

THE CLERK'S COLUMN

JUNE 2011

Would you believe it?

The older you get, the more memories you have of unexplained co-incidences, for which one of the wisest men of the 20th century devised the word *synchronicity*. The other day, I had just been reading about a garden open to the public in Bramdean, when the doorbell announced the arrival of a delivery man. As he was at the end of his round, he seemed disposed to chat, and commented on our front garden, adding that a relative of his used to be a gardener in Abbotts Ann, but had moved on to work in a garden, now open to the public, in Bramdean.

Well, you may remember the story in April's *Column* about twenty-five firemen sent to rescue a cat from a roof, in which I quoted the old nursery rhyme about four and twenty tailors who went to catch a snail. A couple of weeks later the *Daily Mail* carried a headline:

Rescuing a snail? That's a job for the Fire Brigade!

It happened in Aberystwyth, when a very distressed elderly lady turned up at the Fire Station. Being concerned more about her condition and safety than the problem she breathlessly described, and not having any fires to put out just then, the manager sent some officers 400 yards down the road to her home. There they cautiously removed the cause of her agitation. This was an ordinary garden snail, of the kind that enjoys munching up your lettuce seedlings, which had climbed 8 feet up a wall.

Planning

The Parish Council spends quite a lot of time looking at planning applications; there were 45 of these in 2010. The score so far this year is 18; six of these have been for conservatories, eight for alterations or extensions, one for roadside cameras and three for new dwellings. Obviously it is the new ones that give most food for thought; in a village like ours, with 51 listed buildings, conservation is bound to be a major consideration, and the Council is proud, and protective, of our heritage.

So Councillors are not too keen to encourage architects to display their virtuosity if it conflicts with the letter and spirit of the Village Design Statement. This states that *It is important that in any new development, the houses blend in with the style, scale and materials of the old.* Since most of the houses here are neither broad nor tall, this makes life difficult for an architect whose client wants a big house. It is helpful if an applicant can consult the Parish Council before finalising the plans, and the Council welcomes this as a neighbourly thing to do. But if someone doesn't talk to us and wants something like a three-storey house or a flat-topped box or one made of corrugated aluminium, it should not come as a surprise if the Council doesn't like it. Unfortunately we don't have the last word, and Test Valley has the power to ignore local opinion. Examples of the two approaches may soon be seen very close to the northern edge of the village.

Conservation, like political correctness, can sometimes verge on the batty. No-one disagrees with the principle that wildlife habitats should be protected; accordingly planning applications have to include an ecological survey. Rats and mice are wildlife, I suppose, or do they count as domesticated? Anyway, thank goodness no-one has suggested that they should be protected; but do we have to worry quite so much about water voles if our conservatory extends towards the river-bank? Couldn't slow-worms wriggle away from a building site and go to sleep somewhere else? And surely bats, with their amazing sonic radar, wouldn't bump into a new house on their flight path. And aren't they sensible enough to find a new place to hang upside-down in – a nearby belfry, perhaps - if someone found a new use for their old dormitory?

The Powers That Be in the Cairngorms didn't think so; they succeeded in closing down parts of a Watersports centre, which entertains thousands of schoolchildren each year, for three months. Some pipistrelle bats were found slumbering peacefully in one of its buildings. The managers were told to provide a heated bat box; a specialist firm quoted £1,000 for this, though they eventually got one made locally for £150; but apart from the time spent on massive paperwork they were still £350 out of pocket, and lots of children missed out on adventurous activities. The pampered bats must be the only ones with a carbon footprint. But I digress; I meant to say something about Material and Non-Material Planning Considerations – i.e. what we can, and what we can't, object to. Now this will have to wait for another thrilling instalment.

New Councillor.

The first business of the Council's June meeting was the co-option of Mrs. Rebecca Bone to bring our numbers up to full strength, and indeed to bring the average age down quite a bit. Cllr Bone has plenty of expertise and enthusiasm which will be much appreciated. She quickly found herself landed with a project. We have some funding available for improvements to play areas, and we have heard that parents are taking their children to places like Appleshaw and Longstock, where they find better swings and roundabouts. Abbotts Ann doesn't like to be outdone by places lower down the alphabet, so the Council has been asked to think about adding to the equipment at the War Memorial Hall. It has been noticed that those other places have no shop, so there is no scope for a post-play ice-cream, a parental cuppa, or stocking up the larder. Since all this is available a few yards up the road from our playground, a spin-off could be more business for the village shop. In this connection, by the way, we hear that the cream teas and the special "Abbotts Ann" sausages have proved very popular.

Highways and Byways

The good citizens of Monxton have voted overwhelmingly in favour of traffic calming "build-outs" between Red Post Bridge and the junction with Cattle Lane. We are still waiting to hear from the Hampshire Highways about the similar measures we are asking for up by the new school, and now residents of Little Ann Road are asking whether something could be done to slow down traffic there, other than the notorious Z-bend.

Meanwhile Cllr Maureen Flood brought good news for cyclists: Andover is to be connected to the National Cycle Network, a quiet, ongoing enterprise designed to provide routes from A to B and back which are safe and relatively car-free, or completely so, as in the case of that part of the network which follows the old "Sprat and Winkle" railway line. Hands up anyone still around who remembers Andover Town Station and the infuriating level crossing which was there long before Sainsbury's was born or thought of.

While we wait patiently for the re-opening of Red Post Bridge, so that we can get to Weyhill without finding ourselves in Enham Alamein via the new gyratory system at 100-acre Corner, we have been warned of road closures on the A343 and Mill Lane.

Our energetic Footpaths Officer, Paul Kelly, has been busy, not only seeing to the clearance of a dumped bike and a fallen tree, but negotiating with HCC for improvements to some of the paths which need attention, including Pitt's Path, Donkey Path and the one from Duck Street to the Manor Close field. And with the help of the Chairman, and volunteers John Barlow and Tim Tayler, he has installed new finger-posts which stand proudly on The Drove and on Dunkirt Lane at each end of the less romantically-named Footpath 501.

The Big Society?

Many of us are still far from clear what the "Big Society", let alone "Localism", means – including Cabinet Ministers themselves? – but haven't communities like ours been acting in its spirit for ages? Surely it's voluntary activities that make the local world go round. Witness the great success of the Fete Committee's Plant Sale, which raised £714, doubling earlier profits, or the War Memorial Hall Committee, which is nursing a headache about a gas-supply to their magnificent new cooker. Or individuals who get quietly on with jobs like Keith Saunders running the Website, or David Downey up-dating two vital productions – the Parish Map and the Emergency Map. And don't forget the seven volunteers on the Parish Council, who calmly receive brickbats and bouquets with equal impartiality.

Future Meetings. Councillors have spotted the fact that if meetings go on much after 9 p.m., some of those in attendance are perilously close to their sell-by date. So, though the next meeting on July 7th will start at 7 p.m., subsequent meetings will be going back to a 6.30 start. There will be a shortened meeting on July 28th and no meeting in August.