



2011 Chairman's Report

Activities

Although we have no one event to compare with the *Celebrating Alton!* exhibition which marked our 40th Anniversary last November, the Society has not been idle during the past 12 months:

- There has been no new tree planting but with Jim Dickinson's inspiration we have continued to monitor the successful planting of the year before.
- The Alton and District Youth Council took the lead this year with March's Town Spring Clean, but with the recent and much regretted demise of that organisation we have to decide whether the event will continue. Please let us know your thoughts on this.
- The Committee had an inspiring *Away Day* at Chawton House in May and Mike Heelis's daughter Philippa subsequently gave a subgroup an inspiring introduction to social media.
- We had a stall at the Victorian Cricket event on the Butts in June and we will be present at the Yuletide Festival on Sunday, 4th December.

Meetings

- During the Spring: we had meetings with Damian Hinds, MP, with representatives of both Waitrose and Morrison's supermarkets, we attended the Alton in Bloom planning meeting, the holocaust memorial tree planting ceremony at Amery Hill School, and the reopening of the refurbished Swan Hotel.
- During the Summer: we had a meeting with the newly elected Town Council, we spoke at the Tesco Appeal Hearing, we attended the Town Tree Walk, and we were represented at meetings of Alton Museums Partnership Advisory Group, and Damian Hinds' Town Vibrancy Group
- During the Autumn: we attended the Alton in Bloom Awards Evening, the South Downs National Park Liphook Workshop, the Town Council Diamond Jubilee planning group, and we met representatives of the Anstey Residents Group and Coors Brewery. Not least, our team distinguished itself by coming second in the CPRE Quiz night in East Meon last month!
- I would like to make special mention of the presentation of the newly completed *Alton and Holybourne Local List* to the Town Council on 19 Oct: Undoubtedly one of the Society's greatest achievements, this is the result of years of work by Edward Hepper, Mike Biddiss, Brain Alexander, Norman Isham, Jeremy Wood, Nick Carey-Thomas and Jane Hurst. The Autumn newsletter contains an explanatory article by Edward and the first of four

illustrated extracts. It reminds us of Alton's rich architectural heritage – the town having, for example, more than twice as many officially-listed buildings as Petersfield.

The List has also been submitted to East Hants District Council whose leader, Patrick Burridge, received it with effusive praise. But it remains to be seen to what extent the Council officials will be able to set aside theoretic concerns in deciding what to do with it.

- Edward Hepper must take an even larger share of the credit for something which is at the very heart of the Society's role - the monitoring of planning applications. The diligence and expertise with which he performs this unremitting task is quite beyond praise. I particularly draw your attention to his summary in the Summer newsletter of applications where we have made a difference. Like all newsletters of recent years, this remains available on the website.
- Another jewel in the Society's crown, and perhaps its most publicly-conspicuous achievement, is the on-going maintenance of Flood Meadows. This is carried out on one Sunday morning a month by a happy band of volunteers under the supervision of Martin Gibbs. Mike Heelis has been our liaison with this group for many years. They are constantly getting awards for their work; this year it was the Silver Gilt award from the South and South East in Bloom panel
- Norman Isham has continued his *Improving the appearance of Alton* project and not only his initiative in this but also the invariably enthusiastic and effective response from deputy town clerk Greg Burt (last year's joint Alton Society Individual Award winner) merit special praise and thanks from us all.
- The annual awards, as presented this morning, continue to enjoy considerable prestige in the town. We have worthy winners this year in John Sadler for the *Alton Society Individual Award* and the astonishing St Lawrence Church West End Project for the *John Ambrose Award*, with commendations for the exterior refurbishments at the Swan and the Market Hotels.
- As announced last year, the Society has now severed its formal link with the *Treloar & Gauvain Memorial Trust*. Although this trust was originally set up under the auspices of the Alton Society and although its annual awards to Orthopaedic nurses in the South of England are more highly regarded than ever, the shared accounting of the two organisations has now outlived its usefulness.

Issues that have arisen in 2011

Key issues in which we have been involved during the last year include the following:

- On the Alton Museums we are represented by Brian Alexander and Mike Biddiss, and while we welcome the continuance of opening and the wonderful number of volunteers who have come forward, we very much regret the loss of Tony Cross with his irreplaceable expertise so freely given to the town for so many years, and of Angela Scott and her famously friendly colleagues on the front desks. We also note the grim fact that the Hampshire Museums

Authority were not deflected one iota from their initial proposal, in all its unfairness to Alton, which provoked such a huge public outcry last year.

