

ABBOTTS ANN PARISH COUNCIL

Newsletter: August 2008

THE YELLOW PERIL

That indispensable book of reference, Brewer's *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*, tells us that this phrase arose from a scare, originating in Germany in the late 1890s, that the "yellow" races of China and Japan would rapidly increase in population and overrun the rest of the world, with fearful consequences. Well, the populations of these countries have had less effect on the world perhaps than their high-tech products; we will have to wait and see whether the economic consequences are fearful or not. And has anyone actually seen any travelling orientals with faces the colour of a primrose? Anyway, a week-end visitor from darkest Surbiton drew attention to a different traveller, when overheard saying how they liked those bright yellow flowers adorning the roadsides and meadows of Hampshire, with a name that could have come out of the pages of Harry Potter. On enquiry it was clear that they were referring to *Senecio jacobaea*, known to you and me as Common Ragwort, a long-term resident of England, and its disreputable cousin *Senecio squalidus*. Actually the latter is an immigrant, which was being taken to the Botanical Gardens in Oxford by an enthusiastic botanist as a rarity from abroad; unfortunately a seed or two jumped off the train, and before anyone could pull the communication cord, the cuttings and embankments of the Great Western Railway were covered with their descendants, whose seeds were wafted along the line by the slipstream of the trains in their coffee-and-cream livery. Now the road traffic is helping it to continue its relentless march. Both kinds have been stigmatised as noxious criminals by the Weeds Act of 1958 and the Ragwort Control Act of 2003, and their toxic properties for livestock are well known in the countryside.

Clearly therefore, it should be treated as a Public Enemy; but research will show that this attitude is far from universal, and many scientists rush to its defence, claiming that it is surrounded by a miasma of myth. The interestingly-named pressure-group called Buglife tells us that it supports something like 70 different species of creatures, both winged and creepy-crawly, which would suffer dreadfully if Ragwort were eliminated. For instance, the caterpillar of the Cinnabar Moth will eat nothing else, which gives rise to one of the so-called myths. 1988 was recorded as an exceptionally good year for Cinnabar moths; the caterpillars from one of these can eat a whole plant in a day, consuming a million seeds before they all turn into grown-up moths. So by the end of that summer, the caterpillars had eaten all the ragwort, including the seedlings for the next year. Result, not much Ragwort in 1989, and nowhere for the moths to lay their eggs; therefore, no caterpillars, and hardly any Cinnabar moths ever since. But the Ragwort has had the last laugh, because their seeds can lie dormant in the earth for up to 20 years, so they soon popped up to find they no longer had anything to fear from the predatory Cinnabars. Myth or not, it makes a good story, and goes far to explain why there is so much *senecio jacobaea* about. It doesn't like dense, well-managed grassland, so you won't find it where mowers, or sheep, are at work. It is important not to let it go to seed. Highway and railway authorities have found in general that the only thing to do is to pull it up. But watch it! There are other laws about disturbing habitats and uprooting wild flowers...

BIODIVERSITY

All this leads on to NERC. This is one of the latest brainwaves from Defra (No, I won't tell you what farmers call this Department) and stands for the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006, which rather looks as if it means *us*. NERC Demands that Local Authorities play a leading role in achieving a rich and diverse natural environment, protecting and enhancing what is there already and restoring areas that have become degraded. Sounds great.

Ragwort however illustrates the problems that arise when we interfere with nature; eliminate Ragwort, and you also make life unsustainable for the pretty, and harmless, Cinnabar moths and 70 other kinds of little insects. Encourage birds of prey and then wonder why there are no songbirds. Plough up the prairie and the earth blows away in a cloud of dust. Introduce cuddly rabbits to Australia and they eat up everything left behind by the kangaroos. Establish NERC and you find yourself wrestling with LDFs (Local Development Frameworks), SINCs (Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation) and stuff about Sustainable Communities from the HBP (Hampshire Biodiversity Partnership). Not as easy as it looks from an air-conditioned Whitehall office.

JUST A MINUTE

The Clerk of a Devon parish - a retired postmistress - found a new use for the Minutes. On her way back from a meeting, carrying her rolled-up minutes, she spotted several youths playing football near the War Memorial, where she had been carefully nurturing floral displays for the Britain In Bloom contest. Her request to move the game to the nearby playing field was met with verbal abuse so she responded with a biff with what she had in her hand. "It was only rolled-up paper," she said, "and I am a little old lady." Soon after she had a knock on the door from the Teignmouth Crime Investigation Team, and found herself accused of Common Assault, following a complaint from the boy's mother. What if it had been your Clerk, at 6 ft 2 in, carrying the 2-kilo Minute Book ? Actually, whenever this Clerk has encountered groups of youths, they have always politely moved aside and said "Good Evening." Once he even thought he heard, like the whisper of a breeze, the word "Sir".

PARISH COUNCIL MEETING: 8th August 2008

POWERS AND DUTIES.

