

Annual Report of the Bearsted and Thurnham Society: 2006/7

Two closely related issues have dominated the year since our last AGM - Maidstone Borough Council's Local Development Framework Core Strategy, and Kent International Gateway.

The Society was dismayed when, following the local elections of May 2006, the new borough council decided to set targets of 10,080 new houses and 470,000 square metres of business development land over the next 20 years in order to secure New Growth Point status for Maidstone, and to designate vast areas of countryside to our immediate north, east and south east as areas of search for the relevant development sites. Population and employment trends in Maidstone did not remotely justify development on such a scale. We believed the Council to be motivated by misguided civic rivalry with other local authorities, and blind to the enormous damage to the town, the environment and the quality of life of all residents of the borough which this would entail. We objected strongly.

The Council claimed that New Growth Point status was necessary to secure central government funding to meet Maidstone's infrastructure needs: a spurious claim given that such funds can be used only for the infrastructure needs arising from the new developments proposed, not for pre-existing needs.

They also argued that designating attractive greenfield sites near Junctions 7 and 8 of the M20 for business development would attract the high-quality businesses and well paid jobs that Maidstone needed. We pointed out that once they had designated the areas as business development sites they would have no power to ensure that the spaces there were taken by the new high-quality, high-pay businesses they professed to want to attract. We believed they were more likely to be taken by existing local businesses relocating there and re-developing their former brownfield sites for housing. Or, even more seriously, by low-pay businesses of the warehousing, transportation and retail type on a scale vastly greater than could be serviced by available local labour. All this we argued would pose a serious threat to the vitality of Maidstone Town Centre as well as destroy a large part of the best of Maidstone's natural heritage.

Just how right we were was demonstrated when Kent International Gateway, a front organisation for the AXA group, announced its intention to cover virtually the whole of the Special Landscape Area south of the M20 from Thurnham Lane to Hollingbourne in giant warehouses, cranes, railway sidings, roads and related offices for a massive so called rail/road interchange facility, justifying its claim on the ground that MBC had already designated the area for business development. To be fair to Maidstone Borough Council they have come out strongly against KIG, as it has come to be known, but they will need to show total resolve if, as we expect, AXA now submit an application marginally less horrendous than the one originally outlined. We will accept nothing less from Maidstone Borough Council than outright refusal of planning permission and absolute commitment to fighting and winning any appeal to the Secretary of State for any development of this type on this land.

All the local groups opposed to KIG, including this Society, moved swiftly to form the united front organisation STOPKIG.org to fight it. I will not repeat here all the arguments against KIG. We have circulated copies of just some of the many materials issued by STOPKIG.org. Regular readers of Kent Messenger and Downs Mail will be aware of the very considerable media coverage and public support it has secured.

So many people have contributed to this that it is invidious to mention just a few of their names, but I would like to pay particular tribute to Richard Horton for his splendid chairmanship of STOPKIG.org, to Alan Thomas the Vice Chairman, to Christine Thomas the Treasurer, to Val Springett and Carol Rennison of, respectively, SaveBearsted.com and SaveBearsted.org - our other two main partners in STOPKIG.org - for the enormous energy and creativity they have brought to the task - not least to the development of the website, design of publications and media coverage - and to Richard and Dena Ashness for the vital roles they have played in making it all happen. No less important has been the enormous flow of ideas, vital intelligence and support of the foot-slogging variety from countless Members, to all of whom the Society and the whole community are deeply grateful. We have a strong research and analysis committee who will go through the application with a fine tooth comb as soon as it is lodged. We are consulting on KIG and the Core Strategy with some neighbouring villages and this will be taken further. I promise you this: the Society, through STOPKIG.org, will do all in its power to stop this development which, if implemented, would do irreparable damage to the character of Maidstone and to the quality of the lives of present and future generations of residents. Both the Society and STOPKIG.org will be among the speakers at a public meeting being organised jointly by Kent County Council and Maidstone Borough Council at Invicta Girls Grammar School on 6 July from 7 p.m. We urge all our Members to turn out in force to make their views known.

We wait to see whether the latest change in political control of Maidstone Borough Council following the elections of May 2007 will bring any change in this situation. But your Committee believes that if Councillors for the main political parties fail to represent the constituents who elect them, the Society may need to field its own candidates in future borough council elections, and to encourage other residents associations in other wards to do the same. Over 80% of Members responding to our survey on this supported this idea. We invite you today to pass a resolution approving it in principle.

In other respects the Society has continued to grow and to broaden its activities. On this occasion a year ago I reported a membership of 1250. Today it stands at 1337.

As our Treasurer will shortly report to you, our financial position remains sound. The need to assist with the early funding of STOPKIG.org, and some exceptional printing costs, have temporarily reduced our capital, but we are confident that this can and will be recovered through the STOPKIG.org fund raising effort, and that the funds needed for the STOPKIG campaign will be forthcoming. We do not therefore need to propose any increase in the Society's annual subscription of £2.50.

In the course of the year the Society submitted objections to, or observations on, 18 planning applications. Of these, decisions are still pending on three; 8 were refused as urged by the Society; one had conditions attached which met Society objections; and 7 were approved despite our objections, although three of those were outline approvals only, leaving aspects of the Society's objections to be considered again later. We object only to proposals which we believe will do significant damage to the character of the neighbourhood concerned or to the quality of life of local residents, and only then when we can find grounds in the local plan or in central government guidelines which offer some hope of success.

We were extremely disappointed to hear that Bearsted Parish Council had decided to submit a revised application for planning permission for a Multi-Game Area on the Elizabeth Harvie Field following refusal of its original application, despite our having told them that nearly 90% of Members responding to our survey about it had expressed strong opposition. We are pleased to report however that following a presentation to it by Bearsted Woodland Trust of attractive alternative design proposals for a young people's recreational facility to be located on BWT land, the Parish Council has since voted to enter into discussions with BWT and has not submitted the Elizabeth Harvie Field application.

Demand for Joan Brown's excellent booklets on services and amenities for older residents and those with disabilities has continued to be strong, and Felicity Simpson has begun work, assisted by Tracey Shelley, on a revised edition of the Society's booklet on amenities and facilities for families with children under 11.

We are grateful to Carey Jack for the hard work he has put into the maintenance and further development of the Society's website, not least at the time of the KIG crisis.

The Society's Footpath Group is to be congratulated on the successful outcome of its long-standing campaign for improvements to the signposting and safety of the public footpaths across Bearsted Golf Course.

The Society is grateful to the many Members whose responses to our questions helped the Society provide much input to the Bearsted Parish Plan Group for the development of its household questionnaire. Regrettably, but entirely understandably, the Group has had to suspend its work for the time being to allow the whole community to concentrate on the fight against KIG. We very much hope that it will be able to resume its work before too long. Meanwhile, the Society congratulates the Thurnham Parish Plan Group on the successful completion of its own parish plan questionnaire and excellent analysis of its results - an exercise which fortunately was completed before the KIG bombshell hit the parish.

Finally, I record my gratitude to all the members of the Society Committee for their unstinting support and hard work over the past year. We are a small group working under extreme pressure much of the time, and still badly needing reinforcement, particularly in the area of planning and development. We are extremely fortunate that the manpower and skills required for the fight against KIG have been forthcoming through the medium of STOPKIG.org. I very much hope that a year from now I will be able to report that the STOPKIG fight has been won, and that at least some of the outside talent and energy that has helped win it has been absorbed into the Society for other battles to come.

Brian Clifford
Chairman