

Annual Report of the Bearsted and Thurnham Society for 2005/6

By the time of the last Annual General Meeting in May 2005 the Society's paid-up membership had declined to just 114 and the Committee felt obliged to table a motion for the Society to be wound up in the absence of more volunteers to support its work. I asked David Cockerham to join me in responding to that challenge. We were elected to the Committee and given six months to prove that the Society could be re-invigorated. Today our Committee has grown from five members to eleven; the Society has over 1250 paid-up Members, and we have a splendid network of 39 extremely committed and hard-working Road Stewards helping us to sustain and expand that membership and ensure good communication with it. I am extremely grateful to all who have worked so hard, both in the initial membership drive and since, to help us achieve this transformation.

All Members now have personalised annual membership cards as proof of their paid-up status. Our new-style newsletter, Bearsted and Thurnham Report, goes three times a year to every household in which we have Members, keeping them in touch with what we are doing and with local issues of concern, and, through its 'Round the Oasts' feature page, reminding them also of aspects of life past and present that are a cause for pride in and affection for the very special area in which we live.

The Society's new e-mail address book has enabled it to keep a significant proportion of the membership informed of important issues which arise between newsletters. As the year ended, work was well under way to set up the Society's website. We are indebted to Carey Jack for this, and very much hope that the site when fully functioning will not only facilitate even better communication with existing and potential new Members, but provide facilities for online payment of subscriptions to reduce the burden on Road Stewards.

Our Special General Meeting in November 2005 introduced several small amendments to our Constitution including the dropping of the word 'Amenity' from our name to make it less cumbersome. This implied no change in our status as an amenity group. Indeed, we have been able since then to publish a revised and expanded version of the Society's booklet, *Amenities and Services for Older People in Bearsted and Thurnham*, and to publish a new one, *Amenities and Services for People with Disabilities in Bearsted and Thurnham*. We are indebted to Joan Brown for the compilation of both booklets, and grateful to Bearsted Parish Council for their contribution towards their printing costs. In response to an offer by the Chairman of Bearsted Parish Council to use Council funds to make Bearsted's pavements less difficult and dangerous for wheelchair, scooter and push-chair users, we have conducted a survey and provided the Council with details of many locations where work is needed.

As the year ended preparations were well advanced for a Society stand at the highly successful Friends of Holy Cross Open Day, and we were beginning to prepare too for a Society presence at the Bearsted Fair on Saturday 24 June.

Widespread concern among residents about the threat to the character of Bearsted and Thurnham posed by insensitive housing and commercial development will have been a major factor in the rapid rise in our membership. We were accused in some quarters of 'scaremongering' about this. Developments since then have demonstrated that our fears were only too well founded.

The work of the Society in this area falls broadly into two parts: one is to attempt to influence planning and development policies at national, regional, county, borough and parish level, and the other is to object or seek improvements to individual planning applications. The Society is now registered with Maidstone Borough Council as one of the organisations to be included in all policy consultation exercises, and to be advised of all new planning applications.

We have made detailed representations on the following draft policy documents:

- Planning Policy Statement 3 - Housing (PPS3)
- South East Regional Plan
- Local Development Framework Core Strategy
- Local Development Framework Statement of Community Involvement
- Local Development Framework Affordable Housing Policy
- Local Development Framework Open Spaces Policy

We also obtained policy statements in this field from all three major parties and published them in the Society newsletter in advance of the local elections.

PPS3 and its predecessor PPG3 define the gardens of existing houses as 'brownfield' sites - i.e. as previously developed land whose scope for re-development or 're-cycling' for high-density housing should be exhausted before development on 'greenfield' sites is allowed. Existing local planning policies which commit both our County and Borough councils to preventing development which destroys the special character of neighbourhoods should enable, indeed oblige, Maidstone Borough Council to refuse such applications, but Council officials have insisted that those local policies are overridden by PPG3/PPS3, leaving them powerless to act. Meanwhile, developers have a strong incentive to concentrate on this kind of character-destroying small development in gardens to avoid having to make the contributions towards government affordable housing and open space targets and improvements to local infrastructure which become compulsory only on larger developments.

