

Ashdown Forest for Sale!

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The story of the fundraising campaign in 1987 to enable East Sussex County Council to purchase the freehold of Ashdown Forest and save it for posterity

In 2019 the Ashdown Forest Research Group was invited by the Conservators of Ashdown Forest to investigate an archive of old papers that had been stored away and largely forgotten in the depths of the Forest Centre. Among them we were surprised to discover a book with plain blue covers entitled “Ashdown Forest Purchase Appeal 1987”. Opening it we found a list of almost two thousand people and organisations that had donated to an appeal in late 1987 to raise funds to enable East Sussex County Council to purchase Ashdown Forest.

We were – it must be confessed – quite unaware that the Forest had been put up for sale or that there had been a campaign to save it that had attracted huge public support. We decided to find more about the campaign, and the results formed the basis of a recent exhibition at the Ashdown Forest Centre. This article summarises what we found.

Ashdown Forest for Sale!

The starting point was the decision of the 10th Earl De La Warr to sell Ashdown Forest. According to a press report, he made a formal offer to sell the freehold to the county council in May 1986. He gave the council first refusal and set a price – £1.2 million – well below what it would fetch on the open market.

It wasn't until January 1987 – according to another press report – that the Conservators were consulted. They had “*come out in favour of the sale*” in order to ensure “*the long-term preservation of the forest*”. Two months later, the possible change in ownership was raised by the Board's chair at the Commoners' annual general meeting. No objections were made; the only concern was whether the 1974 Ashdown Forest Act would provide adequate protection or might need amending.

In September local newspapers reported that the earl had set the council a deadline of 24th November, the date of its next meeting, to make a decision on whether or not to purchase the Forest. Sixteen months had now passed since he had made his formal offer to the council.

The council seemed to have no doubt that the earl's offer was very favourable, and that there would be undesirable consequences if it were not taken up: the offer had been made

on “...extremely generous terms... the forest would fetch at least twice as much on the open market, and would be eagerly sought after by Americans in particular and others who would see opportunities for splitting it into a series of small holdings to be sold separately.” For his part, the earl was reported as saying: “I have no doubt that Ashdown Forest is worth a great deal more than the figure I have set with the county council... Whether, even with the best will in the world, they will be able to raise the money to buy it at what everyone tells me is a very cheap figure is now a matter for speculation.” The earl himself seems to have wanted to avoid a situation where the Forest ended up being sold off in lots, and was “reluctant...to even consider such a possibility”.

The issue for the council seems largely to have been financial. On 23rd September its environment committee recommended acceptance of the earl’s asking price of £1.2 million, but only if more than half that sum could be raised from other sources before the 24th of November deadline. (In practice, the amount the council needed to find was said to be more like £1 million, because of tax rebates.) According to one councillor who spoke to the press, the council was in a challenging financial situation with an “*overstrained capital programme*” and so could only carry out the purchase if there were “*considerable contributions to reduce the cost to considerably below £500,000*”, and pointed out that it was already spending £80,000 a year maintaining the Forest. There was another consideration; the council would incur a government penalty if it funded more than half the cost of purchase from its own resources.

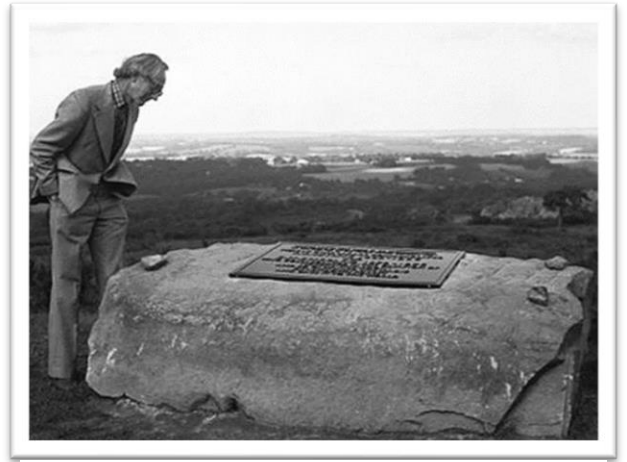
The council had already been promised “*substantial*” contributions from outside sources, including £100,000 from the Countryside Commission (a government agency) and “*a substantial sum*” from Wealden District Council, and there were other potential outside sources to tap, but there would still be a major shortfall.

