

ANNUAL PARISH MEETING CHAIRMAN'S REPORT 2010

Gladstone's government passed the Local Government Act in 1894. Uproar was caused at the time by the two simple principles contained in the Act. Firstly, the creation of institutions having a civil origin, status and affiliations – the Parish Meeting and the Parish Council; and secondly, the transfer of the civil functions of the older parish authorities to the new institutions. As a result the Church was excluded from formal participation in local government and the traditional functions of the parish, which had always had a 'Christian' complexion, were to be administered by laymen.

During the next 60 years, Parish Councils fell into obscurity. In 1894, the leaders of the village were the squire, the parson and the schoolmaster. This influence was derived from their traditional prestige, superior education, relative wealth and in a hierarchical society, social standing. The difficulties of Parish Councils at this time can be highlighted by a number of factors:-

- Parish Councils began their existence without the co-operation of the influential.
- On their creation, Parish Councils obtained their revenue mainly from rates on agricultural land. In the 1870s the long decline of agriculture, which only ended with the Second World War, began thus reducing revenue. It is interesting to note that within 18 months of their creation, agricultural land was de-rated by 50% without compensation.
- Between the World Wars, various Parliaments from time to time, saw fit to give new functions to Parish Councils but at the same time, reduce their financial assets. Their spending powers were reduced (again without compensation) by further de-rating. At the end of the Second World War and during the 1950's a variety of legislation was passed to reform the Parish Council system. In 1969 the Royal Commission Report on Local Government under the Chairmanship of Lord Redcliffe-Maude was published which proposed, among other things that the minor or local council was to be empowered on a parochial scale to do what it pleased for its people. The Labour Government of the day accepted the Report but was then overthrown. The following Conservative Government inherited the Report and the undertaking to reform local Government, where the improvement in the position of local Councils was taken for granted. The passing of the Local Government Act 1972 gave Parish Councils the framework in which they exist today.

The purpose of the Annual Parish meeting is to allow all our local organisations an opportunity to report on their activities over the last 12 months and to highlight the wide choice of activities available within the parish.

As chairman of your parish Council for the last 12 months it falls upon me to give a picture on the activities of your duly elected councillors.

Your 15 member council meets on the third Monday of the month and deals with the wide range of correspondence which crosses the parish clerks desk covering everything from accidents to watercourses. They discuss issues arising from the two committees of planning which meets twice a month, amenities which meets monthly, as well as the recommendations from a number of other Council-led groups. The groups carry out in-depth work and report to the committees and Full Council for formal approval. Such groups work on Publicity & Website, Finance, Policies and various projects such as Jubilee Sports Pavilion and Staple Drive Play Area. Members also give feedback from the many extra meetings they attend in their own time and this surely highlights the commitment they have to Staplehurst in making sure we have a voice in the decision making process, not because we think we know better than anyone else but because if we don't, who will? Councillors who speak at meetings they attend do so as representatives of the Parish Council and present the collective viewpoint.

At this point I would wish to offer our thanks to Anne Widdicombe, as our outgoing MP, and wish her a long and happy retirement. We welcome as our new MP Helen Grant and have written to her to acknowledge her role and invite her to our Christmas meeting. We would also like to congratulate Borough Councillor Hotson on his re-election and wish him and his wife a successful year as Mayor. We would wish to thank both him, as our County/Borough Councillor and Borough Councillor Richard Lusty for their active support of Staplehurst. Richard as chairman of planning has been supportive and with his monthly surgeries has been able to advise and support to those who have attended with a selection of issues and concerns.

We continue to express our concerns with regard to the different view the Planning Officer holds on the various applications which we have dealt with over the year. At this point we can reassure everyone there are no confirmed planning consents for the rumoured 450 houses being considered in Staplehurst by the Borough. We have a Rural Settlement Group who will be looking to a Housing needs survey to support the parish councils view that at this moment in time we still lack the infrastructure to support further development. With regard to planning we had 85 full planning applications. There were 67 decisions where MBC agreed with parish council recommendations and 13 where MC disagreed and 8 applications were withdrawn. The Staplehurst Free Church re-submitted their planning application as the previous consent had timed out and was granted. Golding Homes applied and were granted permission at Winches Garth for the building a 5 properties and Homeleigh applied for outline planning permission for 14 houses with the business moving to the site on Maidstone Road. The enforcement notice at Huntsman Stables, where the appeal was dismissed, is ongoing. I would like to thank the planning committee for their diligence and careful consideration on all planning matters.

Thanks go to Joan and Malcolm Buller for their sterling work with Speedwatch and to our police cover provided by Mark Pennicott, Chris Lomax and Pete Gardner.

Since becoming the second parish in Maidstone to achieve Quality status we had one meeting with Boxley and MBC to discuss what benefits QC status might bring within our working relationship. Nothing came of that and this year we lost our status due to not having sufficient elected members. Though we tried to pursue this, our elected members dropped further when with regret both Cllrs Green and Franks resigned. We greatly miss Cllr Green's planning expertise and Cllr Franks for his unstinting commitment to the Jubilee Field project, without which I doubt this project would have succeeded. I am also sorry to report two further councillors have stepped down in the last week Cllr Fairfax and Smith. We are however keeping Mrs Fairfax expertise involved with the Annual report and the Village Update. The Village Update was part of meeting quality council status and we regard it as important that we continue to meet the requirements and so enable the council duly elected in 2011 to aim for Quality Status. Thanks go to those who contribute and those who deliver to make sure every house in the parish receives a copy.

We were sorry to lose Maria Norris, and welcomed Helen Warmington as our assistant clerk. We are still running a Playscheme but this year we have gone out to tender and have a company running the scheme. We hope the outcome is another successful scheme and an easing of the burden on the clerk and assistant.

We have this year, thanks to the sterling work of councillors, taken on the responsibility for the Bell Lane toilets which as I am sure you are all aware, MBC no longer wished to provide as a facility. We will be monitoring how this is managed over the next three months.

My thanks as always go to all council members who as volunteers themselves give of their time above and beyond the call of duty. My sincere thanks go to councillors and in particular the vice chairman John Perry. I am as always indebted to the clerk for her unstinting support over the last 7 years whilst I have been chairman.

We are entering our final year in office and during the next 12 months I hope some of you will come and see what is involved with a view to standing for election next year.

A parish council can only express the views of the parish if they are given and this means the views of all those people who don't use the Forum but whom we meet at the monthly meetings held by Borough Councillor Lusty or in the street. You need to tell us what you would like to see happen here whether it is a growth in housing, a supermarket, cycle paths, allotments, play areas, policing, highway issues etc. If you don't tell us then we can only assume!