

HARTING PARISH COUNCIL

Parish Meeting - Harting Tree Project

MINUTES

Minutes of the Parish Meeting held on **Wednesday 7 October 2020 at 6.30 p.m.**

The meeting was held via Zoom video link in accordance with the Coronavirus Act 2020

There were 34 Zoom connections linked to the meeting, some with more than one person present, it is estimated about 40 people were in attendance.

The meeting was chaired by Mr Shaxson, the chair of the Parish Council and members of the Woodland and Tree Sub Committee (WTSC) took part along with Petra Billings, the chartered ecologist appointed by the Council to develop the planting scheme for the Warren.

In attendance: Mrs Walker (Parish Clerk).

1. Apologies for absence: Mr A Palmer, Mr N Johnson Hill and Mrs A Church

2. Welcome

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting and confirmed that the meeting had been called to discuss the Harting Tree Project and to listen and react to the questions and issues that were raised.

3. Housekeeping

The clerk confirmed the meeting would be recorded for the purpose of the minutes and went on to outline some of the processes that would be in place to help the Zoom meeting run smoothly.

4. Tree Project presentations

Mr Shaxson stated that it was clear that people were concerned about the Warren and that the Parish Council was too. He hoped that by the end of the meeting some of the concerns may be allayed.

Mr Shaxson referred to the chronology of the Harting Tree Project which had been sent out with the agenda (see appendix A to minutes). The following areas were highlighted. In 1937 the Wace had been planted and following severe damage by squirrels the decision was taken to allow the self sown ash to become the final crop as they were so healthy. This was how the ash became the dominant species.

The three tree surveys carried out on behalf of the Parish Council were triggered when the clerk attended a training course and hear about the case of Witley v Cavanagh. The second of these surveys showed the start of the ash dieback, then 16 months later the third survey showed the ash situation had become so critical that most of the ash trees would need felling. The Council had no option other than to follow this advice.

The Woodland Trust noted in its report that ash was the single largest problem in the Warren. The Woodland Management Plan, written by Petra Billings, was overtaken by the onset of the ash dieback.

The processes to gain the necessary licences were set in motion in June and notices were posted to South Gardens and the Warren notifying the public of the ash dieback. There was a hiatus with delays at the Forestry Commission, but the Council felt that the danger to human life, posed by the trees, meant there was no option other than to continue.

The felling was carried out and this led to issues which led to the subsequent closure of the footpaths.

The next stage was to move forward to the preparation for the restoration and at its March meeting the Council agreed to install deer fencing to protect the saplings and natural regeneration.

The footpaths were gradually opened at the end of June and Euroforest returned to the site to reprofile the paths, the WSCC Rights of Way officer has said the paths are now satisfactory. Mr Shaxson apologised that the paths were not as they used to be although they are fit for purpose, he confirmed that they will be monitored from now on and, if necessary, remedial works will be done.

The ground work for the deer fencing has been carried out and the protection of the beech saplings is underway.

Mr Shaxson handed over to Dr Bowman for details of the replanting and restoration plans.

Dr Bowman outlined the two aspects of the restoration. The first is the protection of the natural regeneration, seedlings of native trees and shrubs that have germinated and grown this year. The second is planting the bare-root saplings. It is hoped there will be a rich mix of species, with trees forming 70% of the total and the rest being shrubs.

The protection of the regeneration needs to happen imminently before the leaves fall. It is hoped that volunteers will be helping to protect a total of 700 seedlings. It was noted that several volunteers were present at the meeting.

There is already a good range of species showing, some such as beech, field maple, hazel and hawthorn are growing in abundance. Other species such as spindle, dogwood, dog rose, yew and wild gooseberry are also appearing. There is a good level of ash regenerating, but whilst ash dieback is still evident across the South Downs the seedlings will not survive.

The usual planting season for saplings is October to March and the Council aims to begin planting at the end of November during National Tree Week. However, it was noted that this timetable would be dependent on the availability of the bare-root saplings as they can only be lifted when they are dormant. In some years this has been as late as mid-December.

The Council intend to plant about 3800 saplings, with both volunteers and contractors, by the end of March 2021. The variety of species will be increased with the inclusion of small-leaved lime and whitebeam to the trees and guelder rose and wayfaring tree to the shrubs. It is possible that further planting in the 2021/22 season will include other species. It is essential to have a diversity of species to ensure the health and longevity of the Warren.

The volunteer planting will take a variety of forms with teams of both adult and family groups. It is important to engage with children so they can understand the fun and importance of planting.

