

CHAIRMAN'S ANNUAL REPORT - MARCH 2009

To use a well known quotation from Charles Dickens' novel "A Tale of Two Cities" - "It was the best of times. It was the worst of times..."

We have had a busy year as a Parish Council with some very definite highs and lows. The year began with two resignations from long standing Councillors, including the immediate former Chairman. Ray Lawton and Roy Read had both served as Parish Councillors for many years (Roy for over 40 years!) and their local knowledge and experience had been invaluable to the Council. However, the Council received three good applications for the two vacancies, placing the Council in the enviable but very difficult position of having to select two candidates for co-option. As a result Chris Tratalos and Karen Bolshaw were co-opted in July 2008 with the expectation that they would bring new ideas and youthful enthusiasm to the work of the Council.

Sadly, three former Parish Councillors passed away this year - Stan Owen, John Corlett and Jean Greenhough. They had all served the Parish Council in many different capacities, each with their different skills and interests. Roy Read's wife also passed away this year, after a long illness,

Throughout the last 3 years the Parish Council has been heavily involved in the environmental and planning enforcement action at Senna Green Farm, and the local opposition to the related planning applications for the new poultry waste processing plant at Thellow Heath. This matter came to a head this year in the refusal in February 2009 of the two related planning applications for the replacement plant at Thellow Heath and the so-called enabling application for residential development at Senna Green. The Parish Council represented the concerns of parishioners throughout this process; liaising with PEACE, the local residents' opposition group, holding a drop-in session in October 2008 to enable parishioners to examine the revised planning applications, sending objection letters and attending and speaking against the two applications at the relevant Vale Royal Planning Committee meeting. An appeal in the High Court is still pending in relation to the certificate of lawfulness, and we wait to see if an appeal against the refusal of planning permission will be lodged.

Planning remains a controversial area for the Parish Council with two other applications causing particular local concern. The application and subsequent grant of a limited planning permission relating to the use of an airstrip for a commercial plane at Fairbank Farm provoked angry reaction from local residents in the vicinity due to the noise and nuisance caused. The Parish Council objected to the application, and continues to monitor the situation and report problems to the planning authority. The second application relates to the use of the former Appleton Thorn airbase as an Autodrome. The application area crosses three planning authority boundaries with inevitable complications, and

further reports on noise levels and noise reduction measures are awaited so that the application has yet to be determined. New planning legislation which came into force in 2008 should mean the Parish Council is consulted on fewer small "householder" applications but the overall number of applications for conversions, larger extensions, stabling and linked equestrian uses seems unlikely to diminish.

The Parish Council and its Clerk has spent much of the year wrestling with the implications of, and new arrangements arising from, the re-organisation of the Cheshire authorities - with Vale Royal BC and Cheshire County Council disappearing with effect from 1 April 2009. Not all our current contacts will transfer across to the new West Cheshire and Chester unitary authority, so we have to establish new relationships with highways, environmental and planning officers. We can also expect changes of approach and policy over the next few years, coupled with the likelihood of increasing financial stringency as the global economic problems impact on local government budgets. Our 2009 precept for instance includes a small additional budget to cover minor works, like hedge and grass cutting, which are likely to be the first casualties of any cut backs at the new authority. This budget has been created by savings in other areas such as insurance, where the Council had been able to secure a beneficial 3 year fixed premium. The Parish Council hopes that its status as a "Quality Parish Council" will assist in ensuring we get a fair hearing from officers and Councillors in the new, much larger authority, and we liaise regularly with our local councillor Malcolm Byram. The Council has maintained its drive for good governance with the adoption this year of the ICO Model Publication Scheme for parish councils, the revised Model Code of Conduct and a Statement of Intent on Training. Our newer Parish Councillors are attending regular training on relevant subjects and on-going training for all Councillors and the Clerk will be reviewed over the next few months.

There have been other small but significant achievements in the last year:

- The Parish Council has a live web site and a new dedicated email address for correspondence;
- We secured a Parish Plan Implementation Grant for the installation of a sound system in St Marks' Church;
- We made a small grant to the Village Hall to assist in the purchase of good quality carpet in the new extension;
- The new, and very comfortable, chairs which were purchased by the Village Hall Committee with a grant supported by the Parish Council, are now in use;
- The prize money from the Calor Village of the Year Environmental award has been used to purchase a bench for the church yard;

- The Parish Council has assisted in the development of a more efficient electronic system for circulating urgent Homewatch information to local residents;
- Cheshire County Council Highways have agreed to install improved signage and speed reduction markings at four principal entrances to the village in an effort to slow traffic through the village centre, with the work likely to begin very shortly.

It must be admitted the Parish Council has had less success with issues like highway repairs and planning enforcement. Piecemeal and often shoddy repairs to road surfaces are a constant irritation. Whilst we continue to make regular monthly reports to the appropriate officers at district and county level their responses are constrained by an apparent lack of funds and resources. We wait to see if there are any improvements when the new authority takes over.

As usual the Parish Council has played a part in many Village events, and more widely within Vale Royal. The Chairman and Parish Councillors walked in the July Fete procession and attended the Fete service held at the Methodist Chapel on the following day. The Chairman placed a wreath on behalf of the Parish Council at the annual Remembrance Service held in St Mark's Church. Parish Councillors attend meetings of the Village Hall Committee, and the Parish Plan group, and two Councillors have recently been appointed as Link Councillors with our local primary school. The Clerk and Councillors attend Police Forum meetings, Area meetings and local council Cluster Events - to name but a few.

The Parish Council also held a very successful Charity Cabaret Night in March this year to raise money for local charities, which was attended by over 150 people and raised £2000. This event was funded entirely by ticket receipts and donations, with no call on Parish Council funds, but it amply demonstrates both the commitment and organisational ability of Parish Councillors and their Clerk AND the level of support the Council receives from the local community which it serves. As Chairman I wish to thank all my fellow Councillors and the Clerk for their efforts and enthusiasm over the last year.

DAH

10 March 2009