

ABBOTTS ANN PARISH COUNCIL

Newsletter: September 2008

Local Democracy 1

September 1st was a great day for local democracy. The STOP the Megashed campaign was launched in our War Memorial Hall; it drew most of its tireless volunteers and much of its inspiration from representatives of Parish Councils. Apart from your Council's closely-reasoned letters of objection to the plans, an indispensable contribution was made by Abbotts Ann Action, with John Moon's meticulous unpicking of the developers' statistics with their glossy assurances that we had nothing to fear from traffic, noise, light pollution or any other damage to our green and pleasant habitat.

The campaigners made sure that their views were well asserted before the actual meeting, because it was ruled that the only parishes that had a right to speak were those within whose boundaries the development was to be dumped; so Monxton and Penton were allowed all of three minutes each. Still, this was, of course, a meeting of the Planning Committee for the north of Test Valley, whose officials were in favour of approving the proposals and tried to make everyone's flesh creep with dire warnings of how many millions of council tax-payers' money would have to be spent if it went to appeal. But this is where your elected Borough Councillors, Arthur Peters and Graham Stallard, come in - indeed no earthly power would have kept them out; Cllr. Peters even postponed his holiday. When it came to the vote (13-11) it was clear that without their speeches and votes the proposal would have been approved. So a great debt of gratitude is owed to these two stalwart Abbotts Ann citizens, who can mull over the words of the Duke of Wellington after Waterloo: "It has been a damned nice thing - the nearest run thing you ever saw in your life. By God! I don't think it would have done if I had not been there!"

It would be nice if that was the end of the story, but there are more battles to come. When they do, we must be ready to obey the Iron Duke's command of "Up, Guards, and at 'em!".

Local Democracy 2

Communities in control: Real People, Real Power is the title of the Government's White Paper recently introduced by the redoubtable Hazel Blears MP, Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, abbreviated to CLG now that some Sir Humphrey has spotted that DeClog is not serious enough. What on earth does she mean by *Real People*? My first thought was that she meant people who are not politicians, but that might start us asking ourselves, perhaps with some justification, whether our political leaders really exist, and whether our Hazel herself, with her flaming red hair and broad, confident smile, is no more substantial than the Cheshire Cat. However, she was real enough when she told the Annual Conference of the National Association of Local Councils that the two themes of the White Paper were 'rehabilitating local political activity' and 'giving more power to local people'. To hammer her point home, she said she wanted local people to be in the driving seat, and power in local communities to be rebalanced so that the voice of local people is heard and acted on, and where it isn't, people have the levers to make a difference themselves. So she seems to imply that it's *local* people who are the real ones, and that they will no longer be just passengers, but be drivers, with all sorts of pedals and levers to play with. It then turns out that it is not so much a matter of increasing the powers of existing local councils, but more of creating lots of new ones in places (like Andover) where there are no parish or town councils. So, apart from the nice warm feeling that the Government thinks we are real people, it looks doubtful whether existing parish councils will notice much difference. We shall see.

Consultation

An old English teacher used to say that a good rule of thumb for understandable writing was to be very wary about packing your remarks with Latin based (long) words which may look and sound great, but leave the mind a-boggle. Compare that sentence, which, I think you will find, contains only one (short) Latin word (yes, it's "Latin") with these from the latest consultation document from SEERA (remember her?): *Where the assessment highlighted the potential for negative sustainability effects associated with the implementation of an option, the appraisal has put forward recommendations to mitigate the negative effects. Table 1.3 lists the recommendations that will be important to consider as part of the development and implementation zzzzzzzz...* There's only one non-Latin word of any length, and even that, some purists would say, should be *highlit*.

You would never guess that the consultation is about providing pitches for Gypsies and Travellers. Easy enough to guess the short Anglo-Saxon comments of the Clerk and Councillors when requested to peruse thirty paragraphs of similar material and formulate a considered response - Whoops - I mean, when asked to read this stuff and think of an answer.

Fruit in Season

Did you know...? Blackberries have grown across Europe, Asia and America for tens of thousands of years, and some of them - perhaps the variety grown in the Garden of Eden - are thornless. Someone (probably a Ph D. candidate) has revealed that there are more than 2,000 varieties, mostly under the categories of *spinosa* (very prickly) or *spinosissima* (very prickly indeed). Few of them are sweet enough to eat straight from the bush, but they are packed with anti-oxidants, like Vitamin C and ellagic acid (not in stock at Boots) offering protection against cancer and various chronic conditions; their pips are not only a source of fibre, but also contain salicylates which are what aspirins are made of. All of this is free for all, as there is no law against picking wild fruit - or indeed mushrooms if you know what you are doing. But remember, I said "wild". "Scrumpling" in private apple-orchards may be a time-honoured practice, but those involved could fetch up with an ASBO.

