

## **ANNUAL MEETING OF THE PARISH OF BOXLEY**

### **Boxley Parish Council Chairman's Report for the year 2013/14**

I opened last year's report by saying that it had not been an easy twelve months. Little has changed; but without the excitement of a Royal Visit, we have been less in the public eye. The old adage of the swan serenely cruising over the water while paddling like ... (insert here your word of choice) comes to mind as the workload never seems to lessen. But what have we been doing?

The council's Environment Committee, chaired by Wendy Hinder, successfully opposed a number of applications in the interest of local residents and in other cases our suggestions for mitigating adjustments were taken into account by MBC. However the new National Planning Development Framework, with its underlying presumption in favour of development, augurs badly for the future. But be assured, your parish council, which is strictly non-political, will continue to argue loudly and strongly whenever there is just cause.

This leads naturally into MBC's draft borough-wide Local Plan, which has justifiably received much criticism in the media and from KCC. We are all agreed that it sets too high a figure for the borough's population in 2030, demands an unsustainable housing provision given the existing infrastructure deficiencies and looks to development in open country when brown-field sites still exist in the urban area. Your parish council was thoroughly involved in MBC's long-running public consultation exercise and, with members sitting on the Maidstone area committee of the Kent Association of Local Councils (KALC), the parish council was party to that body's vociferous and well-argued opposition. While the number of proposed development sites in the parish is not great, the knock-on effect on already congested thoroughfares such as New Cut Road, and on local schools and health and social services would be great. We shall continue to fight our corner.

At the same time, much preparatory work has gone into a possible Neighbourhood Plan for the parish, as well as day-to-day issues such as maintenance of highway verges, ensuring that litter and dog-waste bins are emptied and salt-bins re-filled (not that the latter was an onerous chore this past winter). We are now encouraging residents to report pot-holes, failed street-lamps and fallen trees direct to KCC Highways on their excellent interactive map, but still become involved.

On the financial side, I do not have to repeat last year's doom and gloom. By careful management of our resources, your council ended the financial year within budget and has set a zero-increase in the Parish precept for 2014/15. At a time when everyone's purse, including the council's, is under pressure, I know that this will be welcome news.

In the course of the year, we gave much-appreciated financial support to the Vinters Valley Nature Reserve, the Walderslade Woodlands Group and the newly-formed Friends of Boxley Warren, all of whom are doing excellent work in maintaining much-loved areas of the natural heritage on our doorsteps. We also contributed to the cost of a new local walks leaflet produced by Kent Wildlife Trust and their providing a live video link to a kestrels' nest ('kestralcam' - not yet in use because the kestrels settled in before the camera). We also opened a Community Chest to fund or part-fund suitable initiatives by local groups and organisations. Regrettably, despite publicity, the response has to date been poor.

The Estates Committee, chaired by Vic Davies, had (no relation of mine, he would be the first to add) had two items that figured prominently in last year's report, namely the creation of the Weaving Diamond Jubilee Orchard and the purchase of land for much-needed allotments.

Anyone who has visited the Orchard recently would have been delighted by the spectacular amount of apple blossom. It augers well for a bumper crop in the autumn. In the meantime, this little piece of newly-created old Weaving, unexpectedly found just round the corner from Tesco, gives much enjoyment to Grove Green residents.

The Dove Hill allotments (taking their name from the adjoining MBC-owned woodland in Sandy Lane) are also proving a great success. But this only tremendous effort on the part of Bob Hinder, who chaired the three-person working group, the Clerk and John Brooks, a local resident who has received the first KALC Community Service award in the parish. This time last year all we had was a stretch of steep hill-top sheep pasture accessed through a field gate and a vision stretching 80 years into the future. Now we have a good access road, a rabbit and vandal-proof fence, piped-water and a compostable toilet. This was all made possible by the Royal Engineers and the Queen's Own Gurkha Engineers in Invicta barracks who constructed the high-quality access road in partnership us. It is impossible to say just how grateful we are to them, and to the St Paul's Scout Group who allowed their nearby compound to be used for storage purposes.

The fortunes of Beechen Hall continue to improve as the result of successful marketing by our Assistant Clerk, Melanie Fooks, although the pattern of bookings has noticeably changed in the face of the adverse financial climate. Well done, Mel, ably helped by the Caretaker, Maggie Smith, and her assistants. It is a popular venue for all sorts of activities.

In conclusion, I wish to welcome aboard our (fairly) new councillor, Dennis Hollands (but there is now another vacancy in the South Ward) and to thank my Vice-chairman, Pat Brooks, committee Chairmen and Vice-chairmen and my other fellow councillors for the tremendous help and support I have received throughout this busy year. Paul Dengate, with his IT expertise always readily given, deserves a special mention here. But it is to Pauline and her staff in the office that I reserve my special thanks: they do so much working for the better Boxley in which we all wish to live.

Ivor Davies  
12 May 2014