

ABBOTTS ANN PARISH COUNCIL

Newsletter: October 2008

UTOPIA

The saintly scholar/administrator, Sir Thomas More, would never have heard the word *sustainability*, but the idea was surely in his mind when he coined the word *Utopia* and applied it to his ideal community back in the time of Henry VIII. That King's way of running things was hardly ideal, and Sir Thomas was only too well aware, as he paced his cell in the Tower, that his dreamland was never going to exist, and that he had been right to call it by a word that means *Nowhere*. However, under Henry's more recent, and more sedate, successors, a lot of people, from wild weirdos to pious philanthropists have tried to found mini-Utopias, almost always in the form of hopefully self-sufficient (i.e. *sustainable*) village-sized communities.

The Clerk has vivid childhood memories of one of these at the weird end of the spectrum in darkest pre-war Gloucestershire, where a group of anarchists had been trying to live in a chaotic jumble of sheds since 1898 without such "modern" necessities as money, matches, or even, it was rumoured, clothes. They had burnt the original title deeds spiked on a pitchfork, abjured personal property and lived on home-grown vegetables in a life that to a child looked like no fun at all. Oddly enough, unlike any of the others anyone seems to have heard of, this "Colony" (one of the more polite local names for the outfit) is still there, and still run, not by a Parish Council, but by a general meeting. But its founders would not have approved of money creeping in during the 30s, when they set up a bakery which is still going, having presumably made huge concessions to Health and Safety; they also started selling craft work to outsiders, including excruciatingly uncomfortable sandals and scratchy hand-woven garments of druidic design. It now has a Colony Hall, a swimming pool, a football team, mains water (from 1949 - some years before this came to Abbots Ann) and electricity which arrived in time for Christmas 1954. So in the end it turned into a village, which we all know to be the nearest you can get to a true Utopia.

All kinds of worthy philanthropists, including the practical Quakers, visionaries like Ruskin and romantic poets like Shelley and Coleridge, had a deep suspicion of Blake's dark, Satanic mills and a hankering for the green and pleasant land. So they launched dozens of short-lived schemes, all of which involved settling men and their families from factories and mines in patches of countryside; most petered out through lack of experience or funds. However, the ones that worked best arose from the mass unemployment which followed the Great Depression of the '30s, when the Government was persuaded to step in (remember the Prince of Wales saying "Something must be done"?) and the Land Settlement Association was founded, with private funding matched £ for £ by the Government. And the first of 18 estates to be acquired and populated was at Little Park, Abbots Ann, where the 37 10-acre holdings were very sensibly attached to a central farm and located within the boundaries of an existing - and welcoming - village. The original settlers helped with the construction of roads and services and, of course, the building of the characteristic bungalows. As time went by, times and the settlements changed; the L.S.A was wound up and its funds put into a charitable trust which offers grants for horticultural students. You can read more on the Village Website and can see the importance of Little Park and Cattle Lane in the history of Abbots Ann.

FREEDOM OF INFORMATION

I am not sure who is the boss of the Information Commissioner, or who had the bright idea of up-dating the regulations covering the rights of you and me to obtain information from public authorities from Her Majesty's Treasury to Much Snoring Parish Council, but clearly the boss didn't think that the Commissioner had enough to do all day. So a set of guidelines that seemed to work perfectly well for the last four or five years has been replaced by a massive Model Publication Plan, which must be adopted by all and sundry by Christmas. Unfortunately it seems that the Commissioner thought he could keep his boss quiet by producing a one-size-fits-all model plan which, with a few tweaks, would work for any body whether chaired by B. Johnson or B. Griffiths. Sledgehammers and nuts come to mind. Sadly, the time-honoured plan favoured by most Parish Councils was ruled out; this boiled down to "If you want to know anything about what the Parish Council is or does, ask the Clerk." Two footnotes would add: (a) "but please not before breakfast or after supper," and (b) "If he/she doesn't know the answer he/she knows someone who does."

PARISH COUNCIL MEETING 2ND OCTOBER 2008

Planning

One of the most important, but also frustrating, tasks of the Council is the exercise of the right to scrutinise planning applications. Important, because the village must be defended against unsuitable development; frustrating, both because the Planning Department has no duty to act on the Council's recommendations and because applicants often keep on trying to get their plans passed anyway by repeated applications for the same project or even by taking the case to appeal. Recently, for instance, the planners disagreed with our support for a discreet extension to Water Cottage, and the Inspector at appeal agreed with the planners and turned it down. Now, when the planners agreed with our objection to the idea of squeezing a sizeable extra house into Kingsmead, this has gone to appeal.

If you were wondering why this newsletter has gone to town over Little Park and Cattle Lane, read on. At fairly regular intervals the Council has to look at plans for new or altered buildings on Cattle Lane. Not long ago there was the saga of the plan for a 3-storey, ultra-modern eco-house at the corner of Cattle Lane and Monxton Road - the other side of the viaduct, but still in Little Park. This idea was clearly in conflict with the Council's strong resolve to maintain the historic "feel" of the area as characterised by the Land Settlement's neat original bungalows; so the Council has always tried to insist that new buildings of any size should have eaves that start at the ground floor windows and that any upstairs room should be in the roof-space. Therefore any plan for two, let alone three conventional storeys will be resisted. Which is what happened at this meeting to an application to develop the site at the corner of Red Post Lane and Cattle Lane, involving the replacement of a Land Settlement bungalow with a tall house, which would be splendid if it were built somewhere else. Architects are advised to look further along the lane to see that it is perfectly possible to provide plenty of accommodation without violating the Parish Council's policy. There's nothing wrong with dormer windows.

