

Minutes of annual general meeting of Greenham and Crookham Conservation Volunteers

21 July 2013

Members present: Derek Cutt, Ewan Davies, Jim O'Donoghue, John Parker, Laurence Parker, Dean Pawlyn, Pam Pickett, Neil Rickman, Linda Sharpe.

Also present: Ade Wallington, WBC Greenham Common Ranger

Apologies

Apologies were received from Derek Emes, Ian Norman, Judith Qualtrough, and Ben Waite.

Minutes of previous meeting

The minutes of the previous AGM on 15 July 2012 were approved and the Chairman signed a file copy as a true record of the meeting.

Actions from the previous AGM minutes

DE to continue liaising with Chris Austin (Chairman of the now wound-up CGCA) re transfer of funds. **Ongoing.** Derek has spoken to Chris but the funds have not yet been transferred.

DE and JP to liaise re transfer of Chairman's responsibilities. **Completed.**

NR and JP to liaise re transfer Treasurer's responsibilities. **Completed.**

J O'D and DK to liaise re sharing of Tools Officers' responsibilities. **Completed.**

DC to inform Paul Hendry at WBC that Derek Emes remains our nominated Commissioner. **Completed.**

Election of officers for year 2013-14

With the exception of DK (joint Tools Officer) the current officers had all indicated their willingness to stand again. There being no alternative nominations, all were proposed, seconded and unanimously re-elected.

Officers for the coming year therefore remain...

Chairman: John Parker
Secretary: Derek Cutt
Treasurer: Neil Rickman
Tools Officer: Jim O'Donoghue

Derek Emes had also offered to continue to serve as our appointee on the Greenham and Crookham Commons Commission. Again, there being no alternative nomination, he was proposed, seconded and unanimously re-elected. Derek Emes therefore remains our appointed Commissioner.

Action: DC to inform Paul Hendry of WBC that DE remains our nominated Commissioner.

Chairman's report on activities since the previous AGM

John presented his report, the text of which is reproduced below:

Having taken over as Chairman at the last AGM I have survived my 1st year in post.

The tasks over the last year have taken us to all corners of the common. We have undertaken scrub clearance at Martindale, Bishop's Green, Aldernbridge and Sandleford and then closer to the control tower car park we cleared a large area of bramble to reveal one of the former fuel storage tanks. We renovated the waymark posts in the central area and over the last few months have been carrying out maintenance of the footpaths to the south of the GAMA site.

Our numbers have fluctuated from 4 (on a snowy Sunday in March) up to 15.

I would like to thank the following for their work during the year:

- Derek Cutt as Secretary and Neil Rickman as Treasurer.
- Ade and the West Berkshire Council Ranger team for their support and providing us with a range of tasks and the materials required to carry them out.
- Derek Cutt for keeping our web site up to date and Pam Pickett for being our "chief photographer".
- Dave Kenning and Jim O'Donoghue for looking after our tools.
- All the members who have turned up to provide the "elbow grease".
- Derek Emes as our elected representative on the Greenham and Crookham Commons Commission.

We have supported the Duke of Edinburgh's Award Scheme by providing opportunities for participants to undertake the "service" element of their Award.

In addition we have also been able to provide tasks to support the West Berkshire Youth Offending Team and hope that some of our "visitors" have benefited from the fresh air, exercise and the opportunity to contribute something to supporting the environment.

We have attracted some new members over the year and are always pleased to see former members returning to support us. We even "exported" one of our members to New Zealand to help the folk down under with their conservation efforts!

An interesting statistic is that over the last 10 years the Volunteers have contributed around 8,000 man hours of work to maintaining the Commons!

Here's looking forward to another year in which we can help to improve the Commons for the benefit of all its users.

John Parker
Chairman
21st July 2013

Feedback to the Ranger

Ade had asked for feedback about what activities the membership had particularly liked or disliked, or suggestions for future tasks. From a general discussion, the following points emerged:

- Nobody likes clearing brambles! Some people don't like cutting bracken.
- Nobody likes pulling ragwort, which is a valuable part of the ecosystem, especially since the people who most publicly dislike it (e.g. the equestrian community) never come out and pull it up themselves.
- There was general support for revisiting an area or a task if necessary, in order to get it finished and get the sense of having achieved a lasting gain. A related point was that in the last year or two we have paid much more attention than previously to stump treatment, so members have less reason to feel they are wasting their effort on cutting scrub which will just grow back again. It was suggested that we could do some experiments to monitor the regrowth from treated versus untreated stumps.
- Since BBOWT have had Conservation Trainees on site, they have had the lion's share of clearing larger trees, while the volunteers have been left with the less satisfying small scrub.
- Construction tasks are generally popular, also good to give us something useful to do outside the scrub-bashing season.
- There was a suggestion that we could undertake some species and habitat surveys. The meeting was generally in support, and Ade agreed to consider whether some such activities can be fitted into the programme.

Treasurer's report and financial matters

Neil presented the latest financial position. In summary, we have had no income since the last AGM, nor any expenditure. Our funds therefore remain sufficient for the foreseeable future.

The Treasurer's report and the accounts were accepted, with thanks to Neil.

John reported that Barclays had recently contacted him about an administrative matter, despite the fact that they have been informed that Neil is now the main contact person.

Action: NR to contact Barclays to ensure they recognise him as Treasurer and primary contact.

