



ANNUAL REPORT OF THE BOARD OF CONSERVATORS OF ASHDOWN FOREST 2009/2010



Fig. 1. The Conservators' flock of Hebridean sheep, Wrens Warren (Chris Marrable).

FOREWORD

John Barnes, Chairman of the Board

To many of those living, walking or riding on the Forest its designation by the European Union as a Special Area for Conservation and a Special Protection Area must sometimes seem far removed from their concerns. In this past year, however, both Wealden and Mid-Sussex District Councils developed their response to the requirements of the EU Habitats Regulations. These require both the assessment and investigation of the impact of development on the conserved areas. Natural England too have taken the view that no new business development should take place within 400 meters of their boundaries. The message for the Conservators is absolutely clear, but those interested in the Forest as an amenity and as an area of natural "wilderness" might care to reflect that the conservation of heathland is erecting another very powerful bastion against external threats to the character and attraction of Ashdown Forest.

Protecting the Forest also takes place 'on the ground', through vigilance and bye-law enforcement by staff and through new policies by the Board. As the public purse tightens, the Board has to consider slimming down its operations and seeking new income streams. At such times the Board is very appreciative of those who continue to support the Forest "because it's worth it": the Society of Friends of Ashdown Forest and the many volunteers who help staff at the Forest Centre or out on the Forest itself. To them in particular I would like to extend my personal thanks.

This is the last report that I shall sign of as Chairman. I have enjoyed my three years and hope that I have played my part in our effort to explain better what the Conservators are about. I should like to thank my fellow Conservators and particularly those who hold office, the Clerk and his staff for their part in easing the Chairman's task and making the job so enjoyable.

John Barnes

CONSERVATION

In the third full year of funding from Higher Level Stewardship (HLS), restoration of the Forest's internationally important heathland continued to make good progress with extensive areas grazed by the Conservators' flock of Hebridean sheep (Fig. 1), cleared of invading trees or scrub (Fig. 2) or bracken-mown (Fig. 3). The Panel established by Natural England continued its monitoring role.

On an area basis alone, HLS is having a great impact on the Forest's heaths, adding to that of the grazing by livestock belonging to commoners in large areas in the south, central part of the Forest. Perhaps due to improving communications and understanding, adverse public reaction was restricted to work beside the A275 near Chelwood Gate – much of which was actually carried out by some of the 66 commoners who exercised their right to cut wood. Most wood, however, cut by commoners and another 53 non commoners under permit, was taken from woodland rather than heathland edge – a tiny impact on the 1000 hectares of woodland under the management of the Conservators.

