

HERTFORD HEATH PARISH COUNCIL

Chairman's Report for the Year 2002/2003

It seems as though this has been a busy year, but then most years involve much diverse activity. The impression is probably magnified because it has been my first as Chairman.

A very significant event was the introduction by central government of the requirement for parish councils to adopt a code of practice, which in turn required elected members to complete declaration forms. This was, not surprisingly, considered by many to be an unnecessarily heavy-handed piece of bureaucracy. Parish councillors are all volunteers, giving freely of their time and skill for the benefit of the local community. They receive no financial reward and there are absolutely no "perks". The total precept for most parishes – including ours - is so small that there is no real opportunity for fraud, even if there were an evil-minded councillor. In any case, the established systems, including the custom of declaring an interest in any discussion where it is appropriate, have for generations worked smoothly. I feel that interfering politicians, who seem to behave with little honour among themselves, have given up trusting anyone to do anything without strict supervision by bureaucratic officials.

I am pleased to say that, after considerable public outcry, the requirements of the members' register have been made significantly less onerous than originally proposed. Nevertheless, I can understand why some councillors have decided that this requirement is "the last straw" and have decided not to stand for re-election. I should like to thank them for their devoted service over the years, and to express the hope that they will feel able to continue to serve their community without holding office as councillors: they, like all members of the parish, will of course always be welcome at meetings of the Council.

I should also like to thank all those who have decided to seek re-election, or have volunteered to stand for the Council, despite the conditions. I am convinced that it is most important to have an active Parish Council, working as far as it can to further the interests of everyone who lives in the village. Rural communities are increasingly ignored by central government, which is more interested in the numerically superior urban voters. We must therefore be more and more assertive in making our point of view heard. On the basis of there being safety in numbers, and that problems shared are problems halved, I very much welcome the proposal by Braughing Parish Council to establish a group to be known as PREP, "Parishes for Rural Environment Protection", which is planned to act collectively as a lobbying agency representing local parishes with similar interests, and should also provide a forum for mutual support.

While on the question of support, the Council must try to elicit more interest and support from residents in the village. I believe most people agree with what we do on their behalf and want the Council to continue but not enough express any opinions or make any suggestions. If we are to be a truly representative council, we need input from those we are supposed to represent. Not even enough candidates came forward for there be an election on 1st May. We ought to have nine members, but it looks as though we shall have

only six, being the nominees appointed without an election. That means we can co-opt up to three more members during the coming year, and I hope we shall be able to find people who, although reticent about the nomination process, will be willing to be co-opted.

But enough of politics, except to record a big vote of thanks to our representative County and District Councillors, Nigel Copping and William Ashley, who have been highly supportive and helpful all through the year. Although they do have party affiliation, they like us are just good local people working for the local community.

Like most parish councils, ours is a group of dedicated volunteer members, working on practical issues without the complication of any party involvement. Our practical achievements in the past year have been considerable.

As usual, by far our greatest commitment has been to the Recreation Ground. Under the efficient and competent management of Andrew Hambling and his committee, and despite the problems of poor communication from the football teams and the incessant activities of the vandals, both the football pitch and the children's play area have been continuously available for use by many villagers and visitors. Several repairs have been carried out to equipment in the play area but the greatest stride forward has been in preparing some provision for teenagers, a group whose interests have been sadly neglected in the past. With the help of a grant, a sheltered meeting point has been ordered and will be installed very soon. Parish funds have been used to provide a practise goal and some chain link fencing to protect neighbours' gardens from flying balls. We hope to provide a basketball ring during the summer to add an activity more popular with the girls.

Planning applications have come through as frequently as ever and have been carefully considered by the sub-committee. Although our comments are only considered among many others, we believe we have had some influence in helping to keep our environment attractive to live in. For example: the Council was pleased that the redevelopment of Lavender Cottage in Downfield Road was limited to two stories, making a very attractive house for the site; it was also pleased that the dormer roof extension to 59 London Road was refused permission; much effort was put in to commenting on the proposed developments at Elbow Lane Farm, some of which were acceptable and some totally abhorrent... and we eagerly await the decision of the planning authority.

