

Compton & Shawford Annual Parish Meeting 26 April 2006

Chairman's Address

It's fashionable for politicians to flaunt their green credentials these days.

So I'm pleased to say that the parish council has implemented its own recycling policy.

We've been recycling used chairmen.

After George Beckett's second three year stint, I was re-elected chairman in May 2005.

That makes it 5 out of the past 11 years that I've been in the chair.

While that is nothing compared to Chris Corcoran's reign at Twyford, or Geoff Sharman's 20 years and counting at Oliver's Battery, I think it's healthy to have a new face at the helm from time to time.

So I'd be pleased if we elect a new chairman at the annual parish council meeting next week.

10 years ago

It was 10 years ago yesterday that I gave my first annual report as chairman.

If I was a backward looking kind of person, I might remind you that this time in 1996,

- we had just purchased a computer for our clerk,
- we had established a parish website
- and although the M3 had been open for fifteen months, it would be another 6 months before the purchase of the "return land" next to the playing field was completed.

I might also remind you that, back then, we were planning two weeks of celebrations to mark the centenary of this Parish Hall. The celebrations would feature

- exhibitions, parties and quizzes,

Compton & Shawford Annual Parish Meeting 26 April 2006

- a Simon Theobalds pantomime (complete with Di Threlfall as the principal boy, Simon Jones as the Fairy Stockbroker, and a special mention in Bob Emmerson's write-up for the elegant pair of legs shown by Simon North), and
- an old time Music Hall evening, whose many highlights included the Horticultural Society's scary story about "The Vegetable Plot".

We were also just about to look into a suggestion to purchase the former Booking Office at Shawford Station as a Parish Office and information point.

You probably won't be too surprised to hear that, this time in 1996,

- People were worried about car parking in Compton Street near the school, and
- Nick Campbell-White was bemoaning the Hall's annual losses of £3.5k.

It would take a referendum and two and a half more years before we could finally bank the proceeds of the sale of the adjoining land and start on the Parish Hall refurbishment.

But we're not here to talk about ancient history.

The past year

So what has happened in the last 12 months?

- We've made huge progress on the upkeep of Shawford Down,
- the rail services have improved, including a recently added 16:53 service from Winchester, thanks to lobbying by the Shawford Rail Users' Group (SRUG),
- and the Bluestar No 1 bus now runs four times an hour along the main road.

We held a meeting with the chairs of the Residents' Associations to discuss the idea of a Parish Plan. Everyone thought it was helpful to get the different parts of the parish talking together, so we may all meet again when other important issues come up.

Both schools in the parish are very well regarded and continue to improve on their own already high standards.

Our new priest, Paul Baird, sadly on leave of absence at present, has been doing a fine job, with his committee, of driving the Church Centenary project, which

included looking into aspects of social exclusion - arguably a topic this Parish Council should be concerned with.

We have had a largely favourable press from the Hampshire Chronicle, as you can see from the cuttings on the boards.

A year ago, however, the Chronicle told us that they could no longer promise to print our parish council reports in full.

We decided then to stop sending them our reports at all.

But a number of you have told us you miss the reports in the paper, so we will revisit that decision at our meeting next Tuesday.

CASCA continues to thrive and the Sports Club's finances are much healthier, largely thanks to improved bar takings in the new pavilion.

Incidentally, although for insurance reasons and to conform to the licensing regulations, use of the pavilion is for members only, anyone in the parish who would like to use its facilities would be welcome to join one of the sports sections as a playing or a non-playing member.

The Parish Council has given the Sports Club a nominal rent for the first five years of the new pavilion while they recover from the lean years in the old building.

But our aim, when their lease is reviewed, is to move towards a cost-neutral position, so that the running costs of the field are borne by its main users and the burden on the council tax payer is reduced.

Finance

Which brings me on to the question of finances.

- What does the Parish Council cost?
- Are you getting value for money?
- And what are the alternatives?

Nick has spoken about the increasing proportion of our budget which goes on admin, due in large part to the stream of new rules and regulations coming from

central government.

What does the Parish Council actually cost?

For the benchmark “Band D” property owner, £34.54 of your Council Tax comes to the Parish Council, which is about 3% of the total bill.

Or, in round terms, enough to buy a pint of beer at the Bridge every four weeks. To share with your whole household.

If you fell into the top council tax band, you’d be paying twice that.

