____
May 2009

Clerk _____

“The Board reaffirms its approval of the Phase I redevelopment of the Forest Centre. This will comprise DDA compliant toilets, repositioning of the boiler, a remodelled entrance and associated works. This will be subject to:

- costings, to be approved by the FGP Committee;
- secure funding, to be evaluated by the FGP Committee;
- evaluation of options for replacing the wood-burning boiler;
- conformity with an approved plan for Phase II, which will have been assessed by the Working Party and the RPA Committee and approved by the Board, but not dependent on Phase II being implemented;
- an understanding that implementation of Phase II would require costings, a business plan and a fund-raising strategy approved by the Board and that it would complete the whole redevelopment.”