The council at first dismissed the idea of making a public appeal for funds because it felt time was too short, but soon it changed its mind. At their board meeting on 28th September the Conservators were told that the council’s chief executive had “*requested the assistance and agreement of the Conservators to various aspects of the fund raising*” and that “*it would of great help if the Conservators and/or Friends of Ashdown Forest could pledge a minimum of £50,000 toward the purchase.*” The Conservators replied that they would “*raise £50,000, and possibly as much as £100,000*”. They then asked the Friends to provide a co-ordinator for the appeal, a crucial role which fell to the chairman, Bill James. He threw himself into the task and became the campaign’s driving force. An appeal office was set up and the Friends became the receiving body for donations. As well as cash and cheques firm pledges of money were also accepted (and assiduously chased up later).

The campaign begins

The appeal was launched at a press conference on Monday, 12th October 1987, with less than six weeks to go before the earl’s deadline. Crucially there was one person present who would immediately raise its profile: Christopher Robin Milne. The inspiration for the

Christopher Robin of the Winnie-the-Pooh stories, Milne told the assembled journalists that he had spent his life trying to live down the Christopher Robin image, but had travelled from his home in Devon to plead for Ashdown Forest. Newspaper articles published over the weekend showed photos of Milne striding across the Forest, and that evening he appeared on local TV news programmes championing the cause.



Christopher Milne at the memorial to his father A.A. Milne and E.H. Shepard at Gill's Lap (photo courtesy of Rosalind Bowlby)

The campaign quickly got into full swing: letters were sent out to members of the Friends, leaflets and flyers widely distributed, posters put up in village halls, local shops – anywhere that could be found. Meanwhile the chair of the Conservators, Anne Sheldrick, wrote to the Forest Commoners and Bill James to members of the Friends to seek their support, and letters were sent to those who might be able to influence firms or trusts to support the appeal.

The headline message was *“The Forest is in Danger”*. The campaign literature set out the threat clearly: the council’s *“capital budget is extremely tight, so Ashdown Forest may not be considered high priority by some councillors with serious problems in their own areas.”* If the council were to purchase the Forest it would be preserved as a *‘single entity’*. If not, it would be sold on the open market and split up. This would be an *“absolute disaster”*: with the Forest in multiple ownership, it would be very difficult for the Conservators to enforce the Ashdown Forest Act which required them to *‘regulate the Forest as an amenity and place of resort subject to the existing rights of common upon the forest and to protect the forest from encroachments and to conserve it as a quiet and natural area of outstanding beauty’*. The *“present careful management and conservation”* of the Forest would become *“virtually impossible”*, and maintaining its *“ecological value”* difficult.

Doubts about the suitability of the county council as a purchaser must have been raised in some quarters. One newspaper reported that a suggestion that the National Trust should step in had already been ruled out. The campaign literature defended the council, pointing out that it had recently firmly rejected a recent controversial application from BP to explore for oil off Kidd’s Hill, and noted that the council would pay *“about £75,000 a year towards the management costs of the Forest.”* A letter issued by the Conservators also stressed that although the council would be the initial purchaser it would then *“hand the ownership over to trustees in order to safeguard it in perpetuity”*.

A hurricane strikes

No-one had expected that within a few days of the launch of the appeal that a hurricane would strike. The ‘Great Storm’ that swept through southern England in the early hours of

Friday 16 October blew down fifteen million trees, and decimated an estimated 300-500 acres of high woodland on Ashdown. At Buckhurst Park, the ancestral home of the Earls De La Warr, one resident claimed that at its height trees were falling at a rate of one a minute. Standen House near East Grinstead was cut off for five days, Nutley's famous windmill suffered over £6,000 of damage, and many properties in Crowborough were badly damaged.

