

6 Ashley Heath (Moors Valley) NEW 202

6.1 Location *(See Location Map)*

Ashley Heath (Moors Valley) forest covers a total area of 513ha and occupies a roughly triangular piece of land with the Moors River close to the western boundary and the Ringwood to Horton road forming the southern boundary. The B3081 runs along the northeastern boundary and separates Ashley Heath from Ringwood North and Somerley. Moors Valley Country Park is located in the southwest corner and has a strong influence upon the forest with high visitor numbers. A discrete area of woodland lies immediately to the south of the main block adjacent to the Castleman Trailway and Ashley Park residential area. This block is known locally as Jack's Garden, named after a former Ringwood Head Forester.

6.2 Landscape Context

Topography within the Ashley Heath block is gentle with the entire area lying between 20 to 50 metres above sea level. Viewpoints across the forest can be accessed in the north west corner where the ground rises to its highest point. A formal lookout structure near Moors Valley Country Park gives visitors access to views across the southwest section. External views into the forest are limited to glimpses from the B3081 and Ringwood to Horton road and some recent felling adjacent to the B3081 provides more general views into the forest and has diversified the visual character of the roadside corridor.

A balance between the provision of continuous cover and felling / replanting silvicultural systems is proposed within the plan as a way of achieving visual diversity at both the detailed and landscape scale. The proximity of Moors Valley Country Park places a key importance on the size and shape of felling coupes and the development of diversity of age, species and woodland structure.

6.3 Current Woodland Structure *(See Habitat Structure and Age Structure Charts)*

Soils across the entire area are podsol and the woodland is dominated by Corsican and Scots pine. Some Douglas Fir is planted on the more fertile sites in the south east at Watchmoor and Norway Spruce and Lodgepole Pine are planted on the most poorly drained sites in the northwest near Ebblake. Broadleaves account for less than 1 % of the woodland area and generally exist as pockets of Birch, which have naturally regenerated amongst the Pine.

A process of age class diversification was started under the previous Forest Design Plan and this has started to produce a greater proportion of temporary open space and younger areas of woodland. The retention of some older groups and the development of areas under continuous cover will gradually increase the proportion of physically mature trees.

A network of open space has been developed throughout the forest as a result of heathland ride widening carried out over the past decade. Additionally, as part of the previous Forest Design Plan some areas have been felled and restored to heathland habitat. It is intended within the plan to build on existing ride widening and heathland restoration to create a network of open space comprising heathland, wooded heath and wetland (mire).

6.4 Conservation *(See Site Designation Map)*

Ebblake Bog SSSI lies at the north west corner of the block and approximately 85% of the total SSSI area lies within the FE boundary. It is designated for its wet heath and mire plant communities and the many rare species associated with these habitats. The FDP incorporates plans to restore adjacent habitats to improve habitat linkages with this site.

The Ashley Heath block contains a number of more localised sites of nature conservation interest associated with the predominantly heathland habitat and the species that are associated with them. These have been developed by local staff and conservation organisations such as the Herpetological Conservation Trust and Dorset Wildlife Trust. Two sites are designated by DWT as Sites of Nature Conservation Interest (SNCI) and these are shown on the Designations Map. Both are heathland areas adjacent to rides, which will be widened to enhance and develop heathland links. Some open heathland areas were created under the previous forest design plan. It is intended to extend and consolidate many of these areas as part of the current proposals.

6.5 Recreation

Moors Valley Country Park is located to the south west of Ashley Heath. The park is jointly managed by East Dorset District Council and Forest Enterprise and attracts an estimated 1 million visitors per year. It has become one of the foremost visitor attractions in the UK.

Facilities located on Forest Enterprise land include a 500 space woodland car park and a play trail consisting of timber sculptures set amongst the pine woodland. An elevated walkway known as the Tree Top Trail is located to the north of the play trail and a viewing platform known as the Lookout is located further north which provides views across the south west section of the forest. A Go Ape site has also been built with high wire structures built between the trees in the vicinity of the Play Trail. A permanent orienteering course has 50 control sites distributed all around the Forest.

Cycling provision is also developing with a series of way-marked trails along the forest tracks and the Watchmoor Bike Park which consists of a series of structures and obstacles for more extreme cycle enthusiasts. A single track mountain bike trail between the trees is currently under development. The high visitor numbers in the area surrounding the park means that management for public access and recreation objectives are paramount in this area and the Forest Design Plan reflects this aim. A detailed plan for the recreation zone which incorporates the Play trail, Go Ape and Tree Top Trail area has been prepared.

Elsewhere in Ashley Heath informal public access is gained at various points along the B3081 Ringwood to Verwood road as gateways are frequently used for informal parking. A bridle path runs east west across the central part of the forest. Access can also be gained from the Castleman Trailway which runs along the southern boundary Moors Valley Country Park.

6.6 Archaeology *(See Site Designation Map)*

There are six scheduled and 1 unscheduled ancient monuments within the plan area. All are Bronze Age barrows (funerary monuments) which occupy positions on the highest points at the northeast and south west of the forest.

All of the Scheduled Ancient Monuments have current management plans approved by English Heritage and the sites will be managed in accordance with the management plan. The review dates for these plans have been resequenced to correspond with review dates for the forest design plan.

The unscheduled Ancient Monuments will be afforded the same protection as scheduled monuments and will be managed to establish shallow rooted vegetation in an open heathland setting.