

ABBOTT'S ANN PARISH COUNCIL

Newsletter: May 2009

Down the Thatch

It used to be said that a sign of old age is when the policemen look young; but what your scribe found much more alarming was the time, back in the last century, when he visited the Tower of London and found that the Beefeaters were looking young. Again, it used to be said that there would only be old codgers left to carry on the old craft skills, like stone-masonry, bell-founding or thatching. But when some thatch in Little Ann needed expert attention, who should turn up but a pair of youths in hoodies, who shinned up and down ladders like squirrels in a nut-tree and did a job of which their grandfathers would have been proud. And if you look around you will see similarly youthful wheelwrights, blacksmiths, bowyers and maybe even candle-stick makers.

Mind you, the old codgers are still around, but far from being determined to stick to the old ways are enthusiastic about research and development. Unfortunately thatchers young and old are building up a substantial head of steam about interference from the Powers that Be, as personified particularly by Conservation Officers and English Heritage, who seem determined to stop the clock. The Society of Master Thatchers has warned that you could face a fine of £20,000 or 6 months in gaol if discovered replacing thatch with anything other than "traditional material." Six years ago this threat was issued to an owner in Wherwell who had a cottage re-thatched and saw no reason to seek planning permission. In Hampshire, if you go not very far back in history, this would mean "long straw", where you can see the stems of the straw on the surface, held down at the eaves by a criss-cross pattern of split hazel "spars". This looks fine, but you are lucky if it lasts much more than a dozen years and the Wherwell owner was let off the threatened prosecution on condition that the thatch was replaced with long straw after 14 years. This could easily cost £20,000 and only last another dozen years, while if the new thatch was "wheat reed" it should have lasted for some 40 years, while "water reed" should have almost double that life as long as the ridge is kept in good order.

To explain - water reed was developed in East Anglia where the material grows in abundance in the fens, and can be as tough as bamboo; the thatch is laid so that you can only see the ends of the reeds except at the ridge, where, because the reed doesn't bend, you have to use straw or sedge. Wheat reed uses straw, but it's laid like water reed with just the ends showing; this system, sometimes called Devon reed, has been used there for ages. You have to look quite closely to tell the difference, but have a look around our village; can anyone spot long straw thatch except on ridges and porches? So should those who dwell under what the Clerk's children used to call a "fur roof" be very afraid? Probably not, because it is getting more and more difficult to obtain supplies of straw that hasn't been mashed up in the jaws of a combine harvester, and this is further complicated by convoluted European regulations about seed. Although supplies from East Anglia are dwindling, partly because harvesting is a cold, wet and windy operation, and partly because of nitrates leaching into the fens and making the reed too bendy and squishy, there is plenty of reed available, even if it has to come from Turkey or the Camargue. So maybe soon it will be the only available material. Meanwhile, because its production emits no CO2 and a fur roof provides excellent insulation, ecology and common sense may yet put the red-tape merchants out of business.

Equality

It would be nice if the Powers that Be would let us get on with doing the right thing without setting up laws, and expensive institutions called Commissions, to threaten us with untold miseries if we don't. We have just been reminded by the Equality and Human Rights Commission that we already have a *duty* to do things about the three "strands" of race, disability and gender, but also have a *responsibility* to demonstrate what we are doing about them. Now, we are told, these three

duties will be harmonised into one new duty, covering all seven equality strands: age, disability, gender, gender identity, race, religion or belief, and sexual orientation. If you try to unravel this knitting, it surely looks as if strands 3, 4 and 7 are more or less about the same thing. Does this indicate a psychological hang-up somewhere in Whitehall? Are not those affected by strands 4 and 7 a tiny minority compare with the rest? Anyway, legal powers and inspectorates are emphasised in sombre tones. Then in an attempt to adopt a lighter note, we are encouraged to follow the example of Cardiff, who won the 2008 Wales Diversity Awards Public Sector Category for their project which includes Muslim women's swimming, Dads and Lads sessions, culturally-sensitive gym inductions and Bollywood dancing. And Tayside Police are commended for discovering that contact with their Communication Centre was difficult for deaf or hard-of-hearing people. What a surprise! Their solution was to offer a text-messaging service; their next research project will have to be finding out how many deaf people, who tend to be of a certain age, have the faintest idea of how to send a text-message; then they will find that this scheme gets in a tangle with the age-discrimination strand.

Traffic Calming

The Daily Mail has launched a search to find England's biggest pot-hole, inviting photos from readers. Anyone got a picture of Lake Windermere? Meanwhile the Parish Council of picturesque Navestock in Essex have voted not to report any potholes because they are just as effective as sleeping policemen in slowing down traffic. They haven't thought how discriminatory this policy is against cyclists, bikers, horse-riders and motorists, who will need a new "strand" of their own.

