

**Minutes of the
Fourth meeting of the Parish Liaison Panel
of the Board of Conservators of Ashdown Forest**

1900, Wednesday 2 September 2009
Ashdown Forest Centre

Present on behalf of the *Board*: John Barnes (Chairman), Michael Hoy (arrived 1935), Hew Prendergast (Clerk), Rupert Thornely-Taylor (left at 2019).

Present on behalf of Parishes/Councils: *Buxted*, Geoffrey Sheard; *Danehill*, Joan Lunn; *Forest Row*, Vivien Hill, Brian Killick (left at 2019); *Hartfield*, Clair Park; *Maresfield*, Roger Street; *West Hoathby*, Paul Brown.

1) Apologies

Board: Michael Cooper, Philip Glyn, Francis Whetstone.

Parishes: *Buxted*, Louise Daniel; *Cromborough*, Sandra Timms (received post 1700 by email); *Danehill*, Mike Wells; *Hartfield*, George Korbel; *Maresfield*, Charlie Stevenson; *Withyham*, Jill Pardey.

2) Minutes of the last meeting (13 May 2009)

In para. 4, p. 2, it was noted that ‘sad’ should read ‘said’.

3) Matters arising

There was none.

4) Issues submitted for discussion

i) Future of the Forest Centre

With the aid of two architectural drawings, Hew Prendergast outlined the Conservators’ progress on the development of the Forest Centre. For several years the shortcomings of the public side of the Centre have been very apparent. They include:

- low quality and non DDA compliant toilets (these are the only public ones on the Forest);
- uneven access into the site from the adjacent car park;
- very low visitor numbers (ca 15,000, 1% of those coming to the Forest) and
 - resulting lack of income (not covering costs)
 - and reduced opportunity to inform and educate the public; and
- labour-intensive wood fuel boiler.

So far the Conservators have approved of the replacement of toilets and the wood boiler (possibly with a chip-fed one) and of a new access into the site (so-called Phase 1 of the development). However, it is also acknowledged that to make a visitor centre attractive and viable it needs to comprise three elements, commonly described as T, P and C (= see) or Brew, View and Loo. The Centre lacks the T or Brew, i.e. a catering facility, which would only be possible were a link building inserted between the current Information and Office Barns. Such new build, alongside the replaced wood boiler and toilet block, were indicated on the drawings with green roofs - which John Barnes, in answer to a question from Vivien Hill, explained would be ‘green’ (i.e. eco-friendly).

The cost of the whole project (‘Gateway to Ashdown Forest), comprising (the approved) Phase 1 and the (not yet fully approved) link building/tea room (with enhanced space retail) of Phase 2, has been estimated by quantity surveyors as £1.2 million. Hew Prendergast is currently working with a retired local architect on a Project Definition, including a funding strategy, that will be then be submitted to a working party.

John Barnes said it was important for the Conservators to educate visitors and to do so required attracting them to the Centre; the current 1% is simply not enough. A facade to the road and a level access into the site would help. On the subject of refreshments, he said that derived income would help cover costs (so that the Centre 'washes its face' financially), a point confirmed by Hew Prendergast who mentioned a catering feasibility study done for the Centre in 2005. Based on various models of visitor numbers and spend, this suggested a potential income to the Conservators of at least £7,000. John Barnes said that doing Phase 1 and 2 together might be the most cost effective approach (were the funding available) but a piece-meal approach is also possible.

Vivien Hill said that Forest Row Parish Hall and Abbeyfield House had both obtained funds to improve compliance with the DDA and suggested that, once the T, P and C had been sorted out, the Conservators should apply for a wedding licence as a source of income. She added that Cllr Jane Wogan would be worth contacting since she had done a lot of research on wood chip systems. She urged the Conservators to avoid putting baby-changing facilities in the Ladies part of the new DDA-complaint toilets! A separate facility – or one that combined with the needs of the disabled – would be desirable. In answer to Paul Brown, Hew Prendergast said that it was not known if chipping would be done on site but thought it unlikely. One alternative might be the exchange of wood for chips with a local chipping company.

In discussion, a number of points were raised: any upgrade of the Centre would complement local facilities, not compete with them (although Paul Brown said that West Hoathly Village Hall was always full); there is no intention to charge an entry fee to the Centre; and all the information discussed this evening is in the public domain. Indeed, the notion of transmitting the Conservators' ideas to the parishes was welcomed.

ii) Ashdown Deer Group

Hew Prendergast said that the only news since the last meeting was the consolidation of a local Deer Management Group (DMG), with more landowners/-managers expressing interest in joining. He said he did not know how the DMG would develop but that good advice was available from the Deer Initiative. A crucial role of any such group is communication between neighbours over a significant part of the landscape. It is also crucial to understand that, even with greatly intensified shooting, a large deer population may not level off for several years.

Using the example of rabbits, with which he is familiar, Roger Street wondered about a conflict of interest in stalkers who, due to wanting to keep their sport, may not want to shoot enough deer to reduce deer numbers. Hew Prendergast replied that he had learned that landowners may not even know how many deer were being shot by stalkers using their land. This is likely to change now that many of them were so concerned about the damage done by deer. It is also likely that they will exert pressure on stalkers to shoot does, since they are the ones producing young, rather than bucks which, due to their antlers and large size, are usually the more popular with sportsmen. Population reduction can be achieved only by shooting does.

5) Other issues

Roger Street reported injuries incurred by a walker on the Forest Way caused by a biker.

He then asked about the Conservators' response to the Local Development Framework consultation. Hew Prendergast replied that he had stressed the importance of EU Habitat Regulations and their requirement that any development with a potentially adverse effect on Special Protection Areas and Special Areas of Conservation (like the Forest) goes through an Appropriate Assessment process and puts in place mitigation measures. Such measures for other sites in the UK

(e.g. heaths in Dorset and the Thames Basin) have included payments/housing unit (which site managers use for e.g. educating visitors) or the purchase of so-called 'interceptor' areas where residents of new developments can recreate instead of on the SPAs/SACs themselves. The first step in the Assessment process for the Forest was the visitor survey commissioned by Wealden (WDC) and Mid Sussex District Councils in 2008. One of its purposes was to provide predictions of increased visitor numbers to the Forest from developments in the surrounding area. The data, not yet available, are crucial for understanding from where future visitor pressure is likely to emanate.

Roger Street thought that opposing developments rather than getting the most 'benefits' from them would have been a better response. Of the six options for development presented in the consultation, he highlighted Option 6, which focussed on development in the Lewes/Uckfield railway line catchment, and Option 4, the one favoured by Fairwarp, which limits development within the AONB.

Rupert Thornley-Taylor disagreed, considering that the legislative requirements under Habitat Regulations were the best defence for the Forest, since they would force local officers to take notice. He added that the Forest is better protected than the AONB. Michael Hoy queried Roger Street's statement that WDC Councillors favoured Option 6 and emphasised that WDC must build the 11,000 home target imposed on it by government.

John Barnes was grateful that the issue had been raised and asked Hew Prendergast to add the Options to the agenda of the Conservators' next meeting (on 7 September).

Clair Park asked whether the 47 ancient, veteran or notable trees mentioned in the May minutes had been reported to the Ancient Tree Register. Hew Prendergast replied that that is where the data came from.

There being no further business, John Barnes thanked everyone for their attendance.

The meeting finished at 2103.

NB Date of next meeting: 16 December 2009 at 1900.