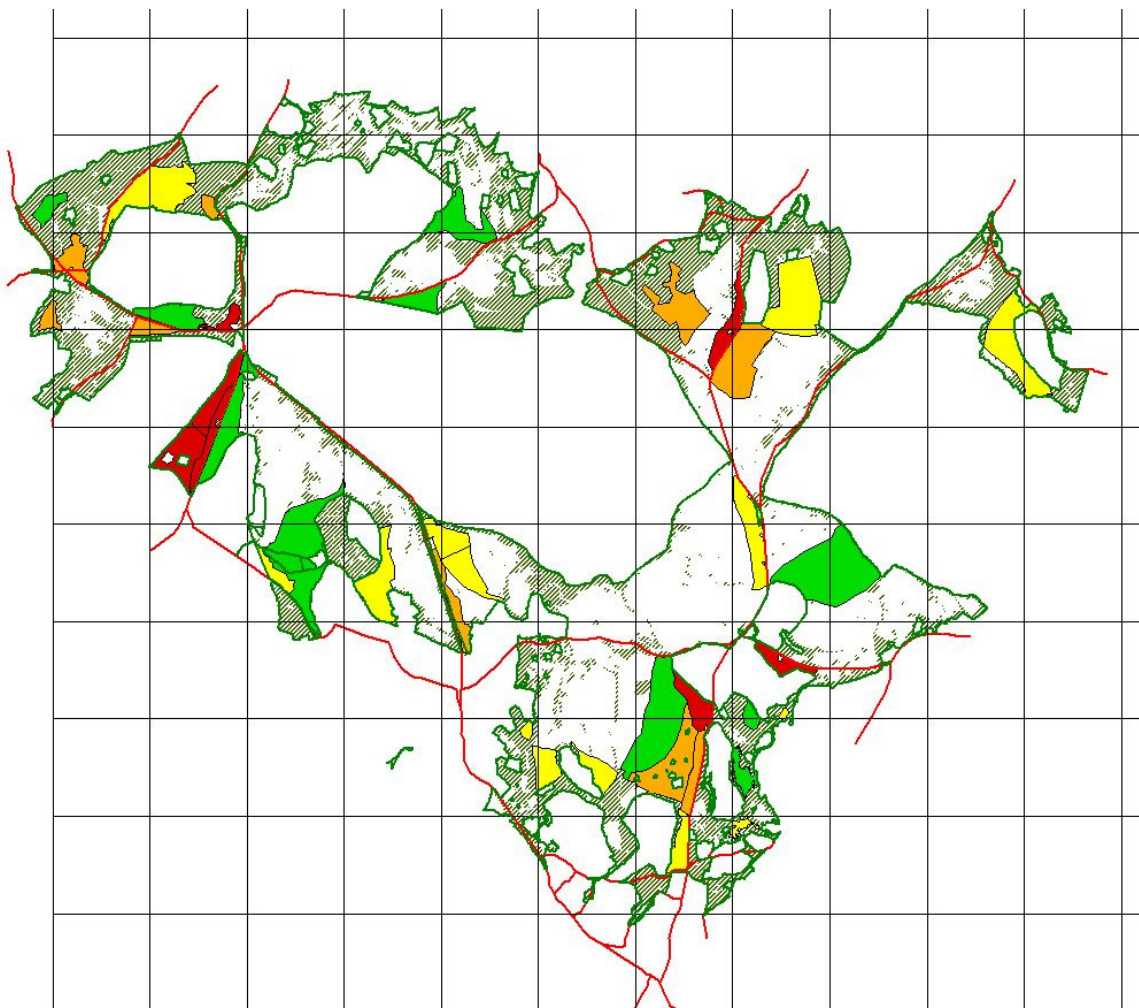


Fig. 2. Areas of the Forest where tree/scrub clearance has taken place since the start of HLS as part of heathland restoration work. Red, 2006-2007; orange, 2007/2008; yellow, 2008-2009; green, 2009-2010; hatched green is woodland.

