

THE CLERK'S COLUMN

February 2010

ALL FIT ONE SIZE?

Governments have a touching confidence in their ability to change the way people behave even when we don't feel like it, and the more thoughtful legislators hope that this will alter the way we think. Sometimes it works, as with smoking or wearing seat-belts, but even so, drivers are more likely to be persuaded to stop using mobile phones at the wheel by hearing about this causing a horrific pile-up than by the threat of a fine. And it is not easy to see, for instance, how people's behaviour or attitude to binge-drinking was supposed to be improved by allowing pubs to be open all night. Too often the law-makers forget that the Law of the Unexpected Result is always lurking round the corner however good the original intentions. In the main courtyard of one of our oldest schools there are gutters leading to a central drain. Over the centuries, these examples of mediaeval engineering have acquired nick-names carrying a warning that has made generations of pupils pause to reflect on the fact that, as a wise man once said, we expect *results*, but what we get is *consequences*. Politicians should take note. The gutters are called "Good Intentions"; the drain is called "Hell."

The Press recently seemed determined to make it look as if the Pope was trying to warn Harriet Harperson about unexpected results of her Equality legislation; I doubt if he was expecting the effect of his remarks on his own popularity; but it would be very surprising if such a massively complicated law didn't turn out to be (as Dr. Johnson unkindly described a second marriage) a triumph of Hope over Experience.

I was planning to bore you to death with a summary of the main difficulties that the new equality laws might cause for local government, but this month has proved rather less entertaining than usual for the Parish Council, and the phrase "part-time" has been tinged with irony. So it will have to be a case of "Watch this Space", bearing in mind the continuing stream of stories demonstrating the triumph of Political Correctness over Common Sense, not to mention George Orwell's cynical comment that all men are equal, but some are more equal than others.

The Greeks, of course, not only had a word for it, but so often had a significant story. Incidentally exams in Classical Studies have provided some bizarre answers about them, For instance one bright spark, faced with the question "What was the greatest achievement of the Greeks?" replied "Learning to speak Greek." To "Name the wife of Orpheus whom he tried to rescue from the Underworld." one answer was "Mrs. Orpheus." I am reminded of a Roman History question "Where was Hadrian's Wall built?" to which the answer was "Around Hadrian's garden." Well, teachers always tell examinees that you won't get any marks for a blank, and wouldn't you yield to the temptation to give at least one mark for an answer that made you laugh?

Yes, but what about the story, which might contain an important message for our legislators? Athens was, of course, the place where democracy was invented, but this story comes from the early years when there was a king in charge - actually a rather absent-minded character called Theseus who was in such a hurry to get home from exile that he left his devoted girl-friend Ariadne behind on the island of Naxos; but don't cry for her, because she was quickly picked up by a passing god. Anyway, among the problems he found waiting for him was the habit of a local bandit called Procrustes of kidnapping travellers; he had an iron bed on which he dumped his unfortunate victims. If they were too short, he stretched them on a rack until they fitted the bed; if they were too long for it he trimmed them at both ends. Oddly, he didn't actually fit his own bed, so when Theseus finally caught up with him he gave him a fatal dose of his own medicine. Not sure whether this is a tall story or a short story, but it's certain that no law can make all people of equal length.

PARISH COUNCIL MEETING 4th February

The resignation from the Borough Council of Arthur Peters weighed heavily on the meeting, and the Chairman was prompt to pay a warm tribute to his many years of tireless and diligent service to the community; all Councillors wished their appreciation and gratitude to be placed on record. The Chairman emphasised the importance of the friendliness and relative informality of the way in which the affairs of the Parish were traditionally conducted; this was endorsed by all present knowing how vital it is to the well-being of a village that differences of opinion should not embitter neighbourly relations.

POLICE

Our new P.C.S.O., Ross Hanley, introduced himself and outlined plans for future regular “surgeries”. He mentioned the need for everyone to be wary of unsolicited callers offering, for instance, to mend the roof or re-surface a driveway, supported the warning by Neighbourhood Watch of recent thefts of diesel and heating oil from vehicles or tanks, and recommended the use of the 101 phone number for reporting nuisance or suspicious activities. It was suggested that he would be most welcome to visit the Eagle, but he sadly explained that regulations were an obstacle, at least while he was on duty.

WAR MEMORIAL HALL

The replacement of the old roadside fence has not been forgotten; unfortunately grant-making organisations mostly like to fund exciting new projects like installing playgrounds or restoring the village pond, but we have been saving up, so the job can be afforded. However, thanks to the discretionary grant from our County Councillor, Andrew Gibson, the roof of the big store in the grounds can be renewed. A stitch in time...