It is anticipated there will be a further 300 seedlings protected during spring and summer 2021, with new planting in the 2021/22 season to replace any failures, fill in gaps and balance out any species mix.

The planting is not the end of the project, the maintenance of the woodland is an ongoing matter. It was the lack of maintenance that led to the ash becoming the dominant species.

Dr Bowman finished her presentation by stressing how sad it would be if a future generation were to say that the major effort invested in 2020 and 2021 had been wasted because the community did not continue to volunteer to look after the Warren.

The Chair rounded up the presentations by apologising as, despite having provided a large amount of information, it was clear the communications had not reached everyone. The Council will endeavour to improve the methods of communication.

He also stressed that the Parish councillors are not experts, they are volunteers who depend on various organisations for guidance, including Euroforest for the tree works. It now appears that the Council have pioneered the process to deal with dying trees on public access land and that the guidance given could have been better. It is likely that this experience will help others, the Council has effectively been a guinea pig. This status, along with a great deal of work by the Woodland and Tree Sub-Committee has resulted in a large grant of £32179 being provided by the Tree Council.

5. Questions from the public

The meeting was opened for a period of questions from the public.

5.1. Mr Shearing raised questions about the variety of species to be planted. He noted that Sussex was covered in woodland and wondered if it was possible to be bold and imaginative to develop a Warren that could be distinctive and admired for decades to come. He felt that the planting should not be restricted to native trees.

Mr Shearing asked if the following could be included within the planting scheme:

- variation of leaf / tree colour throughout the year by including beech, copper beech, liquidamber, field maple and sycamore
- visual impact by planting some trees in clumps and using Specimen trees such as oak, walnut, whitebeam and hornbeam
- evergreens to provide colour all year round by using holm oak, holly and hemlock
- clumps of trees such as silver birch for bark effect
- spring blossom such as wild cherry and amalanchier
- trees to provide berries and fruits such as rowan and holly
- avenue of trees up the path? What about Copper Beech?

Mrs Billings responded to the questions, she felt that some of the points were excellent but was unable to agree with them all. She stressed that the woodland was distinctive, and it was important to only include native trees within the planting scheme. The woodland had been in existence since at least 1600 according to the maps and the community of flowers that are found there and may date back before this time. The ancient woodlands are a special and rare habitat and so it is important to work with the species that are already there and growing well. The trees and shrubs need to grow well on chalky soil. She went on to answer the specific queries.

- variation of leaf / tree colour throughout the year - will be provided by field maple, beech and various shrubs. Copper beech and liquidamber are not native and will not be included. Sycamores are growing in abundance across the Downs and it is thought they will come to the Warren of their own accord without planting
- visual impact by planting some trees in clumps and using Specimen trees – there will be some planting in clumps and there are arguably already some specimen trees in the mature beech. Oaks can be included but will be much smaller on chalk soil. There is a potential for a couple of walnuts.
- evergreens to provide colour all year – yes
- clumps of trees such as silver birch for bark effect – silver birch is not good on chalky soil so will not be included
- spring blossom – yes, there is already some wild cherries present and more can be added in the second planting season
- trees to provide berries and fruits such as rowan and holly – there is already holly, spindle and dog wood present
- avenue of trees up the path – rather than trees there will be belts of shrubs along the paths, this will promote biodiversity and the wildlife. As shrubs need light they are better placed on the paths

Mrs Billings also suggested that the inclusion of some juniper in the second planting season might be good.

The Chair confirmed the Council had been offered a disease resistant elm that would hopefully be planted at the northern end of the Warren.

- 5.2.** Mr Miller expressed excitement at the project and asked if the £32k grant was sufficient to cover the cost of the planting plans that have been put forward.

Mrs Billings said she had been involved in the initial costings for the project and felt it covered all of the costs with the exception of the interpretation boards that were proposed for the entrances to the Warren. The Tree Council were taking another look at this.

It was noted that the initial expectation was for a maximum grant of £25k. Mr Shaxson confirmed the increase had been down to the hard work of the team writing the grant application.

- 5.3.** Mr Miall suggested there was a danger of having too many beech in the woodland and asked if the number of beech saplings could be reduced by the number of seedlings protected. He felt that the beech had been introduced to the area in comparatively recent years.

Mr Shaxson responded to confirm that saplings will be planted with a 2.5 metre spacing and there will undoubtedly need to be some thinning at some point. He confirmed that the historical records show the evidence of beech for some time.

Mrs Billings confirmed that the original number of beech to be planted had been vastly reduced to include some lesser species. She felt that the number included in the planting scheme was now about right but if the beech is found to be too heavy then thinning can be carried out to alter the mix., this is an important part of the management. She stressed that the restoration of the woodland will be a balancing act.

