

## **Report from the Erica Trust**

Last September, after detailed discussions with the Forestry Commission and Natural England, our plans for Lee Woods and Smokeham Bottom were welcomed into a Countryside Stewardship Scheme, and the critical Felling Licence approved.

The slightly scary harvester commenced its work in January and covered a surprisingly large area before stopping for bird nesting, with only extraction of that cut timber continuing. In this very short window much of the heathland restoration phase has been achieved. The far western slope, to make a heathland link down to the ponds, is yet to be finished, and a few large spruce and fir either too big or too close to the road to be felled by harvester are still to go, but the major part of the heathland work is done. Inevitably a few of the retained pines and birch subsequently succumbed to the strong winds, and others will most likely follow over time to different wind directions. But some young trees will be encouraged to take their place, and down in the valleys a more natural woodland will be allowed to regenerate.

Some of the proposed thinning works have taken place, for example in the old quarry area and behind Culpeppers Dish. Other thinnings are still to come, for example down the slopes from the quarry to Smokeham Bottom, round Allotments Plantation and in Culpeppers Dish itself. These further works will start in late August to take advantage of a hopefully a dry autumn. Critically we will then also move into the more delicate broadleaved woodland restoration phase, substantially, but not completely, extracting the coniferous element up slopes and over the heath. The brash has been left on the ground to lessen the impact of the activities and will be selectively cleared at the end of the whole operation.

Of course we recognise that there has been impact and disturbance, and that more is to come, and we are most grateful for the forbearance with which this has been received. Also much appreciated are the many kind words of support, which have made a journey not without administrative and practical humps and bumps, a nevertheless most rewarding experience.