

Chair's Report for Annual Parish Meeting – 19th May 2021

Because of Covid, we were not allowed to hold an Annual Parish Meeting in 2020, so I will try today to include issues of interest to us over the last two years instead of the normal year.

PERSONNEL

At Christmas time the Parish Council lost an old friend in Owen Clarke, who died of cancer. He was on the Parish Council for about eight years, the last four of which he was Chairman, and he handed the chair over to me five years ago, in May 2016. Owen joined the parish council at a time when it was difficult to find volunteers, and stayed on in the chair longer than he would have wanted out of a sense of duty to his community, Tibenham. He will be remembered fondly as an effective and selfless public servant as well as a fun and entertaining friend.

Two years ago, we said goodbye to our District Councillor, Charles Easton. In a change of ward organisation which saw us joined with Bressingham and Burston, we then said hello to our new District Councillor, James Easter. Incidentally, James is now Vice Chair of South Norfolk District Councillor – congratulations to him.

We recently took part in elections for the county council. We have been affected by this, in that we are no longer served by Bev Spratt, but by Councillor Barry Duffin, who has experience as District Councillor for Forncett since 2015

Over the past two years we have lost the services of two councillors, Alan Harris and, more recently, Auriel Mephram.

I would like to pay tribute to these people, and in fact to anyone who voluntarily gives up time to assist the parish council in our work. It's a cliché, I know, but it's a thankless task and you'd have to be crazy to do it.

On the upside, we have also welcomed new councillors since the last APM in 2019 – Caroline Knight, Darren Gipson and Leah Smith (attending her first face to face meeting despite being on the council since September 2020).

Our clerk for the past almost five years, Marianne Purdy, left us recently, so this evening we are joined by our new parish clerk. I would like you to meet Alison Ibbitt, all the way from Banham. Alison is new to the role of parish clerk, so I would like everyone to welcome her, and to help her to settle into this post.

FLOODING

For many years, Tibenham has suffered from flooding during periods of heavy or persistent rain. This is partly explained by our ancient byways – including what is now The Street – being eroded by traffic so that they are lower than the surrounding fields. However, it is obvious that the problems have become markedly more serious in recent years, and culminated in severe flooding in December 2020.

The parish council have been working with Norfolk County Council for several years to mitigate the effects of this flooding. Work has recently been carried out by NCC contractors, and we also would like to recognise the efforts of some of our landowners and property owners to improve drainage in the affected areas.

During recent repair work it was noted how badly the whole of our drainage system has become, due to age, neglect and carelessness (like BT planting posts through ceramic drainage pipes). It is quite possible, indeed likely, that we will need a whole new system to serve the Street and the other roads around the village centre. The present setup is no longer fit for purpose. Ultimately a new drainage system will be of benefit to all of us, and hopefully will provide far better protection for ourselves and our properties in the future. However, it will come at a cost and it will be inconvenient, and no doubt some people will complain.

David has a background in civil engineering, and he is the person to give details. However, I would suggest that we leave that for now – David and I are meeting the Highways Engineer tomorrow and will be able to give a more informed update then.

Perhaps just one more word on drainage, which I know David has already written about in our regular newsletter: who is responsible for maintaining the ditches and culverts? The quick answer is: the owner or owners of property or land adjacent to the ditches or culverts. When you buy a property, you inherit responsibility.

PLANNING

In recent newsletters we have touched on the subject of planning so I don't want to go over old ground again. Various aspects of planning are in the process of change, and our role is likely to change.

At present, the planning application at the Greyhound has caught most of our attention. The current situation is that the application will now go to committee at the request of our District Councillor. A decision by a committee of elected district councillors is likely to take full account of residents' comments, including matters relating to community sustainability etc. When it goes to committee the parish council will have five minutes to speak, should we wish, and I believe one resident can also have up to five minutes. The date of the committee meeting has not yet been announced.

FINANCES

We have been carefully stewarding our use of your money. As a result, we have managed to resist increasing the parish council portion of your council tax for the last two years, and will continue to do so as long as we can.

The news about the state of our drainage system, however, might mean that we have to be cautious about expenditure on non-essential items, at least until we hear more from the County Council about work on the drainage.

However, we have asked via a questionnaire in the last newsletter how you would like us to spend your money, and if there are any projects or improvements we should be doing. We would still like to hear from you about this.

FOOTPATHS

The boardwalk on Slough Lane was installed with financial help from the then District and County Councillors and expertise from Norfolk Ramblers. The extreme weather in December showed that we had underestimated the amount of engineering required to keep the structure secure. We recently put together a small working party to make the boardwalk safer and easier to use. Once that stretch has dried out properly we will be asking for more volunteers to complete the job, which will probably be over a period of three or four days.

Later in the year we will look at all the main footpaths to see if any maintenance is required, and will ask for volunteers to help out.