Report from the Greenham & Crookham Commons Commission

Derek Emes not being present, the Chairman read out his report, the text of which is reproduced below:

An unusual aspect of the past year has been the need for two Extraordinary meetings in addition to the regular quarterly meetings. I will elaborate on these further along.

The AGM was held on 16th August 2012. Chris Austin who had held the chair for several years retired due to other pressures on his time. Tony Ferguson was elected as his replacement.

A number of regular topics were discussed. Commoners rights is one. It was confirmed that there are 18 surplus rights up for sale by WBC. A full "Rights" register was still not prepared.

Perimeter fencing inspection had been completed and repairs under way.

Advice from DEFRA had been received on Grazing Regulations. The current draft had been reviewed by the Council's Animal Health team. A revised draft is to be sent to DEFRA in September for approval. Other usual topics were discussed including gorse control. An EGM was called to reach agreement on management method for 19th Sept.

The EGM met and reached agreement. In short there is approximately only 100 Ha of gorse not 400 as previously stated. This is mainly in compartments 9 through 12. The method finally agreed was cutting and removal. Rotational cutting was to take place as frequently as feasible at around 5 Ha at a time in varied locations.

21st Nov.mtg. covered all the normal topics apart from one major surprise. A sensitive topic was raised whereby a proposal by the WBC was in discussion with BBOWT whereby they would take on the management of the Common on behalf of the Council. As this was a major matter with so many facets to consider an EGM was called for 9th January.

EGM was held and with 14 attendees. The plan was carefully considered with too many topics to list here. Derek C. was at the meeting and can probably answer any specific points raised at this AGM. The Council formally arranged for BBOWT to take over management on 19th May last.

Feb. and May meetings covered the more general matters, list of Commoners rights outstanding still, etc. The impact of BBOWT's role on the management plan was discussed. The possibility of extending the plan to cover Bowdown Woods was mooted. These matters will be resolved in due course but the Commission's Plan is made in accordance of the Act's requirements and so rules.

If members want anything raised at any future Commission meeting, please let Derek Emes know.

Change of management for WBC's countryside estate

AW reported that plans for Berks, Bucks and Oxon Wildlife Trust (BBOWT) to take over the management of WBC's countryside estate are continuing. The nine sites affected are: Snelmore Common Country Park, Bucklebury Common, Hosehill Lake, Wokefield Common, Padworth Common, Paices Wood Country Park, Thatcham Reedbeds, Greenham and Crookham Commons and Audrey's Meadow. The main reason for the transfer is to ensure the continued management of the nature reserves to a high level, in the light of recent and future austerity under the Council with the opportunity to enhance the services with specialist expertise and fundraising that BBOWT can bring.

The Council will remain the landowners, as will the private owners of Bucklebury and Wokefield Commons and Paices Wood. BBOWT will lease the sites (probably for at least ten years initially), and management will be mainly funded by payments from WBC and the continuing income through Higher Level Stewardship grants. Also, as a charity, BBOWT will be able to apply to wider sources of funding.

A total of 9 WBC staff will transfer. This includes the 2 current Countryside Rangers, 1 Countryside Officer and the 6 staff members at the Nature Discovery Centre who will all become BBOWT employees. The transfer date is not yet confirmed but will be later this year.

Alongside the transfer, BBOWT have also been successful in a HLF (Heritage Lottery Fund) bid for a 5 year project which will see more staff employed as part of the West Berkshire Living Landscape project. BBOWT will work out of the Rangers Building 616 and will see an increase in personnel.

The Greenham and Crookham Conservation Volunteers are a very important part of the management on the common and BBOWT would continue assisting the group in its efforts. There may be more opportunities to work on other areas if the group would like to do so.

Control Tower petition

Derek Emes, not being present in person, had asked DC to inform the meeting about an online petition aimed at persuading WBC to retain the control tower as a community resource (e.g. by selling it to Greenham Parish Council) rather than selling it to the highest bidder. The petition URL was printed on the agenda, but the meeting suggested it be e-mailed to the full membership list.

Action: DC to e-mail the web address to all members.

Chainsaw and tree-felling training

Laurence offered to provide training or refresher training in chainsaw use, and/or in tree-felling using hand tools. He is not authorised to certify trainees' competence, but is an experienced practitioner with good and up-to-date knowledge of relevant (e.g. safety) legislation as well as practical techniques. Members present were keen to take advantage of this offer, although any training will have to wait until the winter season.

Action: DC to e-mail all members about this, towards the end of the year.

Other business

LP asked whether, following the expected transfer of management, BBOWT would pay our annual insurance premium (as WBC have previously).

Action: DC to check the insurance situation with Simon Barnett.

LP also pointed out that the change of management might provide us with opportunities to work on other sites within the Living Landscape area or further afield on other BBOWT properties. The meeting was unanimously in support of this idea. We would be happy to help on other sites, either on our normal "third-Sunday" dates or possibly at other times as well.

LP asked whether any events were coming up, at which we would be exhibiting or recruiting. There are none foreseen. DC mentioned that the last invitation we had was for a volunteer recruitment fair run by the Newbury Volunteer Bureau. We had declined the invitation because events of that kind have never proved a good source of new volunteers for us. In discussion, the members present generally felt that our numbers are currently healthy in any case.

DC asked whether anybody is interested in attending first-aid training. Nobody present expressed an immediate interest but it was suggested that DC canvass the full e-mail list.

Action: DC to check with Simon Barnett whether WBC/BBOWT will pay (as in the past) for first aid training on the one day "Emergency First Aid" course. If so, DC to e-mail the members to advise that training is available.