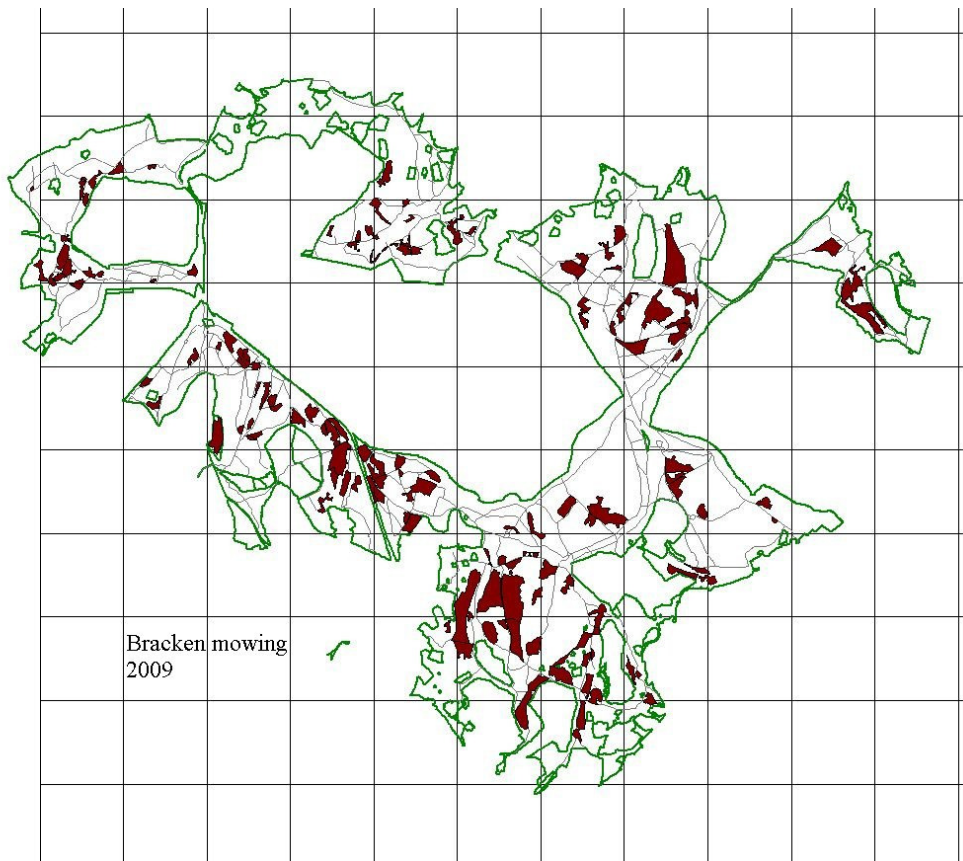


Fig. 3. Bracken mowing areas, 2009. They total 266 hectares.

Lambing of the Hebrideans took place at the Cats Protection site in Chelwood Gate, the new additions to the flock becoming a popular draw for both staff and visitors. With lambing and the purchase of some wethers and ewes, the flock built up to about 300 by the end of March 2010. With either the Shepherd, or Assistant Shepherd, the flock spent 122 days grazing on the Forest, nearly double the 66 of 2008-2009, and the number of 'sheep days grazed' also doubled to more than 21,000.

Although it is clear that close-shepherded grazing alone, even with a considerably larger flock, will have little impact on the 1000 hectares of heathland outside the grazing area, the Conservators' Conservation Committee:

- "recognises the success of the Close Shepherded Grazing Feasibility Project;
- approves the retention of the expertise, resources and animals involved in the project;
- incorporates these into options for developing a new grazing project to continue until at least 2016, taking into account public relations and access, fencing, livestock, costs and availability of funds."

By year's end work had already begun to consider future options for grazing on the Forest, with a close eye kept latterly on a public enquiry on ESCC's application to fence in lowland heath on nearby Chailey Common. The Conservation Officer appeared for the applicant.

Wildlife

Since the start of HLS, several groups of wildlife have been targeted for specialist surveys. This year it was the turn of small mammals. With initial expert support in survey and identification techniques, the distribution of voles, mice and shrews was studied. Only wood mice were actually caught in live-traps (Fig. 4), with high numbers found in appropriate habitat, rough grassland adjacent to gorse scrub. There were plentiful signs of field voles. A report on shrews is incomplete and a long-term dormouse survey was set up with 100 boxes placed in the Vachery and the Cackle Street hazel coppice.

As well as the annual count of marsh gentians and fragrant and marsh orchids, a survey of the sites and rough populations sizes of cotton grass over the entire Forest was also carried out. This species (a sedge despite its name) is a good, easily visible indicator of bogs so can be resurveyed in years to come to see if such areas are diminishing with climate change. A student project on birch, oak and pine gave a positive answer to the question: do trees on the Forest grow an inch (in girth) a year?



Fig. 4. Roger Beal weighing a wood mouse.

Sightings of woodlark, buzzard and raven continued to increase in number, the first species benefitting perhaps from the heathland bird restoration work, the others as part of their general range expansion in Sussex. A local volunteer did the first census of the birds on the heaths in winter, including an attempt to establish the size, number and species composition of roosts; meadow pipit was the most abundant species.

Rangers dealt with 244 deer casualties in the 2009 calendar year (266 in 2008) and the Ashdown Area Deer Forum set up a Deer Management Group to coordinate shooting activities. While accepting the need to reduce the deer population, the Conservators' position has so far been that shooting would be ineffective on the Forest itself unless major neighbouring land-owners were doing likewise on their own land. Evidence that this was now starting leaves public safety as the main hurdle to be overcome.

Heritage

In the Forest Garden at Chelwood Vachery the main work of the year was dredging the lower two lakes, thus completing that phase of its restoration (Fig. 5). No archaeological fieldwork took place but results from a Light Detection and Ranging (LiDAR) survey (a rapidly emerging technology for determining, even in woodland, the shape of the ground surface plus natural and man-made features) came available for the south half of the Forest, and the north half was overflowed in late winter. An external project funded by the Weald Forest Ridge Landscape Partnership Scheme and supervised by the County Archaeologist, it will enable refining of earlier fieldwork work on the Forest funded by HLS.