So the Parish Council would be costing you a pint of beer a fortnight – shared between your whole household.

If we weren’t here, you might be able to reduce your council tax bill by a small amount.

But then you’d have to trust the City Council to look after the parish’s interests.

On the other hand, if you thought the Parish Council should be doing more, we could double our precept and you’d hardly notice the difference in your overall council tax bill.

Of course there has never been an easy way to know what else you would like us to do, but the Parish Plan, which Michael Widén will talk about, gives us a way to find out.

One thing is sure – without people willing to serve as Parish Councillors, there couldn’t be a Parish Council. Several of the current councillors, who have given sterling support over the years, are planning to stand down at the next elections, in 2008. Please give some thought to standing yourself. It’s one of the rewarding ways you can do something for the community.

Quality Parishes

Nick’s going to think I’m picking on him, but I’d like to bring you back to his comment about the stream of directives from central government.

Many of the new regulations are, I agree, frankly inappropriate for a council our size.

But some could be relevant.

One government initiative which we need to keep on our radar is the Quality Parish Council scheme.

We already meet most of the requirements for Quality status, such as producing an annual report, and publishing our minutes and accounts in a timely fashion.

Up to now we haven't seen a need to jump through the final hoops to achieve formal Quality status.

But this may change.

A recent review by NALC, the National Association of Local Councils, highlighted the need to make the Quality scheme more attractive to smaller councils, through financial and other incentives. If this happens, we will reassess our position.

Next Year

So what are the priorities for the next twelve months?

Firstly, playing facilities.

Whenever Winchester City Council reviews the recreational facilities in the area, they highlight the lack of a children's play area in Shawford. We would like to do something about this, if a suitable site can be found, and Mary Shaw is talking to some of the families with children about the options.

Our other priorities are the three Ps:

- Planning
- Park and Ride and the
- Parish Plan

Planning

Can seem so complex it sometimes feels like wrestling in mud. As soon as you think you have a grip on the problem, it slips out of your hands.

- Guidance from central government keeps changing.
- Decisions from the local planning authority have been inconsistent, to put it

mildly.

- And later this year the new Local Development Framework will come into effect.

We are lucky to have had Jeremy Dolphin to apply his forensic intelligence as chair of our planning committee.

Three of us attended a planning seminar recently. We had a few Vicar of Dibley moments watching representatives of other parish councils struggle with the complexities.

We recognise the *right* of property owners, and the *duty* of executors, to try to realise the maximum value of their assets.

But it is *our* duty to do what we can to make sure that developments are in character and do not overburden the local infrastructure.

We were disappointed that such a high density development was recently permitted in Highways Road, and we are keeping our fingers crossed that the Longacre site will be developed with just two dwellings, in line with the latest permissions.

Steve Opacic, Head of Strategic Planning at the City Council, tells me that the Compton Down Local Area Design Statement should be available for comment shortly and he expects that we will find it sympathetic.

Park and Ride

We were contacted back in November by an employee of the County Council promising a meeting to discuss the proposed Park and Ride.

But the invitation was swiftly retracted. We got the impression that he was censured by his superiors for talking to us prematurely.

We were eventually invited to a briefing at the beginning of this month, which confirmed our fears that the County Council had already ruled out all possible sites except Bushfield Farm. They were promising public exhibitions of their plans in late May.

Helped by our District and County Councillors, we made it very clear to them that

they needed to do an equally detailed study of alternatives, particularly the Tarmac site, before the public exhibitions.

Judging by the number of yellow jacketed people wandering about the Tarmac site, they have taken our message on board.

When do you think we first asked them to evaluate the former Tarmac compound for park and ride?

We floated the idea in February 1995, in response to the Bushfield Camp study, and we wrote and asked again in April 1996.

When we see what they come up with at the public exhibition next month, we will get together with the residents' associations and decide what action to take.

Parish Plan

The third "P" is the Parish Plan. We are very enthusiastic about this and I look forward to hearing what Michael will tell us later tonight.

And finally

A big vote of thanks to our clerk, Mike Langford, to my fellow councillors, to CASCA and Frank Smith for making the hall available, to Joan Olson and the WI for tonight's refreshments, and to all the others of you, too many to mention, who oil the wheels of the village by helping run the clubs and societies which flourish here.

Adrian Walmsley, Chairman