Long gone are the days when the majority of dwellings in Abbots Ann were occupied by people working on the land, so it was rather surprising that the Planning Service, against the Parish Council's objection, refused permission for change of use of the bungalow at the old Trout Farm (perhaps that could have been better expressed) from agricultural to residential occupation. This one has also gone to appeal. So there is often more than you may think lurking behind the bare bones of the published Planning Lists.

Cures for Insomnia

The Clerk ensured that Councillors would sleep well by sending each one home with a copy of the aforementioned Model Publication Plan; but this was not the only document which they were supposed to plough through. For instance a glossy brochure explained that Test Valley has adopted a BAP; this I not one of those delicious Morning Rolls obtainable, if you are early enough, from the Village Shop but a Biodiversity Action Plan; a summary contains some eighteen sets of initials, some of which turn out not to mean what you think, such as NT (New Testament? No, National Trust); NE (not Nor'east, but Natural England); BC (not a date, but Butterfly Conservation); HMG (nothing to do with Her Majesty's Government, but Hampshire Mammal Group).

The County Council has produced a 52-page consultation document called *Supporting Hampshire's Rural Communities*, and since this is what we are, it seemed important to read it; the Clerk saved himself and his printer a lot of work by giving Councillors the Web address from which they could download the whole thing.

Then there was a fat consultation document about the making of bye-laws - not of great interest to us, because these involve (a) penalties and (b) enforcement, though the Chairman was musing audibly about re-introducing the village stocks and someone else, remembering mediaeval village lock-ups, wondered whether the telephone kiosk could serve as a mini-gaol. But there was more...

The title *Community Power Pack* had everyone guessing about the contents of another 62-page wadge from Whitehall. It turned out to be a step-by-step guide on how to run a public meeting in such a way as to make a community feel that it was packing some power. The Clerk was instructed to file it away by Councillors who were touchingly confident that he or his successors would be able to find it again when needed.

The smallest of these documents was a leaflet offering funding for worthy projects like making a local nature reserve - No, Mr. Chairman, not for village stocks - from StarEnergy, a firm which specialises in storing gas and drilling for oil. Their Community Fund benefits towns or parishes in the immediate vicinity of its operations; these surprisingly included the Stockbridge and "Goodworth" oilfields, which must be a couple of Hampshire's best-kept secrets. It is not yet known whether Abbotts Ann qualifies as "immediate vicinity."

Highways and Byways

Dr. John Moon, our resident luminary (see below under Shedding Light), came along to present a summary of the latest Megashed developments. No-one can predict the outcome of the pending meeting of the Planning Control Committee; to meet local objections, the developers have accepted a number of conditions which would help to keep excess traffic out of the villages, but Dr. Moon's main fear, and ours, is that if the development is allowed to go ahead, there will be no guarantee that these conditions will be enforceable. So be very afraid.

Clerkly nagging has had some small successes: the notorious kerbstone outside the Eagle is no longer waiting to trip people up, and four (Wow!) of the myriad potholes have been filled in. But no sooner had we congratulated ourselves on this small step forward when we woke up the other morning to find a new telegraph pole had been planted alongside Chapel Cottage, narrowing the pavement and creating a new hazard which may prove easy to bump into but very difficult to get rid of.

Meanwhile we are still trying to get overgrown vegetation cleared, especially where it is invading the pavement between Bulbery and St.John's Cross, not to mention, again, the blocked gullies all over the place. It is appreciated that many householders with hedges alongside pavements are conscientiously cutting them back to keep the way clear for pedestrians; but there are still some places where this needs to be done, so please, where the cap fits...

Money

This is the time of year when we have to think about the budget for 2009-10 and decide how much to ask the Borough to peel off the Council tax for us. It is not easy to guess what expenses might arise so far ahead, but Councillors are already doing their sums about some projects which are likely to need financial support, such as up-dating the heating in the War Memorial Hall and repairing the fencing round it, plus mending the roof of the Church Tower and defending the village against the impact of the Megashed. Because the budget has to be fixed so far ahead, it has to be remembered that the Council needs plenty of notice of any requests. So book early to avoid disappointment.

Shedding Light

A recurring topic for some time has been the failure of the Clerk's steady nagging to get all four lights working on Church Path. During the discussion this time Cllr Graham Whyte informed us, from his experience on another council, that what we were talking about was PMLs; enjoying the bafflement of his colleagues, he went on to explain that the official designation of what you and I call lamp-posts is *Pole-mounted Luminaries*. Well, according to the dictionaries, the sun and moon used occasionally to be referred to as luminaries back in the Middle Ages, but it normally indicates a person of distinction as a source of intellectual or spiritual enlightenment. So the phrase would be more appropriately used to describe one of the oddest of the early Christian hermits, St. Simon Stylites, who was distinguished for living on top of a tall pillar. Church Path is in need of a Patron Saint of lamp-posts...

If you want to know more about the meeting, the Minutes are available on the website or in the Village Shop, and the next meeting will be on 6th November. Members of the public will feel even more welcome now that the Jubilee Room has more comfortable chairs.

Adrian Stokes, Clerk