She confirmed that there were some very large, mature beech in the Warren and these are very compatible with yew which is found there too.

5.4. Mrs Ward read a statement on behalf of those joining via that Zoom link and it included the following points:

- Who does the warren belong to?
- The tree survey report from July 2019 states under 5.4 removal off all ash trees as soon as reasonably practical. Does this mean you could have waited for a drier time of year.
- The Woodland Trust report from December 2018 gives advice on how, what and when to carry out works in ancient woodland and SSSI areas. It is disappointing that the Council decided that 'taking forward the recommendations in the Ancient Woodland Restoration report has had to take a back seat given the ash dieback situation'. The group have met with the Woodland Trust who have said they would have supported the Parish Council with this project.
- The Council's vision of excellence, leadership, openness, accountability, engagement, honesty, integrity and innovation were not part of the Warren works. Parishioners were unaware of the works that had to be done and there could have possibly been help and advice available from volunteers.
- Why were the contractors allowed to start work when the weather was so wet
- Concerns that the loss of beech in the Wace plantation since the tree works is as a result of the contractors not being managed rather than due to the loss of ash protection. The Wace plantation is now dangerous.
- The project was too big for a parish council. It is understood that this is one of the first joint working projects and it should have been a flagship for those involved, sadly it will be for the wrong reasons.
- Loss of the ancient flint road to the South Downs.
- Was the clearance work for the deer fencing monitored.
- The Parish Council is responsible for the damage and despite working hard to gain all the correct paperwork, contractors were allowed in who were only interested in the amount of timber they could extract.
- Need to find a way to move forward.

Mr Shaxson thanked Mrs Ward for the complex statement and suggested that all the issues needed to be addressed in a proper manner which was not possible at that point. It was agreed that the questions would be addressed, and a written response would be made and circulated to everyone present at the meeting (*response can be seen at the end of these minutes*).

Mr Shaxson confirmed that the Warren was gifted to the Parish Council in 1937, the Council owns it and runs it on behalf of the parish. He also noted that the members of the Council are elected every 4 years.

5.5. Mrs Curran spoke in her capacity as a parish councillor and a concerned resident. She recognized the concerns about the works but stressed that due to delays with licences being issued and bad weather, problems have occurred. She stressed the situation was as it was and that a great deal of work and specialist advice has been undertaken. The Parish Council was kept abreast of all the information and agreed this was the right course of action to take. The team have done very well to get the grant for the autumn planting. Mrs Curran urged everyone to get planting and get the job done and to think about the many people that have worked so hard to move this work forward.

5.6. Mr Needham, an archaeologist, offered a longer term perspective on the situation. He outlined that archaeologists look at both cultural and environmental changes over long periods of time. This shows there have been many changes in vegetation cover, some gradual and some more dramatic. In Neolithic times there were insects who had a sweeping effect on elm trees, and they have never really recovered. There is also evidence of the effect of man as areas of ground have been cleared for farming. It is important to remember that the ash dieback issue in the Warren was not planned, it is product of nature.

Mr Needham reminded everyone of the great storm in 1987, and how it felled millions of trees in a single night, and of the clearance of the trees on scarp slopes for the war effort. Although the sight of the Warren is distressing, it will recover and there are already clear signs of that happening. There will be benefits to birds and flowers now the canopy has been reduced.

Mr Needham ended by stressing that it was important to remember that none of the decisions about the Warren had been taken lightly, they had all been done with regard to the safety of those using the Warren. He urged everyone to move forward as a community and help out.

5.7. Mrs Bramley spoke to say that, as a parish councillor, she had seen how much work had been done by the representatives of the Parish Council; Mr Shaxson, Mrs Walker and Dr Bowman despite having stepped down as a councillor. There is an understanding of the concern and upset but the site is already improving. The support from Mrs Billings and the Tree Council grant have been wonderful.

Mrs Bramley urged people to join in the restoration project.

Mr Shaxson confirmed that about 40 people had volunteered to join the planting.

5.8. Mrs Gaterell spoke, in her capacity as a parish councillor, to address one of the statements made by Mrs Ward. She stressed that at the time of the works the Council did not have many channels of communication available. This has been taken on board and the Council is working to improve communications, the new website being one of these channels. The Parish Meeting took some time to arrange due to Covid restrictions, however it is hoped it will have helped. The Drop-in sessions will be reinstated as soon as the restrictions allow. Mrs Gaterell confirmed that the councillors welcome feedback from the parish.

6. Close

The Chair drew the meeting to a close and hoped a proper face to face Annual Parish Meeting might be held in the May 2021.

