

ABBOTTS ANN PARISH COUNCIL

Newsletter: January 2009

CONFIDENCE

The best antidote to fear, one might say, is confidence, and we are all learning the hard way about the dangers of over-confidence. We may have been vaguely aware that the oil might run out one day, but probably not in our life-times, but nobody was afraid that the money would run out, perhaps tomorrow. It's quite depressing to think of hundreds of High Streets with a big hole where Woolworth's used to be, and it's alarming when your confidence in your bank is shaken.

For anyone in charge of other people's money, however confident they may be, there's always at least a twinge of anxiety when the time comes for the Audit. One way in which the Bursars of many an old college used to allay their fears was to soften up the auditors by stuffing them on arrival with an eight-course feast. The menu included oysters washed down with a special brew of astronomical potency called Audit Ale. So next morning the auditors were barely able to do more than nod the figures through.

Last May your Clerk happily submitted the Parish accounts to the Audit Commission, but felt his confidence leaking away when he had heard nothing by the end of November; had he rounded some pence up instead of down, or mis-typed a decimal point? Should he send them a Christmas card? He could hardly ply them with the Eagle's best bitter, let alone stuff them with oysters, as they are based, for some reason, in Plymouth. He need not have worried; just in time for Christmas came the OK, shortly to be followed by a whacking bill (for what looked like not even ticking a dozen boxes, but for checking that they had been duly ticked) and strict instructions to put up notices all over the place to ensure that no-one could say that they hadn't been informed.

INFORMATION

The Freedom of Information Act of 2000 seems to have been working pretty well until the Powers that Be discovered conflicts with the Data Protection Act and Human Rights to Privacy. The Act imposed the duty on all public bodies to let people know what information they hold and how to get hold of it; it also appointed a new hive of Civil Servants. H'mm - do they still call themselves "servants" now that they behave more like Napoleon than Jeeves? This hive contains an untold number of workers led by an Information Commissioner, and they must of course be kept busy. So we are lumbered with a new Act, which commits us to do all sorts of things in typical bureaucratese, such as:

To proactively publish or otherwise make available as a matter of routine, information, including environmental information, which is held by the authority and falls within the classifications below.

To produce a schedule of any fees charged for access to information which is made proactively available.

And so on for five more bullet-points. (Score so far: Latin 18, Anglo-Saxon 6, not to mention one split infinitive and a dubious comma in line 1). Then they suddenly go all chummy, as the "classifications below" are listed as *Who we are and what we do; What we spend and how we spend it; What our priorities are and how we are doing; How we make decisions*, and four more of these (Score: Latin 2, Anglo-Saxon 16 upwards). Two pages of this stuff were adopted in principle by the Council last month, but the Clerk was landed with a deadline requiring him proactively to publish a schedule (how on earth could he publish anything inactively anyway?), by December 31st or else. For the purposes of the Act, proactive publication was achieved by placing the resulting very boring document in the book in the village shop, putting up a notice or two and grumbling about it in this Newsletter. It will all boil down to "Ask the Clerk" anyway.

STICKING TOGETHER

The Clerk had just managed to scrub the last traces of Gorilla Glue from his fingers the other day (wonderful adhesive, but you must wear rubber gloves) when Hazel Blears, the Minister with the flaming hair and Cheshire Cat grin, sent him details of a new “One-stop Shop for Cohesion”. Always eager to try new DIY products, he spotted the words *strong, cohesive, toolkits*, and what looked like a rather odd brand name, iCoCo. He was disappointed to discover it was all about a new website dedicated to creating “Cohesive Communities”. This was developed by no less a body than the Institute of Community Cohesion, which sounds like a hive of honey-bees rather than Civil servants, and it is sponsored by our old friend DeCLOG. It appears that they are dedicated to getting us to stick together. If you wish to adhere to their principles, try logging on to www.cohesioninstitute.org.uk.

An opening ceremony came spectacularly unstuck the other day in Cornwall, when a Council took up the bright idea of the local Police Sergeant and put up a special wall for graffiti at the cost of £3,000. When local dignitaries came to declare it officially open, they found that a disgruntled citizen had sneaked in overnight and decorated the wall with the words “I paid my tax and all I got was this lousy wall.” The Sergeant went off muttering, determined to get his man.