Fig.5. A digger a work in the Forest Garden, Chelwood Vachery (Chris Thorne).

AMENITY & COMMUNITY

EU Habitat Regulations and planning

The popularity of the Forest, reflecting its status as the largest public access space in the South East, was quantified by a visitor survey that took place in 2008 but whose results were not published until September 2009. Funded by Wealden and Mid Sussex District Councils, it aimed to provide baseline data for mitigation measures for impacts on the Forest's wildlife and vegetation resulting from local planning developments.

This survey, the most comprehensive ever on the Forest, emerged out of the councils' need to consider EU Habitat Regulations and the Forest's designations as a Special Area for Conservation and Special Protection Area. It estimated around 1.35 million annual visits although recognised this may be an underestimate. Nearly 85% of cars travelled 10 km or less and the most common reason for visiting the Forest was its "openness". Surprisingly, a majority of people surveyed (56.7%) said they would pay a parking charge – a figure that is of interest in the changing economic climate. A further figure of interest is that there were 62 dogs for every 100 visitors.

While one application of the survey's results is to predict likely increases in visitor numbers, another is to model visitor use of the Forest and to suggest ways in which access (via the focal points provided by car parks) and habitat management can be refined. Habitat Regulations are stimulating a growth in national expertise in the interface between recreation and wildlife (especially on heaths) that could be useful in future on Ashdown.

In commenting on Wealden's Local Development Framework, the Conservators expressed their view that it favoured those planning options that provided a minimum number of houses in villages and settlements near the Forest.

Access and properties on the Forest

Commenting on planning applications has long been a way in which the Conservators can try to minimise impact on the Forest. The bye-laws made under the 1974 Ashdown Forest Act are invaluable for more active protection against the encroachments, parking, rubbish dumping etc. that characterise a small, but persistent, number of properties. There was also discussion about the implications, in connection with bye-law enforcement, of so-called 'urbanised' Forest (e.g. in villages) and 'proper' Forest (e.g. the heaths and woods).

Through the year there was a lengthy exercise reviewing the stipulations and annual rents of the Perpetual Licences granted for properties accessed over the Forest. One outcome was the introduction of separate rents for domestic and business properties, the latter tied to a percentage of rateable value.

Use of the Forest and Forest Centre

During the year at least 35 formal events on the Forest were notified to the office, including sponsored walks, runs and orienteering by societies, scouts, and others. Astronomers exploited the relatively dark night skies and there was military training in navigation and mine-field rescue. There were frequent reports of illegal bike riding, often associated with verbal abuse towards staff or members of the public.

Staff continued the programme of replacing bridges on the Forest (Fig. 6). One at Old Lodge Bottom was the first to be privately sponsored on the same lines as memorial benches that have been so successful. Other annual work programmes cover maintenance of 120 km of fire-breaks/rides that traverse the Forest (Fig. 7) and dealing with dangerous trees along Forest roads. There was an unwelcome flurry of asbestos dumping in the autumn that cost nearly £3,000 to remove. Weekly work parties from the Sussex Probation Service and ESCC Social Services provided invaluable help with a wide range of tasks such as litter picking.



Fig. 6. Ed Burgin and Chris Sutton repairing North Pole bridge (Michael Payne).



Fig. 7. Ride repairs near the Airstrip (Michael Payne).

In the first full year of involvement in the Heritage Lottery-funded Weald Forest Ridge Landscape Partnership Scheme, the Conservators introduced new children's furniture and an electronic whiteboard into the Education Barn, produced a new series of walks leaflets (Fig. 8) and educational material for Key Stage 1 pupils and their teachers, and passed the mid-point in preparing several thousand pages of Forest archives for putting online.



Fig. 8. Three new walks leaflets produced under the Weald Forest Ridge Landscape Partnership Scheme.