PARISH COUNCIL MEETING: 11th September 2008

Mainly Footpaths

There was a certain amount of movement at this meeting, which started with a bare quorum chaired by the Vice-Chairman, Cllr Graham Whyte, who was working speedily through Agenda Item No. 6 by the time Cllrs Griffiths and Oram were able to beat the traffic and join in. At the time, Councillors were systematically discussing problems for pedestrians, like these:

- a. The displaced kerbstone continues to provide a hazardous stumbling-block right outside the Eagle, defying several attempts by the Clerk to persuade Hampshire Highways to deal with it.
- b. Another hazard was highlit in the form of danger of getting stung,
 - i. as various areas were quoted as being obstructed by nettles which have greatly enjoyed our "summer" weather rather more than we have, and
 - ii. as wasps' nests were reported
 1. on Pitts Path and
 2. on Dunkirt Lane just past the gate.
 - c. The pavement between St.John's Cross and Bulbery is almost impassable because of the failure of the borough to cut the overgrown verge; and it does make the main approach to the village look depressingly scruffy.
 - d. People have been ignoring the "No Cycling" rule on Church Path, which is obviously too narrow to be shared safely by both cyclists and pedestrians.

e.. Dumped rubbish was reported by the steps leading from Webbs Lane to Bulbery. This amounts to fly-tipping, which is an offence against the law, quite apart from being a most un-neighbourly act.

The solutions to most of these problems lie in the hands of other authorities, but the Clerk will be nagging those responsible to do their duty.

War Memorial Hall

The Parish Council is still keen to restore the lettering on the stone plaque above the side door to the War Memorial Hall, but was dismayed at the size of the estimate from a professional stonemason. Since all that is apparently needed is for the letters to be painted in, the Chairman undertook to investigate whether such expensive professional attention was really needed, or whether the dreaded Health and Safety regulations would require more than a shortish ladder and a pot of suitable paint.

SEERA again

This body, which covers most of the territory in the bottom right-hand corner of England, including us, has some members who are elected local councillors, but this hardly makes it a unit of local democracy with any kind of electoral mandate. However, it is trying to force Hampshire to accept thousands of extra houses without providing any financial contribution towards the roads, drains, water and power supplies, schools, hospitals and everything else described as infrastructure. It is also threatening to abolish the “strategic gaps” like our own hard-won green belt between Andover and Cattle Lane. It is worrying that their top-down approach does not seem to fit with Hazel Blears’s enthusiasm for giving more bottom-up power to real people, and your real Councillors will not be silent.

Sustainability etc.

Parish Councils are being encouraged to take joint action with neighbouring communities over projects where it is useful to share expertise and resources, so this Council was happy to back the plan explained by Jo Dixon for a conference in November with half a dozen or more other parishes. The aim will be to learn more about reducing carbon footprints and seeing how by putting some flesh on the bare bones of the word “sustainability” we can secure the future of our little corner of the planet.

If “sustainability” means ensuring that things keep going in good order, other matters discussed by the Council were relevant. For instance, we have told the highway people where to look for pot-holes (i.e. almost everywhere), and so we hope to see men at work before Christmas. We also want to keep our telephone box and are looking at ways of preventing BT from taking it away and selling it off as a shower-cubicle or mini-greenhouse. We want to make sure that drivers of long vehicles can see the notices at St. John’s Cross in time to stop them from turning into Red Rice Road, whatever their sat-navs tell them. Not to mention, again, having all four lights working on Church Path.

Visitors.

The Council is always glad to welcome our Borough Councillors to its meetings, and was glad that Cllr Arthur Peters was able to drag himself away from the grimly-named Overview and Scrutiny Committee of TVBC to fill in some details of the continuing Megashed saga and to receive the Councillors’ warm thanks and congratulations for his, and Cllr Graham Stallard’s, vital contributions towards the Northern Planning Committee’s rejection of the developers’ application.

Other members of the public are also welcome to attend meetings, though not many do so unless they are directly involved in an Agenda item; Councillors were left wondering till the very end of the meeting about what Mrs Sally Coffey had up her sleeve, apart from her graphic account of what pot-holes had done to her car (this could have been capped by the Clerk, who still bears the scars of an argument in 1945 between his bike and a Hampshire pot-hole). She actually came along to show us a print, from a painting by the early 19th century artist Sir David Wilkie R.A., whose best-known work is a magnificent portrait of George IV with his portly Germanic figure crammed inappropriately into the outfit of a Highland Chief, with kilt, sporran and all the trimmings. This picture, however was of an altogether more modest subject, entitled *The Village Politicians*, and showed a bunch of miscellaneous rural characters in heated but well-lubricated discussion in the back room of a pub - not quite as decorous as the proceedings summarised above, which in any case were sternly forbidden by Gladstone's Act of 1894 to be held on licensed premises. We were very kindly allowed to borrow the picture for reproducing by the latest computerised technology, so that we can have, among others, a copy to hang in the Jubilee Room. Sir David laid down his brushes in 1841, so we need have no worries about copyright.

Next Meeting.

I can't promise that the next meeting (October 2nd) will be so varied and interesting, but I repeat that all meetings are open to anyone who wants to see Local Democracy at work.

Adrian Stokes, Clerk