The campaign feared that the storm would draw attention away from the appeal and that the costs of repairing the damage would make people less willing to donate. A flyer sought to address this concern:

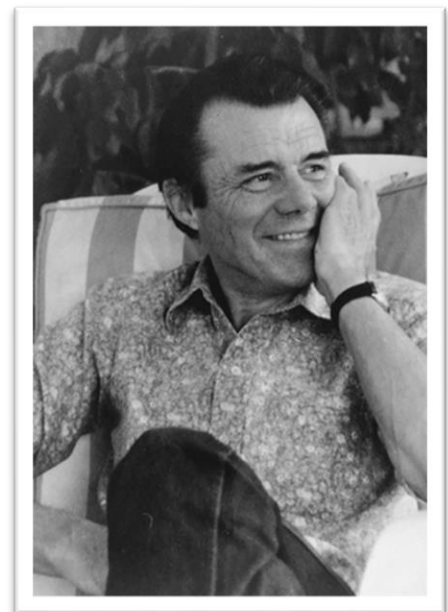
"Please help as much as you are able to. The hurricane has been expensive. Trees and shares [sic] have crashed. But the Forest remains, and time is short."

In fact, the appeal grew from strength to strength, perhaps in part because the storm had drawn people's attention to the value of what they risked losing.

Celebrity support

Of course, for a campaign to achieve a high profile, celebrity support is a great help. Christopher Milne's presence at the start of the campaign was key. He and the Winnie-the-Pooh connection he evoked attracted national and international media attention, particularly from newspapers in the USA, where press reports about the sale of the Forest almost inevitably referred to Ashdown as "Pooh's forest".

Another boost came later from the film star Sir Dirk Bogarde. He grew up in Newick, knew the Forest well, and in the late 60s lived in a farmhouse near Crowborough Common. Bogarde was also a talented artist, having studied at Chelsea School of Art under Henry Moore and Graham Sutherland before embarking on his acting career. When he learnt about the appeal he donated sixteen of his own pen and ink drawings for sale, raising £7,000, while the surrounding publicity added impetus to the campaign.



Dirk Bogarde (photo courtesy of Rosalind Bowlby)

Who donated to the campaign?

We wanted to find out more about the people and organisations listed in the book of contributors that we had discovered. This was not straightforward. There are 1,882 names in the book but only the most basic information is recorded: just the name of the person or organisation concerned, plus an initial perhaps, and in a few cases titles and military ranks (which made identification much easier). There is no indication of where people lived or

how much was donated. Despite these challenges we were able to find out more about a number of them.

We discovered that several wealthy local philanthropists had donated (sometimes posthumously via their charitable trusts). Alfred Wagg, for example, had made a fortune in banking and was a major benefactor to East Grinstead, where he lived. But he also had a close association with Ashdown Forest. In 1928 he bought a hundred acres at the Isle of Thorns and gave it to an East London boys' club; later he bought Hindleap Warren, today an outdoor centre for children, and Broadstone Warren, now a scout camp. Wagg's charitable trust carried on his good works after his death in 1969, most notably in the early 1980s when it sold land at Broadstone Warren to enable the Conservators to build a permanent home at Wych Cross adjacent to the common. So, it is not surprising that the trust contributed to the appeal. Another former banker, Ernest Kleinwort, chairman of a famous banking house and a Cuckfield resident, had been passionate about wildlife conservation and the natural environment, and about Sussex, and so it seems fitting that his trust was a donor too.

Other prominent local residents included Margaret Marchioness of Aberdeen. A former mayor of East Grinstead and a Justice of the Peace, she was also a Conservator of Ashdown Forest and a co-founder (with Ursula Ridley) of the Friends, becoming its chairman for many years. She was an ardent defender of the Forest: when it was threatened by oil exploration in the 1980s she reportedly declared that she would lie down in front of the first bulldozer!

Another, Sir Tufton Beamish, Baron Chelwood, was a former military officer, author and for many years MP for Lewes. He lived on the Forest for over fifty years. He wrote to local newspapers in support of the campaign urging '*every household on or near the Forest*' to make a donation. Evidently he did so himself.

A diverse range of predominantly local organisations appear in the list of donors, some familiar, others less so. They include Women's Institutes and other community, social and residential groups, parish councils, charitable trusts, local history societies, and recreational groups. A number of local businesses, bank branches, and a staff association also appear. Rather further afield are tutors from a school of nursing in Dartford and Birmingham's public library. The appeal seems particularly to have attracted the support of local school children – nine schools are listed – and even the very young, including one "Ben Woodward, aged 4½".