HIGHWAYS AND BYWAYS

Talking of stitches in time, the pot-holed state of our roads is a grim reminder of the need to apply that proverb to all sorts of maintenance. Years and years of under-funding and neglect have landed the County Council with an impossible task; most of Cattle Lane and all of Mill Lane and Church Road need total resurfacing, while last year’s patches are already cracking up again. A real ankle-breaker has appeared on Church Path; the Clerk has duly reported it, but don’t hold your breath. Luckily the Chairman just happened to have a cone handy, but he hopes to retrieve it before next Christmas. Parishioners are asked to keep up the pressure by reporting pot-holes (especially ones not on the Clerk’s usual cycle-routes) direct to the County Council via their website hants.gov.uk.

We have already mentioned the problems of hill-dwellers, such as those at the top of Abbots Hill, in the recent inclement weather; the County Council has been considering the possibility of providing salt/grit bins, apparently free of charge, but Parish Councils are holding back, because the question of legal liability for accidents is still unresolved, thanks to a ruling of the late lamented Lord Denning, and it will probably need legislation to sort it out.

There has been an impressive response to Mrs. Forrester’s petition for improvement to the Salisbury Road, including a reduced speed-limit and a roundabout at St.John’s Cross, for which the Council is most grateful. It will provide our Councillor Andrew Gibson with valuable backing for his campaign.

Our Borough Councillor, Graham Stallard, has followed up our protests at the change to our bus-routes which meant that they no longer go to the railway station. It appears that the changes have to be viewed in the context of a county-wide review of the subsidies provided by the County and the snag seems to be that not enough passengers are going that way to justify the subsidy. However, Test Valley are not letting the matter rest just yet.

THE GREEN AGENDA

Wendy Davis has been busy mustering a group of Parishioners who are interested in ensuring that our Parish is sustainable. The aim of the group is to draw attention to, and encourage action about, issues such as climate change, conservation of energy and general ecological responsibility. Councillors are very aware that this Parish must not be complacent about these issues and hope that the planned public meeting will bear lots of green fruit.

RED RICE ROAD

Neither the Council nor the residents involved in the re-naming of Red Rice Road expected to navigate such stormy waters. Certainly the need for change was felt very strongly by those who had experienced possible life-threatening delays to ambulances that had gone to Upper Clatford. And there were plenty of examples of failed deliveries, plus the constant anxiety that a fire could be well out of control before the Fire Brigade could find the house. But it turned out that it could become rather less straightforward than changing your own name by deed poll. Expressed concerns ranged from the comment that there were no ducks anywhere near St.John's Cross, and the feeling that age-old traditions were being ignored, to fears that Satnavs would clog the village with heavy lorries. Well, if Salisbury Road leads to Salisbury, there seemed to be no reason why Duck Street shouldn't lead to where you can lean over a bridge and feed some mallards, and many of us can remember when no roads in the village had names, but our addresses were Number/Name So-and-So, Abbots /Little Ann. Red Rice Road mysteriously appeared late in the 20th century. A little research showed that the Satnavs don't give the names of the main village streets (nor does Google) but direct drivers by post-code; in fact traffic from Andover to the current Duck Street area is directed by Cattle Lane, while drivers heading for the Eagle are directed via Little Ann.

But the necessity also arose for a thorough check of the validity of the proceedings which started six months ago. It took the Chairman and Clerk rather more than a couple of minutes to dig deep into their resources of patience and neighbourliness to demonstrate that everything was above board, that there were no hidden agendas and that the legality of the process was beyond dispute. So in the end what had to prevail was the assertion of the democratic rights of those affected (i.e. those whose current address is in Red Rice Road). Of 35 households officially consulted by the Borough authorities, 25 voted in favour and 2 against the proposal to change the name of Red Rice Road so that the whole stretch from St.John's Cross to the junction with Cattle Lane should be known as Duck Street.

That's some majority. Likewise by a majority vote in the Council it was resolved, following the statutory procedures with meticulous care, to make the formal request to the Borough Council. And that's democracy. It is now fervently hoped that all that remains is to ensure that any new street-name signs are correctly spelt, made of the right stuff and put in the right place without the necessity of a United Nations resolution.

MINUTES & NEXT MEETING

If I tried to tell you about everything else that was discussed or decided, important though some of them are, I would miss the publication deadline; but it's all rather po-facedly recounted in the Minutes, which you will find, in due course, in the usual places.

N.B. These notes do not constitute an official publication of the Parish Council. You can't blame the Council for its content, hence the change of title. The Minutes constitute the only official record of the Parish Council's proceedings. They are made available in draft form for information only; they are rarely altered, but only become the official record of proceedings when approved as a true record by resolution at a subsequent meeting. This column doesn't pretend to be authoritative, let alone authorised (Councillors don't get to see it before you do), but aims, like Lord Reith's BBC, to inform and, perhaps, to entertain.

The next meeting is scheduled for 4th March at 6.30 p.m.

Adrian Stokes, Clerk, Abbots Ann Parish Council