Once Maidstone Borough Council meets the housing targets set for it in the South East Regional Plan being developed by the South East England Regional Assembly in Guildford, its ability to refuse such applications without risk of losing at appeal will, theoretically at least, be increased. Those housing targets, even unamended, would have involved an increase in the development Maidstone has already had to absorb. But rather than seek to minimise them, the previous Maidstone Borough Council ruling group demanded that they be increased by a further 11%. It also proposed to allow so-called 'high-quality business development' between Junctions 5 and 8 of the M20 in the foreground of the North Downs area of outstanding natural beauty.

The Society believed these to be appallingly misguided policies which would, by damaging the character and infrastructure of the area, weaken rather than strengthen its appeal to existing and new business while making virtually no contribution to the solution of the affordable housing and open space problems - indeed it would make them worse. At national level too the effect of encouraging more and more people to move into this corner of our country with the increasing congestion on the M20 and M25 and our limited water resources has to be a cause for concern.

In our representations we called, and will continue to call, for:

- all these policy contradictions to be addressed so as to remove the incentive to destroy characterful homes and gardens
- the gardens, as opposed to the building footprints, of existing houses to be classified as 'greenfield' not 'brownfield'
- housing and job-creation targets for Maidstone to reflect genuine existing local need, rather than the ambitions of Councillors to expand in competition with other areas
- Maidstone Borough Council to concentrate on improvements to the county town quality and character of Maidstone and its surroundings and especially to its transport infrastructure, including the Leeds/Langley bypass

- Maidstone Borough Council to reassert its right to refuse planning applications which threaten the special character of neighbourhoods

It became clear in the course of the year that the existence of Parish Plans and Village Design Statements could be a significant tool in the fight to protect the character of our parishes. We were pleased therefore when Thurnham Parish Council established a volunteer committee chaired by Richard Horton to begin work on its plan. The Society encouraged Bearsted Parish Council to follow suit, and undertook to play its part. We were pleased therefore when towards the end of the year Bearsted Parish Council announced the inaugural meeting for the Bearsted Parish Plan process, since chaired by Tony Extance on 23 May.

Admiring the achievements and recognising the importance to the community of the Bearsted Woodland Trust, the Society has aimed to maintain close and cooperative relations with its Trustees. We were grateful to be consulted closely over the drafting of the Trust's public consultation leaflet concerning the proposed small enabling development on Gore Cottage land. This is a difficult issue, and we realise that not all will be happy with what is proposed. Our own Committee was not unanimous in its thinking. But I believe the sincerity of the desire of those on both sides of the debate to ensure the greatest possible protection in the long term of our remaining green open spaces is mutually recognised.

In the course of the year the Society entered objections to or made observations or representations concerning developments at:

- Lower Snowfield
- St Faiths Care Home
- 2 The Landway
- 9 The Landway
- Bell Lane
- 2 Winifred Road
- The Ashford Road laundrette
- The barn on Caring Lane
- Tree felling at the White Horse
- The Limes
- Oak on the Green

We have been unable so far to prevent any of these developments, but some improvements to plans have been secured, notably at St Faiths, where a last-minute attempt by the developer to add a substantial garage and groundsman's facility structure close to the Yeoman Lane entrance to the site was refused.

The Society has also sought to ensure that Members are aware of two important local projects being pursued by Bearsted Parish Council: a new pavilion for The Green and a new all-weather 'multi-play' area for the Elizabeth Harvie Field; and that the Parish Council is aware of, and takes into account, the views of Members concerning them. The Parish Council have now agreed to hold a public consultation meeting about Elizabeth Harvie field on 11 July.

The Society supported the successful campaign by local residents against the application by the Black Horse Inn for greatly extended licensing hours, and opposed the similar application by the Kentish Yeoman, which was approved but with some welcome conditions.

I wish I could report also that we have made a start in implementing another objective: the organisation of competitions among school children to promote their knowledge of and

interest in the environment in which they live. Despite the expansion of our Committee we simply have not had the capacity to take this on. We still need more volunteers to share the burden - especially the burden of work in the planning and development field.