There were many small donations. Bill James remarked that "*over three quarters of all the cheques and pledges we received were of £25 and under. Probably half were £5s and £10s.*"

The book of contributors could not include everyone who donated to the appeal. Many donations will have been made anonymously via the collections that took place at local shops and banks, coffee mornings, public meetings, jumble sales, and so on.

The strength of local feeling about the threatened sale of the Forest and the response that this elicited was brought home to us by an anonymous entry in the visitors' book at our exhibition:

"We are Commoners and also supporters of Friends of Ashdown Forest. We took our savings out of a building society to make a donation as we considered it so important to save the Forest."

Deadline day

After a slow start, money began to pour into the appeal at a rate that far exceeded expectations. By the end of the third week of the campaign the initial target of £50,000 had been passed. On Monday 23rd November Bill James informed the county council that £175,000 had been raised – a phenomenal amount in less than six weeks. On the afternoon of 24th November 1987 the council, after just fifteen minutes discussion, voted to purchase the Forest. The chair of the Conservators, who was in attendance, confirmed to the board later that the council had:

"...unanimously agreed to purchase the Forest, subject to contract, for £1.2m, of which the County Council would contribute £300,000."

Another Conservator added:

"...the Council's decision was definitely influenced by the large sum raised by the joint Appeal launched by the Conservators and The Friends."

The council reached its decision on the basis of the figure of £175,000 in donations communicated to them the previous day, a sum that was eventually handed over in March 1988. But cash, cheques and pledges continued to roll in, ultimately pushing the sum raised to over £200,000, leaving a surplus that was earmarked for repairing storm damage.

The council's decision to purchase Ashdown was not the end of the story. The Conservators expected the council to put the Forest in the hands of trustees and at their 30 November 1987 meeting resolved to pursue this with the chief executive. However, further progress was delayed by the death of Earl De La Warr in February 1988 and the consequent need to deal with his executors. A further problem arose: the earl's death meant that the expected tax rebates were lost, and the sum payable by the council rose to £1.2 million, which it said would require adding two pence to the county rates to meet the shortfall. It was not until November 1988 – a year after the council had decided to purchase the Forest – that the sale was finally completed, and the freehold of the Forest and Lordship of the Manor of Duddleswell were transferred into a charitable trust of which the county council was sole trustee, bringing to an end the De La Warr family's centuries-long involvement with the administration of Ashdown Forest.

Christopher Milne was pleased to hear that the purchase had finally been completed. A US press report headlined "*Winnie-the-Pooh's forest saved by friends*" quotes him as follows:

“We are delighted to have succeeded at last in buying the forest and hope our victory will help others in similar battles...This was a prime example of a case where public ownership is better than private ownership. Had it gone into private hands, it would have been exploited for money, which would have been appalling.”

Dirk Bogarde similarly expressed himself “*absolutely delighted*” with the sale.

Conclusion

The true story of the 1987 fund-raising campaign, ultimately, is about a multitude of people and organisations who cared enormously about the threat that the sale of the Forest posed and who wanted to secure its future by contributing to the appeal. The campaign is also a tribute to the vital role that the Friends has played over the years in supporting the Forest; indeed perhaps this was its ‘Finest Hour’. However, the future of the Forest, though it was saved for the nation, is still not certain. The loss of funding from East Sussex County Council and reductions in income available from other parts of the public sector have once again placed the Forest in jeopardy. A huge challenge remains to ensure that the Forest remains a treasured, special place.

Acknowledgements

In preparing the exhibition on which this article is based we are grateful for the help we have received from many sources, but especially Mike Parcell, Rosalind and Nick Bowlby, and Jill Rolfe. We also drew on articles published in this magazine, in particular Bill James’ memoir ‘Fundraising for the Purchase of the Forest’ (Ashdown Forest News, Spring 1988).

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This article was originally published in the Winter 2022 edition of *Ashdown Forest News* (the magazine of the Society of the Friends of Ashdown Forest).