

THE CLERK'S COLUMN

October 2010

Mind your language.

The war on waffle continues, and the Clerk's hobby horse seems unlikely to be put out to grass for a while yet. The Plain English Campaign was founded thirty years ago but still finds plenty to do. The organisation has just set up a website, in which it invites supporters to submit entries for its annual "Golden Bull" awards for the worst communication of the year. The founder, Chrissie Mayer, now in her seventies and still on the warpath, started off with a formal protest outside the House of Commons at which she shredded jargon-filled documents until the police arrived. The officer told her that she was in contravention of the Metropolitan Police Act 1839, took a deep breath and read Section 32:

"It shall be lawful for the Commissioners of Police from time to time, and as occasion shall require, to make regulations for the route to be observed by all carts, carriages, horses and persons, and for preventing obstruction of the streets and public thoroughfares within the Metropolitan Police District in all times of public processions, public rejoicings, or illuminations, and also to give directions to the constables for keeping order and for preventing any obstruction of the thoroughfares in the immediate neighbourhood of Her Majesty's palaces and the public offices, the High Court of Parliament the courts of law and equity the police courts, the theatres and other places of public resort, and in any case when the streets or thoroughfares may be thronged or may be liable to be obstructed."

When the founders of the Plain English Campaign asked the officer if he would mind putting it more succinctly he obliged by saying "Move along, please."

The Met Office recently won a Golden Bull for this masterly explanation as to why long-range forecasts are nearly always wrong:

"Seasonal forecasts indicate how slowly-varying large-scale climate influences make particular seasonal variations more likely than others. Random unpredictable factors (chaos) also partly determine year-to-year variations and these will sometimes over-ride large-scale influences. Such uncertainties make a probabilistic format, as used here, advisable for seasonal forecasts."

Personalisation.

Probabilistic is quite a clunky word - could be handy for crossword compilers, maybe as an anagram of O I Clip Rabbits. It is defined, pretty clunkily, by the Oxford Dictionary as *pertaining to or expressing probability, subject to or involving chance variations or uncertainties*. So it isn't a new word, or even a new use for an old one, and it provides an effective fudge for "Your bet is as good as mine". But while browsing the 376 triple-column pages of the letter P in The Shorter (*sic*) Oxford Dictionary, it seemed a good idea to look up another old word which, in a new guise, has been puzzling the likes of Parish Clerks for a year or so, namely *personalisation*. This word has chugged along happily for many years, indicating ownership of things like number-plates, cufflinks or "tasteful gifts" by putting initials on them. The Oxford lexicographers haven't yet caught up with its recent elevation to an important legislative buzz-word, but thanks to four reasonably jargon-free pages from a government website it began to look like an excellent idea which will drive many future public services. These have tended to work on the one-size-fits-all principle, but now it is proposed that those, like the elderly or disabled, will be asked by the Social Services to tell them what help they want within a certain budget. Some persons are even likely to be offered a cash allowance from which to find and pay for their own private help. Well, that's the idea anyway.

There are signs, too that the same sort of individual attention is trickling through the system at Parish Council level. For instance a survey of local public transport is currently going the rounds. Clearly in Abbots Ann we are luckier with our buses than most rural areas, especially villages near Halifax, where a transport consultation meeting was arranged one evening recently; the organisers were surprised at the small numbers who attended, until someone pointed out that there were no bus services after 7 p.m.

Here there is still a big anxiety about transport to, and between, hospitals in Andover, Winchester and Southampton which looks like going back to the bad old days with the threatened axing of the Andover-Winchester shuttle bus after a very short life. *Cuts* is the buzz-word now.

Cuts

At the moment it feels a bit like a phoney war, with all sorts of savage cuts being threatened by the Government, but not yet happening. One can perhaps sympathise a little with Damocles, who was a creepy courtier of a 4th Century BC Greek dictator. His boss got so fed up with his flattering references to the good fortune of his country that he decided to teach him, and the rest of his court, a lesson on the precariousness of happiness. So he organised a lavish feast, but just as Damocles was about to tuck in, he was told to look up. There, hanging by a single horse-hair, was a very sharp sword. It rather spoilt his appetite.