The proposed one way system for Priors Wood Road still eludes us. Despite assurances that the project was in hand, and scheduled within the 2002/3 budget, it seems that administrative bungles have delayed it further. The further reorganisation of the authority into Hertfordshire Highways seems to have caused more problems than it has solved, but we were pleased to be able to arrange this year for more effective cutting of the London Road verges than has been done for years.

The Parish Paths Partnership has again worked very well. This year's project was the improvement of the footpath from Hogsdell Lane to Rush Green. Three metal kissing gates have been installed, to replace old stiles and the local farmer, Colin Smith, has

kindly helped with re-fencing. The waymarking throughout the parish has also been improved, particularly through the grounds of Haileybury, with the replacement of some broken or missing signs and the installation of some additional new ones.

Bob Akers has continued his long stint as the reliable manager of the allotments, which is much appreciated. The demand for plots has not increased, despite an advertising campaign during the year. The Council's plan to move all the actively cultivated plots to the southern end of the site has almost been completed, and work has started on converting the northern end into a wildlife meadow. Formal permission has been requested from DEFRA for change of use of the northern half, so that a pond can be excavated. Meanwhile two mowings have been done, new boundary hedges have been planted and some of the blackthorn scrub has been removed, with the welcome help of volunteer work parties.

Many of the parish's trees, around the greens and in the conservation area, have matured to the point of needing either removal or specialist surgery. The Council has arranged surveys by two professional advisers, sought approval for its plans from the EHDC Tree Officer and has now let the contract for tree surgery work. Because of the early spring, and administrative delays, the sap is already rising and birds are nesting so some of the work will now only be done after the growing season. In the autumn replanting will take place, planting at least one tree for each one removed, and using indigenous species throughout. It is also proposed that a small community orchard, of traditional Hertfordshire fruit trees, should be planted in the autumn.

The Council decided, early in the year, to initiate a full village appraisal. A sub-committee was formed which set about planning the project. The experience of other parishes was sought, and suitable software has been acquired to process the preparation of questionnaires and the assessment of the responses when they are received. Progress has been less rapid than had been hoped, but should be more significant in the next few months.

The Queen's Jubilee year was marked by the Council commissioning a unique Hertford Heath commemorative medal, beautifully designed by Mary Bourne and specially cast by the Royal Mint. We also arranged, most successfully, to celebrate the extra bank holiday with a family party on the village green in the afternoon and a firework party in the evening. Sincere thanks are due to all those who worked so hard to organise everything. This sort of event brings out the best in all the residents and nurtures a sense of community. It would be wonderful if someone, or preferably a whole team, would come forward to organise a village fete again. I think we need a fete every year.

The final act of the Jubilee year was the planting of a "crown" on the village green. Kindly funded by Haileybury, this consists of a white rowan tree surrounded by eight golden privet bushes. The idea and design were by Mary Bourne and Sheila Pettman who worked hard to arrange it all on behalf of the Council. We were pleased that our vicar, Roger Bowen, was willing to bless the crown after morning service on Sunday March 9th.

Financially, the Council is in good condition. We shall end the year with approximately the same reserves as at the start of the year, despite a policy of spending on projects to benefit the village. This is because we have been successful in finding grants to support many of our activities. Furthermore, we have kept our precept as low as possible again and I hope this is appreciated by tax payers who are burdened by swingeing increases in the District and County elements of the Council Tax. We have a backlog of audits to be done for prior years, due to an oversight by the last clerk, but this should not present any difficulty.

Soon after I took over as Chairman, Fred Davies announced that he wished to resign as clerk. We embarked on the formal procedure of advertising the vacancy, and received seven applications. Only one fully matched our requirements in terms of qualifications and local knowledge, and I was delighted when Carolyn Morgan accepted the job, resigning as a Councillor in order to take it up. New Chairmen always need a helping hand from the clerk, and who better to help me than the last Chairman? It must be rare for the same person to have acted as Chairman, Council Member and then Clerk, all within the same year, but it certainly is a satisfactory arrangement from my point of view. The hand over from Fred to Carolyn has not been as smooth as we would have liked, but the process is now almost complete.

I think, all things considered, the Council has had a successful year, thanks to the dedication and diligence of all members – for which many thanks. We look forward to another good year in 2003/4.

Anthony Oliver
7 April 2003