

Minutes of the
ASHDOWN FOREST
ROADS, PLANNING & AMENITIES COMMITTEE MEETING

1430, Monday 10 October 2005

Ashdown Forest Centre

Minutes

Present Mr F. Marshall (Chair), Mr F. Brown, Mr P. Glyn, Mr M. Lock, Dr H. Prendergast (Clerk), Mr R. Beal (Ranger), Mr F. Whetstone, Mrs J. Wirdnam

Apologies Mr L. Gillham, Mr R. Parsons

Also present Mr J. Barnes

1) Planning issues

a) As he had also raised at the Conservation Committee meeting of 26 September, Mr Brown said that WDC officers were not accounting for comments from the Forest on planning applications. The Clerk reported that he had contacted WDC about this apparent lack of attention and Mr I. Kay of WDC had replied to say that he is looking into the issue.

Mr Barnes suggested copying Forest objections to the local District Council member. Mr Brown will send Dr Prendergast a list of the councillors concerned.

b) There was a brief discussion of the archaeology of the Pale. Dr Prendergast reminded the Committee that there has been some progress towards getting research done. [N.B. See *Annual report to the Conservators of Ashdown Forest 2004/2005.*]

c) Dr Prendergast said that on 5 September there had been a site meeting looking at access to Pooh Sticks Bridge (with e.g. the Ramblers Association and AFRA), including the proposed diversion of the route from the future car park (on private land) to the road over about 50 m of Forest land. Dr Prendergast said that the meeting had agreed that there was, on the ground, an obvious route that would a) minimise impact on the Pale, b) would use tracks already available and c) be relatively direct. None of the various other organisations had expressed reservations over the route except the need to widen it and improve the surface. He asked the Committee whether it had any particular views on the diversion on the Forest. The Committee had none and agreed to leave the detail of the route in the hands of Dr Prendergast.

d) Dr Prendergast reported that one of the planning applications where Forest comments had apparently been ignored concerned the erection of a mast by a mobile phone company at the Nutley Telephone Exchange. BT owns the site and has an access licence across a strip of Forest land by the A22. In the event that the application had been successful (it has in fact been refused), Dr Prendergast asked for the Committee's view on the implications this would have had for a licence.

Mr Barnes suggested that a commercial rate may be needed. Mr Glyn emphasised the importance of a consistent response to licence applications and thought that a professional look at accesses is needed. The Committee agreed that BT should be informed that there would be a review of its licence.

The Committee recommended that the Board appoint agents, selected via tender from at least three applicants, to review existing licences and access on the Forest and made recommendations as to whether their value can be enhanced.

e) On the A275 access, Mr Glyn reported that he had received an acknowledgement from Cats Protection to his letter of 21 September, saying that their Trustees would meet at the end of October.

2) Encroachments/byelaw breaches

a) Dr Prendergast reported that Mr K. Doherty of Old Fox House, Duddleswell signed an undertaking at Lewes County Court on 22 September that he would not park or deposit anything on the Forest for a year. Mr Beal said that on 30 September, Forest staff obtained photographic evidence that both parking (for which permission had been granted until this day) and a mound of soil and bricks were on the Forest. On Monday 3 October further photographs were taken of three vehicles belonging to the firm (Forest Green Construction) apparently owned by Mr Doherty were on the Forest, as well as the mound of soil. All photographs were sent to the County Solicitor. On the weekend of 8/9 October, Mr Beal said there were no cars or other vehicles on the Forest but he could not get close enough to see if the rubble was still in place. He said he was wary of the builders.

b) Dr Prendergast said that the application to the Ashdown Forest Trust Trust for a byelaw enforcement officer is being passed round officers at County Hall.

3) Forest Centre development - update

a) A catering consultant, Food Service Associates (Henley) Limited, had submitted a *Café feasibility study* for the Centre.

The main conclusions were that:

- a sustainable café is a viable option if visitor numbers to the Centre increase (to a minimum of 100,000/year) and overall facilities (e.g. shop), signage, marketing and car-parking improve;
- the café should be 'tea shop' style, offering a simple menu of high quality, locally farmed/sourced produce, aimed at a 'mature' market but also catering for families with children;
- the design and development of external seating should be given priority;
- the operation should be contracted out to a small local company and should not be run in-house or by volunteers;
- on the basis of conservative forecasting, the café would not make a direct financial contribution of significance to the Centre but indirect benefits would lead to increased visitor numbers, higher shop spend and greater understanding of the aims and objectives of Forest management.

Mr Barnes said that a tea business could run on 30-40 people/day. He suggested an interim plan for a tea-room that would not be prejudicial to the bigger plans, using a local person, suitably qualified (certificated).