No swords hang from the Jubilee Room ceiling (though there are those who don't feel too comfortable under the new lighting system), but the Parish Council will be thinking hard about keeping expenditure down and are already working on the budget for 2011-12. In the Clerk's first draft it looked as if we could tidily break even without any increase in taxation until it was revealed that in the Sports Pavilion not just a sharp instrument, but whole chunks of ceiling were coming down. At least there is one threatened tax-increase that won't affect the Council, because we can reclaim VAT on any purchases.

I don't think many clerks would come out on protest marches if their working hours were cut by higher authorities damming the ever-rising flood of communication. The trouble is that it is too easy to send off multi-page pdf files without even having to lick a stamp, but we can't go back to quill pens or clacking typewriters. So it takes a certain amount of time even deciding whether to bin, or delete, pages of surveys, consultations and general verbiage.

Which leads on, naturally, to herbage. The Police, since 1832, have always been interested in obstruction of highways by crowds of people or illegally parked vehicles, but the Parish Council is more concerned with keeping its rather special network of footpaths open and accessible, so, once again, owners of hedges alongside these paths are reminded that it is their responsibility, enshrined in the law of the land, to keep them trimmed, and particularly to be aware that brambles seem to be able to grow several inches overnight, and a warmish Autumn can keep them all in vigorous growth. The same law, please note, applies to hedges bordering roadside pavements.

By the way...

In connection with roadsides, a northern Parish Council is experiencing an unusual problem. While considering the installation of a bench to enable people to stop and admire the view beside a country lane, they found that a chair had appeared there overnight. Over the following few nights the phantom benefactor had added a table, another chair, a cup, saucer, table lamp, two china ornaments, two garden gnomes, a waste basket and a bottle of shandy. It would be sad if this had to be treated as fly-tipping and removed by grim-faced men in fluorescent jackets.

Autumn

At this time of year, Parish Councils everywhere are dusting off their crystal ball and thinking, not just about the budget, but about what else needs to be done; so Councillors have to try to imagine what life will be like as far ahead as March 2012. From discussions at the October meeting it is clear that there is a strong current of feeling, backed by the Council and finding expression in the activities of many villagers, that Abbots Ann can look forward to at least as green and pleasant a future as has been enjoyed in the past year. And most of this is due to what doesn't have to be budgeted for.

The level of voluntary activity here is amazing - just look through the other pages of this magazine, Volunteers are everywhere - whether as individuals attending to footpaths, archives,

trees, website or magazine, or in groups, as in church, shop, hall, sports field, fete, WI, the Players, school governors. Of the two newest groups, the approach of the Friends of Manor Close to maintenance of their green space is grinding its way through local bureaucracy, while AAGA (aka the Sustainability Group) is humming along publicly with Apple Day and more quietly with the presentation of detailed plans for future activities to the Parish Council, the members of which are, of course, also volunteers.

Clerks, I suppose, because some of their activity is “professional,” count as a sort of semi-volunteer, but there are occasional “perks.” As you know, the Council recommended our indefatigable Neighbourhood Watch co-ordinator, Mike Butt, for the County Council’s Good Neighbour Award and were delighted that he was one of the recipients. Since the Clerk had signed the letter, he was invited along as Mike’s “Nominator” to attend the impressive celebrations in the magnificent surroundings of Winchester Castle’s Great Hall and to join in the well-deserved applause. It was good to know that the County Council recognises the importance of the contributions of volunteers to local well-being. And there are encouraging signs that central government is getting the message too.

Winter.

Yes, the crystal ball indicates the need to be ready for ice and snow. It looks as if the legal problems surrounding the installation and use of grit boxes will not prevent us from getting at least two. The Council reckons that the greatest need is on Hillside and Abbots Hill, which can rival the Cresta Run. So watch those spaces.

Shortage of time this time means shortage of detail, but there will be plenty of that in the Minutes. The next meeting will be on 4th November.

Adrian Stokes, Clerk