

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

Resilience

In writing this report for the Village Meeting which has to be held in May of each year, I think we can all be justified in saying "We have never seen a year like it!" – and it's not all been bad. We started off the 12 months from last May with a celebration of the 75 anniversary of VE Day with residents picnicking in their front gardens in place of a street party. There were initiatives to thank the NHS for its amazing work in unheard of circumstances and the village was decorated with rainbows cheering up the place in times when people most needed a bit of cheer. Most village groups and meetings have been on hold for a year except for the invaluable use of Zoom but a number of projects have been completed including the replacement of all of the old street lights with new LEDs, the completion of the new North Door of the church and the replacement of the two clock faces, the renewal of the stone column and maintenance of the church wall underneath it, the acceptance and planting of 18 flowering cherry trees as a gift from Japan. Neighbours have helped neighbours through the pandemic and Spratton looks as if it might come through this historic year in a state that is relatively strong and more resilient in challenging circumstances.

Zoom

Have we seen the last of Zoom meetings or have organisations fallen in love with them? Well in the case of Parish Councils the question has been decided for us. In a recent court case brought by Northants Association of Local Councils, a decision was made that parish councils must hold physical meetings from 7th May 2021. A lot can be said about the pros and cons of virtual meetings but the Zoom meeting, which will no doubt go down in history, is the one held in December 2020 by the Handforth parish council in Cheshire which went viral and recently led to the main character in the drama, Jackie Weaver, to be a national celebrity. For those who would like to see the dark side of council meetings and the, arguably, humorous side, the video extracts are worth looking up. It is a lesson in how not run a meeting and something we are sure could never happen in our peaceful village! Perhaps one of the more serious outcomes of the Handforth event, was that it brought to the attention of the general public, the existence and importance of the role of parish councillors as the first tier of government and the one closest to the needs of the residents. The equivalent person to Jackie Weaver in Northamptonshire is Danny Moody who is Chief Executive of Northants County Association of Local Councils. He says that if he was called in to advise/mediate as she was, that he would have dealt with the situation very differently.

The Buses

Yes – I seem to have to report on this topic every year! We have been in danger of losing our bus service from Northampton to Market Harborough since July 2018 but due to the willingness of most of the parishes on the route, I am pleased to be able to report that we have succeeded for yet another year in persuading enough parishes and the former) NCC, to finance the service until 1st April 2022. One major change is that the route will now go via Brixworth which will open up Brixworth to anyone who wants to access the library, Saxon Spires Surgery, the parade of shops and also a bus route from Northampton to Leicester via Market Harborough (the X7 bus).

The government has promised to finance a rural bus service nationally and put aside three billion pounds for it. We will be pressing our local councillors and MPs to make sure that we don't have to go through another year of raising our own finances to keep a bus service.

New Gates

If you enjoy a quiet walk around our Pocket Park in Brixworth Road you will have found the gates more difficult to close. We have a blacksmith coming at the end of May to fix this and we hope it might keep the gates usable for another 116 years which is the amount of time they have been there.

The blacksmith will also be doing major works to widen the gates in East View Cemetery as funeral directors have complained that their hearses have difficulty in driving into the cemetery. While this work is being done the Kissing gate will be removed so that it is a simple gate which opens inwards and will be easier for access.

Election 6th May 2021

This was the largest election outside of the general election and 143 local councils were up for election, including our local election for the new Unitary Authorities formed following the failure of the former Northants County Council to manage the finances. These had been postponed for 2 years because in 2019 they were cancelled to avoid wasting election costs. There was then only one year before the formal elections and then came the postponement to 2021 due to Covid. Our local Moulton Ward of which Spratton is a part, prior to the Unitary changes, consisted of 5 parishes but now is an increased number. After the Unitary West Northants Council was formed we were made a part of a larger Ward consisting of 31 parishes which were the previous Wards of NCC. This means that we now have three Councillors, rather than one, to be elected every 4 years representing us for Moulton Ward. As the WNC Constitution says *"The overriding duty of Councillors is to the whole community of West Northamptonshire, but they have a special duty to their constituents, including those who did not vote for them."*

The last year of ordinary elections was 2015, the next should have been 2020 and then 2025 etc. The exception to the rule is the district of Daventry where elections have been held "in thirds", i.e. each year a third of the parish councils have elections and then there is one year off. This year we did not have a parish council election because of this and the next opportunity will be in 2025.

For more information on the elections and results see:

<https://futurenorthantswest.org/elections-2/>

<https://westnorthants.moderngov.co.uk/mgElectionAreaResults.aspx?XXR=0&ID=68&RPID=81190>

Some Changes

We have quite a few changes in the village, not to mention the seismic changes in work, caring and social life brought about by Covid. For example we have lost a long established butcher, gained a post office and welcomed many newcomers to the village. We have established a dialogue with Broomhill to deal with issues raised by the village and continue to employ a PCSO shared with 5 other parishes, not to mention the success in keeping the buses running in very difficult times. The Gallops Field has been

closed to walkers, save for the Teeton footpath and we continue to press for a footpath to Brampton Valley Way.

One effect of the pandemic and people in lockdown, has been the exceptional need for pet dogs and cats. This has led to a national epidemic of dog thefts in particular and Spratton has not escaped the devastating effects this has had on owners. The local Facebook network, Spratton Let Us Know can be very useful in alerting residents to these kinds of community issues, both good and bad.

Cherry Trees

The project is funded by Japanese businesses and individuals and managed by the Sakura Cherry Tree Project team. It is a legacy of the Japan-UK Season of Culture 2019-2020 which aims to showcase Japan's attractions in the UK. We have received 15 Beni Yutaki trees so far with 3 Somei Yoshino coming in November.

There will no doubt be major changes both locally and nationally in the coming year, not least, those brought about by the increasingly dramatic data on climate change. With the world getting together for the COP26 Climate Change in Glasgow, it will be surprising if that doesn't result in major changes in life style.

Conservation Area

The former Daventry District Council (now West Northants Council) are obliged to try to have parts of villages of heritage value, covered as a Conservation Area. Everyone should be aware of the consultation process they have conducted to assess whether to make the older part of the village a conservation area. The Council is currently writing up a report on the consultation and say that they are still working out the process for the application due to the change in councils. Only then will they be able to provide a timetable as to when a decision might be reached.

The Future

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One result of these changes may well be that local communities will have more responsibility for their areas and activities, although, looking at the government's new proposals for a change in the planning laws, it looks as if it might be reducing the influence of local people in property development.