Mr Beal said that 50% of visitors over the weekend are looking for refreshments.

Mrs Wirdnam said that volunteers at the Centre need to see that change is happening.

b) Dr Prendergast said that Tenders were sent to six companies to do a business plan for the Centre. A business plan is not only strongly recommended by the Heritage Lottery Fund (from which funding is being sought for developing interpretation and education at the Centre), but also an essential component of the planning process in case the HLF bid fails.

Professional help was obtained from Sussex Enterprise in drawing up the brief for the plan and in awarding the contract – from among the four tenderers – to Parkin Heritage and Tourism (Dartmouth), which is already working in the area. The Urgency Committee approved the hiring. A first meeting is planned for 11 October, along with an architect and WDC. The plan must be completed by 23 December.

4) Commercial activities on the Forest

a) Both the Old Surrey and Burstow & West Kent Hunt and the Coakham Bloodhounds will be meeting on the Forest this autumn and winter. The Master of the former has requested whether the Board would consider increasing the number of hunting days up from the current level of four.

Mr Barnes thought that the Board could not be held liable for hunts breaking the law. The emphasis should be on enforcement of the bye-laws. The hunts must respect them and the future of their activity would depend on compliance. The Committee agreed that Rangers should check on this.

b) Although a conservation issue, Dr Prendergast asked if the Committee had any experience regarding the possible impact of a commercial, gundog training venture on the Forest in summer. The Committee agreed that, if this involved the firing of blanks and projectiles, the activity would be incompatible and inappropriate on the Forest.

c) He also asked for views on the flying of model planes on the Forest. Mr Beal thought that electric radio-controlled models are better than the gliders over which owners have no control. The Committee thought that uncontrolled flying should at most be put in specific areas.

5) Update

a) A draft legal agreement between the Board and Mr H. Osborne on the acquisition of the barn at Whitehouse Farm was shown to the Committee. Dr Prendergast said that the Board's lawyer, Mr P. Vince, had spent considerable time on this so would not expect any changes. He suggested that any comments be made to Mr C. Marrable who has been responsible for the negotiations on the Board's behalf so far. Any comments would lead to delay. Dr Prendergast suggested that the signature of the Chairman of the Board

would be needed for the agreement. The Committee agree to submit any queries to Mr Marrable by 0900 on Friday 14 October.

b) On memorial benches, there has been no offer of a design from a contact of Mr Whetstone. Dr Prendergast suggested that he move ahead with the original craftsman but select another, cheaper, style than the ones originally designed. The Committee agreed.

c) Dr Prendergast said that visitor numbers to the Centre in this calendar year so far were 14,220; at this rate this will be the best year since 1999. Previous whole year figures are 12,086 in 2004; 12,850, 2003; 13,232, 2002; 13,091, 2001; and 14,706, 2000. The Shepard exhibition has clearly been a draw. He added that, welcome though the rise in numbers is, it is still only very modest. Only a substantial change to the site will make an impact. The next exhibition, for which a grant of £2,000 has been obtained from the Weald Heathland Initiative, will be on Forest maps and photographs. An invitation to attend a preview opening on Wednesday 23 November will be sent to all commoners, Conservators, Forest residents and members of the Friends to attend the opening. Mr Barnes agreed to do the official opening.

d) On 7 October Dr Prendergast gave a presentation about the Centre to a conference organised by ESCC on visitor centres.

e) On the last day of the Shepard exhibition (30 October), the Ashdown Forest Tourism Association is organising Pooh's Hunny Festival as part of the Food Festival. Dr Prendergast is giving a talk on wild foods and Mr C. Marrable is identifying fungi during the Festival week.

f) Dr Prendergast said that he had obtained a permanent loan from ESCC of the predecessor of the current Pooh Sticks Bridge. The presence of the Bridge could add to the attraction of the Centre.

g) Mr Marshall mentioned that on the morning of the meeting he had telephoned Matthews, the contractor whose lorries damaged the road verges on Kidds Hill during large numbers of deliveries to Cobbers Farm, and was told that they were not doing any more work, i.e. would not repair the damage that had been done. This is contrary to what Mr Mark Matthew had written to the Centre on 22 November. The Committee suggested sending a letter to Mr Matthews, and copying it to the County Solicitor, requiring the work to be done.

6) AOB

a) Mr Glyn said that he is arranging an exhibition in the Forest Centre of works by the well-known local photographer, Mr S. Dalton.

b) Via Mr Marshall, Mr A. White asked about progress on the bridge below King Standing (at new pond Cottages). Dr Prendergast said that work finished some weeks ago.

The meeting finished at 1706.