In the course of the year the Committee honoured me by appointing me as Chairman of the Society in succession to Heather Langley, and David Cockerham by appointing him as Secretary and Vice-Chairman in succession to Jean Spendley. Heather continues to shoulder major burdens as Treasurer. Jean's membership of the Committee sadly ends today, since she is not standing for re-election. The Society is extremely grateful to both of them for their dedication and hard work over many years.

I am similarly grateful to all the other members of the Committee: to Bob Gee for his thorough and painstaking liaison work for the Footpath Group, on whose year the Group's Chairman, Michael Perring, will report separately; to Dr Felicity Simpson for much invaluable expertise and hard work on planning and development, and advice in other fields too; to Joan Brown for her excellent work on our amenity booklets and pavement surveys, and to our four new members, Jennifer Collier, Jenny Taylor, Tracey Shelley and Caroline Vanhecke for much organisational help and exceptional support provided on many fronts.

I am especially grateful above all to our splendid Road Stewards, whose role is so vital to our ability to function, and never more vital and arduous than it will be in the coming weeks as they begin collecting renewed subscriptions and seeking to recruit new members to replace those whom they will inevitably discover have moved away. We need a steady flow of new Road Steward volunteers to spread the workload more equitably as our membership expands, and to replace those who for one reason or another are unable to carry on.

So much for the 2005/6. 2006/7 is not yet two months old, but already it is clear that it will be a year of setbacks and new challenges, but also of new opportunities.

Lipscomb Cars will be presenting to Bearsted Parish Council on 13 June their plans to re-develop the BP and Volvo dealership sites. We must do all we can to ensure that this development improves rather than makes even worse the difficult parking and access problems in that area.

Councillor Dyke has discovered that the planning permission for 28 dwellings at the old coal yard site next to Bearsted Station was sought without consultation with the Rail Regulator, who has power to block the sale of railway land where there is a clear need for its retention for rail-related purposes, including car parking, which is demonstrably the case at Bearsted. We will strongly support the Parish Council on this.

Meanwhile, hardly a day passes without a new rumour, all too often later shown to be true, of offers by developers for many of our village's most attractive houses and gardens - the recent acceleration of which is possibly not entirely unrelated to the fact that the local elections are now safely out of the way.

We know that Maidstone Borough Council Officials are pressing the owner of the site at 8 Manor Rise to put 7 to 10 dwellings there rather than the two detached houses they have in mind.

In recent days the Planning Inspector has upheld the appeal of the Oak on the Green, allowing the construction of an apartment block to the rear of its car park, and asserting in doing so that the need to utilise land efficiently overrides the acknowledged damage to the amenities of neighbours.

The sad passing of Margaret Lichfield, which we mourn, means that the future of Snowfield will again become a major focus of debate and concern.

Clearly we are going to have to fight hard to save our conservation areas as the pressure to find space for new homes grows.

You will no doubt have seen the piece in last week's Kent Messenger about plans within the next 10 years for a so-called Newnham Park project of mammoth size extending the existing soulless grey blot on the landscape that is Eclipse Park all the way from the Chiltern Hundreds to Hockers Lane, and predominately on greenfield land.

Our local traffic problems are already very bad and growing worse by the day with all the new housing. Can we imagine how much worse they will be when traffic using this development for work, to do business or for shopping is streaming through our lanes?

The new year brings two major changes in the background against which we fight our battles. The first is the process now under way of developing Parish Plans for Thurnham and Bearsted. Not just this Society but the whole community must give total commitment to getting these exercises right.

Secondly, we have a change in political control in Maidstone Borough Council, with three of Bearsted and Thurnham's four Councillors now on the governing rather than the opposition side, and with the fourth Councillor potentially in a position to sustain or bring down an administration that is balanced on a knife edge. We will watch with great interest to see how this influence is used to ensure that any remaining powers held by Maidstone Borough Council to protect the character of Bearsted and Thurnham are fully exercised, while acknowledging that a major part of the problem is central rather than local government policy.

The sad passing recently of Joan Bacon, the widow of our late founder Professor Reg Bacon, reminds us of our great debt to them both, and of our obligation to continue their work. The torch they lit so admirably is for now in our hands, but it will not be long before it needs to be grasped by others. Perhaps the greatest challenge of all in the coming year will be to ensure that new hands are raised and ready when they are needed.

Brian Clifford
Chairman
May 2006