At the Forest Centre there were 28 events, the largest number being school visits, some hosted by teachers from the Sussex Wildlife Trust, but also including, for example, a ESCC Children’s Library Service Reading Day, Fungi and Roman Days and a chainsaw course. Additionally, art exhibitions were *On the Forest floor ... and beyond* (Fig. 9) by Pamela Hurwitz of Sharpthorne, *Ashdown Forest – an artist’s view* by Juliet Murray of Nutley, and *Wide horizons* by East Grinstead artists William de Wilde and Michael Gage. Visitor numbers at the Centre reached 15,782, with 3,287 in August alone – both figures being the best annual and monthly figures respectively for many years - but still a tiny proportion of the Forest total. The publication of the new Pooh book *Return to the Hundred Acre Wood* in October, although engendering considerable national and international media interest, led to no discernible flood of visitors to the Forest!



Fig. 9. *On the Forest floor ... and beyond* was opened on 9 April by award-winning environmental journalist Geoffrey Lean.

The Conservators continued discussion of the extent to which the Centre should be upgraded. General acceptance remained for the need to move (and possibly replace) the wood boiler, for modern toilet facilities and a new entrance to the site but not for the introduction of catering facilities and the new build that this would require. [PS. In June 2010 the Board gave approval for the full development.]

Communication

The Parish Liaison Panel set up by the Conservators in autumn 2008 had four successful meetings in the year. Other links with the local community came with attendance at meetings, and/or membership, of the Ashdown Forest Villages Road Safety Partnership, the Ashdown Visitor Management Partnership, the Ashdown Forest Tourism Association, the Board of the Weald Forest Ridge Landscape Partnership Scheme, the Wealden Tourism Strategy Steering Group and Plumpton College's Countryside and Environment Curriculum Advisory Panel. Staff led one tour and gave seven talks in the local community. Print-runs of 5,000 copies of the Conservators' own biannual *Ashdown Forest Life* newsletter (Fig. 10) were mailed to Forest residents and members of the Society of Friends and distributed widely in local outlets. The e-news service, to which parties interested in news from the Forest log on via the website, had ca 270 on its list by year's end. Local media ran features on litter-picking, walks leaflets, deer and exhibitions and on a poll by *The Times* that the Forest was one of the top 30 sites in the country for autumn colour.



Fig. 10. Front cover of the Autumn/Winter issue of *Ashdown Forest Life*.

An Away Day in October, at the Royal Ashdown Forest Golf Club in October, brought together 11 Conservators, seven staff and ten Friends/volunteers. The aim was to see how the *Strategic Forest Plan 2008-2016*, agreed by the Board in June 2008 and thus already more than 15 months into its implementation, could be revised. It emerged from free group discussion that almost topics raised were already covered by the *Plan* but there was some difference of opinion about a draft Vision for the Forest that was presented. In formal session the Conservators subsequently agreed to the proposal for an annual meeting for non commoners.

FINANCE & RESOURCES

Compared with 2008-2009, the Conservators' income rose from £703k to £751k (Appendix 1). The greatest single source was again Defra's Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) scheme with £351k (46.7% of total income), £41k of which was a Special Project Reserve. Grants from local authorities (ESCC, WDC) and the Ashdown Forest Trust fell from £165k to £157k (20.8%). The year saw the first income from the Heritage Lottery Fund-supported Weald Forest Ridge Landscape Partnership Scheme (WFRLPS; £13k), £7.1k from the installation of memorial seats and a bridge (Fig. 11) and a bank interest of only £21 (£4k) that reflected the impact of global recession. The Ashdown Forest Conservation Trust and the Society of Friends of Ashdown Forest added their own contributions to the WFRLPS, the latter also purchasing a 4x4 vehicle for the Conservators.

Expenditure rose from £632 to £637k, the major contributor being full employment costs of £365k (57% of the total). Changes from 2008-2009 include expenditure for work on WFRLPS (the £13k balancing income), £14k for the restoration of the Vachery Forest Garden (ring-fenced funds for which were drawn from the Society of Friends) and a drop from £11k to £2k for the Forestry Commission-funded rhododendron clearance.

The year ended with a surplus of £66k, £53k of which was the HLS Special Project Reserve and underspend. The total reserves balance on 31 March 2010 was £299k (£233k in 2008-2009).

During the year the Conservators were obliged to repay £37k to the Rural Payments Agency (RPA) it had received as Single Farm Payments in previous years (the RPA having ignored calls of Forest staff that the Conservators were ineligible). A change of current account banking from HSBC to the Cooperative was unsuccessful, the attraction of free services offered by the latter being more than offset by later internet banking and direct debit handling difficulties.



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