

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT TO AGM ON 9TH APRIL 2008

There has always been a high level of activity to report each year at AGMs ever since our Association was founded in 1996, and the last 12 months are certainly no exception.

It has also been a frustrating 12 months with delays and confusion in the planning system affecting local planning, minerals, waste and development generally and there has been a most unwelcome reversal of progress with the proposed South Downs National Park.

One specific frustration has been our continued inability to obtain an explanation as to how the telecom mast on the A283 opposite Link Farm, which sits almost directly above the site of a Roman Bathhouse, could have been put there without archeological supervision at the planning stage and during initial and subsequent heavy mechanical digging. We often find it particularly difficult to get answers when more than one authority or department is involved.

As always, local planning matters have been at the heart of our activity. We have again monitored literally hundreds of applications to develop within a large area in and around Wiggonholt and then investigated and actioned those we considered harmful or inappropriate.

Over the past 12 months some of the developments we have opposed or continued to oppose were at Longlands, Church House Garden, Swan Corner, Greatham Manor, Rock Common, Link Farm, Bog Common and at the Nutbourne Pumping Station.

We strongly supported demands for post office facilities and a chemist's shop in Lower Street, Pulborough. We also backed CPRE in its campaign against a wind turbine at Glyndebourne as a matter of principle.

Wind turbines may be a useful form of renewable energy but their proliferation across the South Downs could seriously affect the unique character of the area. Cllr Louise Goldsmith, who is responsible for Environment and Development at West Sussex County Council, declared herself not in favour of wind turbines when she spoke at our Public Forum on Climate Change. Instead, she urged far greater use of solar energy which was readily available along the south coast.

Whilst final adoption of what is now called "Minerals and Waste Local Development Framework" is still a little way off, there has been a welcome initiative by our MP, Nick Herbert, in the form of a Waste Summit, which was attended by committee member, Kate Glazier. Kate reported favourably on the proceedings and Mr Herbert's chairmanship. The main issue seems to be how to put an end to landfill, given that the County had to take mandatory quantities of waste from London and, unlike Hampshire, had no up-to-date incineration as an alternative. Obviously the aim had to be to reduce the amount of waste created by households and to increase recycling to a point where little residue of waste material needed disposal. As an example, one-third of food produced is currently wasted and householder could treat their share, including bones, by a device called "Green Joanna", currently available from the County Council at a special price of £20.

The lack of an adequate, coordinated public transport system that would effectively reduce the use of private cars is an issue we will be taking up during the remainder of 2008. We believe there are a number of ways in which local public transport can be significantly improved without major extra expense. We will publicize our ideas and intend to follow up with a public forum at which the transportation needs of local communities will be debated with representatives of transport providers and local authorities.

One of the highlights of the year under review has been our new relationship with the Wey and Arun Canal Trust. Some of us have long admired the effort and enthusiasm with which volunteers are restoring the disused canal, section by section, with the ultimate aim of a navigable connection between the two rivers. Already, some 2 ½ miles can be used for pleasure trips with boats owned by the Trust's trading arm. These trips are greatly in demand and are a valuable source of income for the Trust.

Not surprisingly therefore, the management was looking to increase passenger capacity and thought of lengthening and restoring their largest boat, the Zachariah Keppel, to a size that would accommodate coach loads. It was then that the idea arose, of a sponsorship by the Wiggonholt Association, which could be of benefit to both organisations.

Consultation with our membership about the proposal began in June last year when a meeting failed to reach any conclusion. Partly due to your chairman's lack of experience with the projection equipment, a DVD film of the canal restoration work could not be shown and it was also felt that members had been insufficiently briefed.

A subsequent postal ballot showed overwhelming support for the sponsorship proposal which would be privately funded and result in an informal link with the Trust. Having obtained the mandate to go ahead, your committee felt that, if at all possible, the Zachariah Keppel should be converted from diesel into an electrically propelled boat as part of the restoration.

When this proved impractical, we were given the opportunity to sponsor a new electric boat with a capacity of around 55 passengers and facilities for the disabled if technically possible. The use of solar panels to supplement energy will also be considered. In other words it will be a silent, non-polluting, "green" boat. It will be named "Wiggonholt" and display our literature. Once a year, there will be a free outing for our members and we will, of course, be invited to the launch which is scheduled to take place at the end of the year.

Since our last unsuccessful application for charitable status, the protection and enhancement of the environment has become more recognized as a charitable activity through the Charities Act of 2006. Some of our work certainly appears to meet the criteria for eligibility and we are seriously considering re-applying. This may need changes to our present constitution. There will be a separate meeting when the matter has progressed

Our free screening of the Al Gore film "An Inconvenient Truth" took place at Pulborough Village Hall in April. It was well attended, but we would like to have seen more young people there. We had intended to follow up the film as early as autumn with a public forum on climate change, but found the cost of well-known speakers on the subject prohibitive. This delayed the event until January this year, when the final composition of the panel of volunteers proved to be very suitable for a lively and informative local debate, with most of the audience convinced of the need for human intervention to reverse the effects of global warming. About 130 attended, again with relatively few younger people amongst them.

There were three concerts during the year – one more than usual. The first, in November, was a recital by Dame Felicity Lott accompanied at the piano by Graham Johnson – perhaps the most famous artists ever to grace the stage of the Leconfield Hall.

The second concert took place there in January, with the husband and wife team of Anthony Goldstone and Caroline Clemmow performing a delightful programme of piano music, played two hands and four hands.

The third and last concert on March 15 was entitled "Unbridled Passion" and proved to be a most exiting rendering of the Franck and Brahms Piano Quintets by the Ovid Ensemble in absolute top form.

These sponsored concerts may be somewhat divorced from our environmental aspirations, but they have become a most pleasurable and effective way of raising funds and have brought us a number of friends and supporters, including two offers of sponsorship.

Last year saw the launch of our new 6-page website with links to various contacts and to the latest newsletter. Page 5 is up-dated regularly with current issues and events. There is also a reciprocal link with the Wey and Arun Canal website. Two newsletters were also published during the period.

Once again, I must stress the need for new and younger blood on our committee. Several of us have served since our formation nearly 12 years ago and we were not young then. We are looking for people who feel strongly about the protection of our natural heritage and who can help with local government and planning matters, with fundraising, publishing, publicity and public relations and with the organisation of events generally.

The election of the committee will be dealt with under Item 6, but I would just add a personal "thank you" to Kate who, after many years as a hard-working colleague, is not seeking re-election. I am also grateful to the other committee members for their contributions and their support to me personally. And finally I must again single out our Association Secretary, Janet; whose experience and industry enables us to campaign using informed argument and an in-depth knowledge of the planning system.

THANK YOU