PARISH COUNCIL MEETING - 8TH JANUARY 2009

Crime

Our local bobby, P.C.Jewell, paid a courtesy visit, but had no stories like the above, as this part of his patch doesn't give him much to do. A foiled burglary, a couple of cars broken into (well, they did have handbags in full view on the seats), half a dozen outbreaks of vandalism and some possession of suspicious substances put us well down the league-table of trouble-spots. Long may it remain so.

Lights and Wheels

We now have four out of four working Pole-mounted Luminaries on Church Path. No-one could remember how long it had taken to get PML No 2 to function properly, but the Council's polite refusal to pay more than half the County's bill for the maintenance of the lamps seems to have worked like magic. This makes no difference to the rule that the path is for walkers only; wheels are not allowed except of course for wheelchairs; the only other exception is for the historic village bier.

Planning

As mentioned before, the Councillors are vigilant in their responsibility for protecting the Parish's links with its historic past. Recently you may remember their strong feelings about Cattle Lane, so they noted with interest the terms in which the Borough's Planning Authority refused permission for a substantial new dwelling thereabouts. They said “The proposed replacement dwelling, by virtue of its scale, design, height and massing will result in a development that has a greater visual impact from public vantage points in the immediate vicinity than the original dwelling and will detract from the rural character and appearance of this countryside location...” Strong words, but backing up the Parish Council's view that village houses of any size should not be over-assertive or out of character with their surroundings. What may be fine standing back from a quiet laurel-lined road in Camberley or Hampstead, or commanding its own secluded landscape, may not be quite right for Little Park.

The Megashed is still very much in mind, and the STOP organisation is still beaver away. The stress at the moment is on monitoring the documentation covering the conditions to be imposed on the developers for traffic management and other areas of concern, such as noise and light pollution. Our Dr. John Moon is keeping an eagle eye and is already detecting a tendency towards vagueness (or evasiveness?) in the drafting. He expressed disappointment - to put it mildly - at the

way his detailed critique of many of the so-called facts and figures in the developers' application had not been taken into account by the Planning Control Committee. He told us that similar disappointment with the way that the application was handled is strongly felt by other Parish Councils, and thought it advisable for this Parish to join the chorus of complaint on an official basis. So he landed himself with the task of drafting a letter to be signed by the Chairman, when he recovers from the 'flu which kept him away from the meeting.

Meanwhile Cllr Graham Stallard, who nobly came straight on from a two-and-a-half-hour TVBC meeting, assured us that he was closely monitoring the effect of the Test Valley Core Strategy, with particular reference to the protection of the Strategic Gap which keeps us and Andover at a friendly arm's length apart. He is also working for us on the question as to whether we should be included in the "Andover Area" (as at present) or the "Rural Test Valley", which could imply much more than a mere name. The next stage to watch would be the plans for "Settlement Boundaries".

Footprints

In connection with human footprints, Mr. Downey told us, and showed us on a map, about the official establishment of a "Permissive Path", which many people, and dogs, have been using unofficially for ages. It runs between Penny Path and the Old Coach Road (where it suddenly becomes narrower and muddier) and was opened as part of an Environmental Stewardship agreement with Hazeldown Farm. The official write-up assures us that it offers fine views and a chance of observing wildlife such as Brown Hare, Lapwing, Skylark and Grey Partridge.

While on the subject of wildlife the Council is acutely aware of the energetic efforts of the little gentlemen in velvet waistcoats to turn areas of smooth turf (such as the Churchyard) into miniature mountain ranges. Councillors would warmly welcome any suggestions for persuading moles to go and dig somewhere else.

A report from our Jo Dixon drew the Council's attention to footprints (carbon) following the successful meeting in Upper Clatford before Christmas. The organisers would like to build on this initiative to expand its activities and to involve communities from a larger area, aims which the Council is glad to encourage and indeed to share in.

Days, Hours, Minutes.

Quite a lot else was discussed, so if you want to know more you will find the Minutes, eventually, in the Village Shop and on the Website as well as in the Clerk's bulging filing cabinet.

Council meetings in 2009 will take place on the first Thursday of each month in the Jubilee Room, or very occasionally in the Pavilion, at 7 p.m. Members of the public are welcome to attend, and they don't have to stay for the whole meeting.

The Annual Parish Assembly is scheduled for 27th March in the War Memorial Hall at 7 p.m. The whole point of the Assembly is to provide the chance for members of the public to hear from, and question, their local representatives at County, Borough and Parish level and to hear from those public-spirited people who run village organisations. See you there.

Adrian Stokes, Clerk