He hoped that the meeting had been informative and had helped to answer some questions and concerns.

The Parish Meeting will be on the agenda for the Council meeting to be held on 15 October 2020.

Mr Shaxson thanked everyone for attending the meeting with special thanks to Petra Billings for sharing her expertise.

The meeting closed at 7.35pm.

Copy of letter sent to Mrs Ward 20 October 2020

Dear Sue

Thank you for sending me a written copy of your question and statement to the Parish Meeting on 7 October 2020. I am responding, in my capacity as Clerk and Proper Officer to the Parish Council, and I can confirm the councillors have had sight of this response.

I understand that you raised these issues on behalf of yourself and others who were present with you via the Zoom connection, please can I ask you to share this response with them. I confirm that this response will be shared, by email, with the other attendees at the meeting.

You raised the question of ownership of the Warren: the area was gifted to the Parish Council in 1937 for the “exercise and recreation...” of the residents.

I have noted your concerns and will address them below. I think it is important, to put your comments into context. In 2018 the Council was looking at ways to manage the Warren after several decades of neglect: the Woodland Trust Report and subsequent Woodland Management Plan were commissioned to aid this process. However, the plans were completely overtaken by the severity and rapid advance of ash dieback, as detailed in the tree hazard report in June 2019.

In your statement you suggest the felling could have waited for “a drier time of the year”. Waiting for the summer was not an option because felling is only allowed outside of the bird breeding season ie. between September and March.

You mentioned your meeting with the Woodland Trust, and this was also raised at the Council meeting on 17 September 2020. As agreed at the time, it would be very useful if you could share the report or any comments made by the Woodland Trust so the Council can respond to them.

Your statement questions the values outlined in the Parish Council vision. The Council is open and accountable: it is part of my role to ensure that it is.

Unfortunately, there is no mechanism for the Council to automatically contact all households, however, the new Council website has the facility for people to sign up to receive regular updates and over time I hope it will be possible to contact the majority of households by email.

Until that is possible, the Council uses as many as six different means of communicating, but it always posts the agendas of forthcoming meetings on the village noticeboard, next to the White Hart, and agendas, briefing notes and subsequently minutes are always published on the Council's website.

Prior to the ash dieback works in the Warren, the Council also posted information notices at all the entrances of the Warren to tell residents and others that the ash were to be felled. In addition, once the work began, regular updates about the works and footpath closures were posted on the village noticeboard, to the Village Facebook page and on the front page of the Council website.

It is disappointing that, despite these efforts, these means of communication failed to reach some residents and the Council has acknowledged this regret. The Council is looking at ways to address this, if you have any suggestions how we might make residents aware of future initiatives and news, they would be most welcome.

Your statement questions the decision for work to start on 18 October, when one of the wettest periods of rain began. There was indeed some rain at the start of the works, however, weather forecasts do not look far enough ahead to have informed the Council of how wet it would be over such an extended period. Stopping the work would only have been possible for a short period.

You mention the inspection of the play equipment: that was postponed by the contractor who chose not to travel and work outdoors in the rain.

As I am sure you know, beech trees have very shallow root plates which leave them highly vulnerable to high winds and all the more so due to the loss of the ash which had previously provided protection.

Your point regarding the safety of the remaining trees in the Wace plantation is being addressed by commissioning a tree hazard survey, any trees deemed to be a risk will be felled.

In relation to your concern about the clearance along the line of the deer fencing, I can confirm that this work was monitored. In places it is wider than the anticipated two metres, but as far as possible disruption of the soil has otherwise been kept to a minimum.

In your statement you say you “believe the Parish Council are to be held responsible for the damage, we understand there was a fear factor”. All parish councils must make public safety their top priority; this is a responsibility, not ‘a fear factor’. All the organisations involved in the tree works have agreed that the ash dieback situation was necessary and urgent; indeed the Tree Council has said there was no alternative but to prioritise public safety.

This area of the South Downs was hit early and was hit hard by ash dieback. There was no guidance available from the governmental department, DEFRA, on how to deal with it. It is hoped that the Forestry Commission and DEFRA will be producing more detailed guidance on ash dieback which will benefit other parishes in the future.

The only the landowner to have tackled the problem in the area, prior to the Council, was the National Trust. Even they, who have professionals on the staff, used a different contractor, were dealing with relatively flat terrain and had significantly better weather conditions, received a lot of criticism.

You finish your statement by stating that we have to find a way to move forward, and I agree this is essential. I believe you felt the Parish Meeting was useful and also helped to answer some of your concerns. Thank you for raising these issues and I hope this response is helpful.