PARISH COUNCIL MEETING, 7TH MAY

Representatives

This was the AGM of the Council, so the first business was the election of the Chairman and Vice-chairman which resulted in Cllr Bernard Griffiths, who has been a Councillor for 30 years, being elected Chairman for the 20th time running. Is this a record? It's certainly a much-appreciated proof of dedication to the interests and well-being of our happy and glorious village.

Cllr Graham Whyte is Vice-chairman again, and the Council was happy for all the volunteers who represent the various Parish organisations to keep up the good work. The Council also passed a Vote of Thanks to our retiring County Councillor, Michael Woodhall, who, despite being Chairman of the County Council always had time to take a practical and helpful interest in our Parish.

The Council expressed appreciation of the work of our Borough Councillors, Arthur Peters and Graham Stallard who are tireless in their defence of our interests. Cllr Peters is now on the Planning Control Committee, and both are members of the band of watch-dogs called the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, of which Cllr Stallard is Vice-chairman.

Money

The AGM involves a long list of formalities required by legislation going back to Gladstone, most of which are boring but effective in ensuring that Parish Councillors and Clerks could not possibly get away with the monumental parliamentary fiddles hitting the current headlines. The stern Gladstone must be turning in his grave.

Meanwhile the Clerk was able to report, with some relief, that the Auditor could confirm that he had got his sums right, so the summarised accounts could be sent on to Plymouth to be rubber-stamped by Her Majesty's Audit Commission for a fee which never fails to shock.

The Council voted to continue to support the Parochial Church Council in two of its vital functions, namely the publication of the Parish Magazine and the maintenance of the Church Clock

The Council was also cheered to hear that changing their insurers has achieved a saving of £475 of your money; this saving should continue, as the policy includes a no-claim bonus.

Planning

20 Cattle Lane. The right to be consulted on Planning Applications is jealously guarded by Parish Councils and their opinions are much less likely to receive the Ken Livingstone treatment. Here the applicant's architect went literally back to the drawing board and produced a new design, which is certainly closer to the style that our Councillors consider appropriate and in conformity with the Village Design Statement. However, they all agreed that the proposed house was still too tall and dominant for its setting on the corner of Red Post Lane and Cattle Lane, which can be regarded as one of the entrances to the main village. It is felt strongly, especially when a substantial new house is planned, the architect must get it right. Real sore thumbs heal, but buildings can last for hundreds of years.

Manor Close Playing Field. The County Council wanted to show its appreciation of the work of Parish Councils by giving them a Reception in Winchester in mid-April. This could have been little more than a chance for the Vice-Chairman and Clerk to enjoy a drink and nibbles in the august setting of the Great Hall at the Castle while trying to listen to long speeches in a venue which defeats all the expertise of modern acoustic engineers. I doubt if the jury trying Sir Walter Raleigh there could hear a thing, so they condemned him to death anyway. But our Cllr Whyte took the opportunity to get close enough to Cllr Ken Thornber, the Leader of HCC, to bend his ear about the future of the field; the Clerk had already primed Cllr Thornber by email, so he knew about our interest, and the result was a sympathetic hearing. But we mustn't start jumping about just yet, because the building of the new school has only just started, and even when it opens, its new playing field may not be immediately ready for use.

Other Business.

Travellers. Travellers have been reported as camping illegally within the Parish. Anything we say about them may be taken as racist and used in evidence, but whatever Parish Councils may think, they have no powers to take action, which is for the Police and the Borough.

Fencing. The Council has been aware for some time that the fence on the Duck Street side of the War Memorial Hall grounds is past its sell-by date, and is working on some rather frightening estimates for its replacement. Bearing in mind that this area is a dedicated recreation ground for children we tried to find out whether there are any specific regulations about the right height for fences. There are none, but it seems, from advice from Health and Safety experts, that a height of 1100 mm is fine, that bars should be vertical to eliminate the temptation to climb, but they should be close enough together to prevent children from getting their heads stuck. Which is just what we thought all along.

Abbotts Ann Players. The Players are about to lose their storage-space for their collection of props and costumes, and are anxiously seeking somewhere dry and secure and not too far away.

Village Shop. Last but by no means least, the Council voted by acclaim to congratulate the Village Shop on being judged Best Village Shop in Hampshire. Well, we all know it's the best Village Shop in the World, but it's nice for the great efforts of the managers, volunteers and committee to be recognised as Top of the Shops.

Minutes and Meetings

Full Minutes are available in the Village Shop and on the Website.

Because of the Election for MEPs and County Councillors, the next Meeting will be on 4th June at 6.30 p.m. in the Pavilion.

Adrian Stokes, Clerk