

Appendix 1

MEETING OF THE BOARD OF CONSERVATORS OF ASHDOWN FOREST HELD AT THE ASHDOWN FOREST CENTRE

1430, Monday 20 September 2004 Ashdown Forest Centre

National Heathland Conference 7-9 September 2004 **Report by Dr HDV Predergast**

After a welcome to the Conference from Daphne Bagshawe as Chairman of ESCC, the first talk by the only international speaker, from Norway, provided an interesting distinction between British and Continental perspectives of heathland. Whereas the former have been attracted by its biological wealth, elsewhere it is the cultural value that has been uppermost. The importance of understanding *both* these perspectives and incorporating them into heathland management was a recurring theme throughout the Conference. Add the need for education, public relations, economic incentives, a more business-like approach, fund-raising and of course vision and one has a synopsis of what many speakers were saying every heathland manager has to think about now.

We heard emphatic statements that we cannot go back to the past; we cannot, for example, recreate the heathlands of yesteryear. The past does, however, provide a context for understanding current management techniques and, along with cultural associations, it can also be an excellent platform for getting people interested in heathlands. As I said myself in an introductory talk to a session on heathland products: "People are intrinsically interested in people, in what they did and what they do. Yet how many of us are telling the stories about heathlands that will fascinate the public and win them over to their cultural and historic value, and to the management that we need to carry out? A phenomenon worth \$3 billion to its owner called Winnie-the-Pooh strides across a global imagination of Ashdown Forest, and we would be unwise and short-sighted were we to consign it to a dark box of unmentionables."

Such a value is ironic given that the traditional economic role of heathlands has largely disappeared although we did hear of promising advances in relatively small scale activities such as bracken composting and the grazing and marketing of traditional breeds of livestock. But economics are being considered on a bigger scale too. A fascinating £10 million project in Cornwall (where 83% of visitors go to protected areas) is looking at integrating heathlands into the local economy through making links with food, farming, tourism, visitor pay-back schemes and the local community.

A speaker from Dorset said that only through teachers can local people really be encouraged to look after heathlands. Teachers understand the National Curriculum, how to locate the necessary funding and resources, and of course school teachers themselves.

On a scientific level we were reminded that "practice is ahead of the proof in ecological management". A protocol is still under development that will help advise on the management of common land and how, for example, to approach the issue of fencing. There were talks on the interface between ancient woodland and heathland in the High Weald, the potential of what's called 'near natural grazing' in the conservation of landscape scale areas, and the archaeological wealth of heathlands. On field trips round the South Chase David Streeter, Chris Marrable and I were asked about our reliance on bracken mowing than Asulox.

Talks about common land and the CROW Act stressed that heathland management must integrate the needs of both amenity and wildlife. There is a growing area of research looking at the impact of human pressure on individual species – and possible solutions to it. One speaker suggested that we ask ourselves: “why is this area important to us all?” In a summing-up, but forward-looking, session representatives of English Nature and the RSPB separately returned to the key future issue of raising public awareness. The action plan for heathlands must also aim to find affordable ways of management and economic returns, as well as conserve their habitats, populations of species, the elusive wilderness factor and their cultural, archaeological and historical heritage.

The Conference, attended by 200 delegates, was well organised, financially self-supporting, and very inspirational. Before the next National Conference in two years time, there will be a meeting of the European Heathland Network in Brussels in September 2005. The common problems faced by heathlands along the north west European seaboard, and the opportunities offered by international funding, might make it well worth attending. By that time I plan to be nearing the publication of this Conference’s proceedings, and will hopefully have found out more about Daphne’s Bagshawe’s intriguing snippet of information presented to the Conference – that no one there had ever heard about - about heather being layered prior to use for thatching. It just shows that the experts don’t know everything!