Until recently meetings just did not happen in August, but now there is so much going on that your Council would be faced with an all-night sitting in September. So the Councillors duly trooped into the newly-redesigned Jubilee Room, delighted by the fresh paint and new curtains, but not so sure about the lighting. Determined, as usual, to do their parochial duty, they found that the Clerk has given them some homework in the form of a list of their powers and duties as prescribed by a raft (that rather weird buzz-word) of Acts of Parliament. For instance a series of Public Health Acts, starting in 1875, authorises provision of public baths, boating pools and wells, and to deal with noisome ditches. The Enclosure Act of 1845, amended 1894 and 1908, is about designating land for special uses, such as common pasture. No-one seems to know whether the Stocks Act of 1205, which ordered every village to install and maintain stocks, has ever been repealed. If not, their use would surely be more effective than ASBOs, so don't be surprised if the subject turns up on the Agenda of a future meeting.

Most of the laws are there to enable Parish Councils to provide useful facilities like village halls, playing fields or seats or to assert their right to be consulted on planning matters and to complain about all sorts of things. Unfortunately many of the Acts give the other authorities the duty to listen but the right not to do anything at all, and quite a lot of them are strict about what a Parish Council has no right to do. However, someone was clever enough to insert into the Local Government Act of 1972 a clause known as Section 137. Under this, a Parish Council can spend money, up to a specified limit, on anything, which, in its opinion, is in the interests of the parish, or any part of it, or benefits some or all of its inhabitants. This year, for instance, your Council has used this power to help repair the Church Clock, to support the Parish Magazine and the Website and to subscribe to the CPRE and to the campaign to stop the megashed. And there are one or two other things brewing - see below.

MEGASHED

Cllr Peters reminded the Council that the Planning Committee meeting to decide the fate of the old Airfield site will be held at The Lights on 1st September at 5 p.m. Abbotts Ann Action is drafting a final summary of our objections to the proposals. The only spoken contributions permitted will be from Monxton and Penton and these are limited to 3 minutes. Otherwise everything depends on the Borough Councillors. Go along and see local democracy at work.

CARBON FOOTPRINTS

The Government has been urging Parish Councils to think hard about sustainability ((Bzzz)). Accordingly last June, on the basis that if we don't hang together we will all hang separately, our Council listened to Mr. Charles Crossthwaite-Eyre's plans to get the two Clatfords co-operating with Abbotts Ann on ways of reducing the carbon footprint. The whole idea has caught the imagination of Longstock, Stockbridge and Houghton now, so the footprint has grown by several shoe-sizes. A conference is expected...

DOG-BINS

The process is inching forward, with a good prospect of funding from HCC. But have you tried telephoning the Castle in Winchester recently? It seems almost impossible to speak to anyone beyond the receptionist who asks for all sorts of details, puts them into a computer and gives you an 11-digit reference number, and you wait...and wait... It could be quicker to write a letter, if you knew who to write to.

TELEPHONE BOX

As you know, BT wants to remove our telephone box on the grounds of insufficient usage. But they removed the coin-box, so that it can only be used for reverse-charge calls (expensive) and emergencies (free, but rare), so it is hardly surprising that it only averages two calls a week. Also by failing to carry out any maintenance for ages (the light has not been working for some four years), the company is hardly making it attractive to customers. The Chairman is working on the idea to have it registered as a listed building of historical and/or architectural significance.

LIGHTS

Talking of lights, it was quite exciting to see Column No 2 on Church Path glowing brightly again after many months of darkness and dozens of phone calls, emails and letters. But the Dark Ages seem to have returned, as it only kept going for about a week and we are groping our way back into Square One.

ALE AND ARCHAEOLOGY

The village is quite used to having archaeologists digging around, as at the substantial Roman Villa at Abbotts Ann Down. Incidentally, did you know that there is a Roman mosaic of a four-horse chariot buried somewhere alongside the road to Red Rice? Did this give rise to the stories of the sighting of a ghostly coach and horses driving along the same road on dark and stormy nights? One wonders whether the spectral driver would be able to negotiate the roundabout at St. John's Cross for which Cllr Stan Oram and his colleagues have been passionately campaigning for so long, let alone the parked cars in the village street, unless he knew the turning into the old Coach Road.

Members of a special breed of researchers are those involved in Industrial Archaeology, and an interesting opening for action by them has turned up in the Eagle's skittle alley building. Behind the windows containing wooden louvres instead of glass are hidden the remains of the Eagle's own brewery, dating probably from 1865. As the final item on the meeting's Agenda, Cllr Graham Whyte roused the Council's enthusiasm for a plan to restore the installation to full working

order. Councillors did not hesitate to say that “in their judgement” their support would be in full accordance with the provisions of Section 137 of the Local Government Act 1972 (see above) concerning “benefiting some or all of the residents.” So watch this space.

No prizes for guessing the name of the establishment to which most Councillors adjourned.

Adrian Stokes, Clerk