

Epping Forest & Commons Committee Dinner

Guest Speaker's Address: Dr. Neil Hudson MP

Thursday 16th October 2025

Painters' Hall: The Livery Hall

Chair, Alderman, Chief Commoner, Honoured Guests,

It is a privilege and honour to be standing here as the Member of Parliament for Epping Forest. Thank you so much for inviting me to be with you tonight for this wonderful celebration of the marvel that is Epping Forest, in this fantastic setting of Painters' Hall.

Now, I am a veterinary surgeon by background, the first vet elected to the House of Commons since 1884, and many people ask how a vet ends up on this journey. For me, it started in my experiences in the frontline of the Foot and Mouth Outbreak of 2001, where I witnessed sights, I never want to see again in my lifetime. We face similar Biosecurity threats now and I am working hard on this issue as a Shadow DEFRA Minister.

On a lighter note, people often ask me is it true that in the absence of a doctor, that a vet can attend to and treat a person. The answer to that is yes, but we find that after we have taken your temperature, we don't get asked again.

Epping Forest is, in every sense, the heart and lungs of North East London and West Essex. Stretching across 6,000 acres, from Manor Park in East London to just north of Epping, this precious landscape is the largest public open space in the London area and predates our National Parks by almost eighty years. Epping Forest is home to around 55,000 ancient trees, more than any other single site in the country. Remarkably, this single forest contains over 80% of the entire country's veteran beech pollards.

By the nineteenth century, the need to safeguard this precious environment became urgent. The Epping Forest Act of 1878 was a landmark piece of legislation that ensured its protection for future generations. Just four years later, in 1882, Queen Victoria dedicated the Forest "to the use and enjoyment of my people for all times." This historic declaration remains the forest's foundation today. The 1878 Act stopped the right of people in Loughton, in Epping Forest, to undertake lopping where they could go into the forest and cut off the branches from trees above 6 feet from the ground, between midnight on the 11th November and 23rd April each year. In compensation for the loss of lopping rights, Lopping Hall was built as a community building funded by the City of London Corporation. It was opened in Loughton in 1884, the very year that the last vet before me was in Parliament.

I was honoured with the Corporation of London to welcome His Royal Highness the Duke of Gloucester to Lopping Hall earlier this year to celebrate his 50th Anniversary as Ranger of the Forest.

In 1953, Epping Forest's value was further recognised when it became one of the UK's first Sites of Special Scientific Interest, in celebration of its extraordinary biodiversity and ecological importance.

Yet even with these protections, it is vital that we continue our work to protect this precious landscape.

The Forest and the surrounding Green Belt face constant pressure from inappropriate housing and energy infrastructure development.

Whilst I am supportive of our transition to renewable energy, such as solar, it is vital that this is done in the correct places, and we must ensure that our irreplaceable Epping Forest and green belt remain preserved for generations to come.

The Forest also faces threats such as flytipping, littering and anti-social behaviour, that can negatively impact the ecosystem, the flora and fauna, and also we humans who use and enjoy the forest.

I am immensely grateful to the City of London Corporation, as custodians of Epping Forest, for their outstanding work in preserving and managing this landscape. I am also thankful for the many volunteers whose hard work ensures the forest's continued wellbeing, our young ambassadors from local schools, and the Field Studies Council with their High Beach base.

Forgive me if I return to some animal matters. As some of you may know, as part of the ongoing work to conserve Epping Forest, the City of London Corporation manages the herd of English Longhorn cattle, which roam across sites in Chingford Plain, Fairmead, and Bury Wood. I recently visited the cattle in their winter home in Epping Forest. It was a very moving visit for me as it was on the same farm where I did some of my local farm veterinary work experience when I was a young vet student...a couple of years ago now!

I also remember the cattle grazing by the boundary edge, dodging balls, when I used to play for Woodford Green Cricket Club.

On my visit to their winter home in Epping Forest prior to spring turn out, it was great to hear more about their innovative NoFence GPS collar system, which allows the cattle to safely graze and roam freely without the need for physical boundaries.

These majestic cattle play a vital role in enriching Epping Forest's biodiversity, naturally managing vegetation and encouraging wildflowers and insects to flourish.

Finally, Ladies and Gentlemen, I want to pay special tribute to His Royal Highness, the Duke of Gloucester, for his ongoing dedication as Ranger of Epping Forest, and to The Epping Forest and Commons Committee, their Chair Caroline, Deputy Chairman Ben and all of the team for their continued commitment to protecting this most precious place.

Thank you everyone for all that you are doing, and continue to do, to preserve our wonderful forest!