- We remain concerned by the outcome of the Tesco Appeal, which was finally and irrevocably upheld after four successive applications had been turned down by the planning authority and one independent appeal dismissed. As the Herald Newspaper put it, the Alton Society 'fought almost alone' to defend the town centre this summer and I, for one, am extremely proud that we did so.
Associated issues include Hampshire Highways' decision to install three sets of traffic lights on Montecchio Way against the wishes of the people who live there.
At the same time, the announcement this week of a minor adjustment to Waitrose's planning application for a store adjacent to the Station suggests that their scheme, for which permission has been granted, remains very much alive.
- Nick Carey-Thomas has been communicating with Damian Hinds MP about the far-reaching and largely unknowable implications of the *Localism Bill* – one of a bewildering number of pieces of radical legislation currently going through parliament, and one which is causing extreme concern to organisations like CPRE and the National Trust.
- And now we are involved in the campaign to stop our library being closed all day on Wednesday while the one in Petersfield – a smaller town and relatively immune to the imposition of new housing quotas by its inclusion in the National Park - is to be protected. One important lesson for Altonians is : *use it!* And get everyone you know to do the same. It is really only numbers that count with the people who take these decisions.
- We are also concerned by the problem of drunken pub-exit hooliganism which extends almost throughout the night, but we have not seen it as our role to get actively involved. We do note, however, that the brave Altonians who are trying to do something about this problem are having to argue against professional advocates who have been hired by the companies involved.
- We view the demise of the Alton Town Partnership, to which Mike Heelis made such a massive contribution, and the failure to replace it with anything remotely similar, with something close to despair. Meanwhile we continue to watch the progress of the *Core Strategy*. Its predictions for future housing provision for Alton are due to be published in February, submitted to the planning inspectorate in May, subjected to examination in August, and adopted in December 2012. It will then govern development in East Hampshire until 2028.
- The massive concern of maintaining the Health of the Town Centre is the subject of today's forum, so I will say nothing more than that – except that it is a massive concern. . .
- In addition to these concerns we are keeping a watching brief on the Community Centre replacement project, The South Downs National Park , the stalled station area development project, the magistrates court, and the cinema.

Among these topics you will find several examples of the phenomenon that Jerry Cullum calls "Nonsultation". Nonsultation, which may be defined as the pretence of public consultation when outcomes have already been decided, is in itself a massive concern to any organisation with aims such as ours.

The Society

I now turn to our Committee:

- I am very sad to report that Mike Heelis has decided to stand down from the committee. This is largely the result of his disillusion with the demise of the Alton Town Partnership to which he made such a huge personal commitment in our name. He has always been a rock of enthusiasm and loyal support and he will be sorely missed from the work of the committee.
- We have co-opted two new members during the year, Martyn Dell, who has taken on our publicity, and Brian Good : both are standing for election today
- One of Mike Heelis' many contributions was to find us a new treasurer to relieve Jan Nicholas, who has been looking to reduce her commitment for some time. So Chris Matthews, who is a Flood Meadows volunteer, no less, but is also well qualified for this *almost equally* important post, has agree to take over and is also standing for election today.
- Jan Nicholas herself is now standing for the role of Membership Secretary, which she has been fulfilling for years, along with so much else. Indeed Jan, more than anyone else, is the person who fills all the gaps, takes responsibility, and without whom the Society would grind to a halt.

Matters concerning the Committee

I would now like to mention some matters of concern to the Committee.

- First I must record that it has been a difficult period with individual members having far more than their fair share of illness and other pressures.
- Although we now have a full committee, our open-ended remit means that there are simply too many issues for us to cover as well as we would like, or as well as others sometimes expect. So we have to prioritise, and we have to maintain our independence from partisan causes.
- I think it has been a benefit to the society to have a regular chairman, but this is my third and final year under the constitution and we need to give urgent consideration to the question of my successor.
- The question of our *legitimacy* is important. It is clear, although it is sometimes forgotten, that we have no pretensions, and certainly no right, to be regarded as a 'voice of the town' Indeed, although we actively seek more diversity in our committee, there is no reason for us to deny, or be ashamed of, the fact that we are, after all, a society of like-minded people.

But a real question does arise as to the committee's right to speak on behalf of our membership.

That is why communication with our membership is so important.

- Our principle organ of communication is our quarterly newsletter, *Alton Now*. We are extremely grateful to Jerry Cullum for the wonderful job he does editing and producing this at Treloar College. He has had no response to his request for comments on whether we should economise by slimming it down. I suspect members think their subscriptions are well spent on the newsletter as it is. However, although we have had to postpone our plan to economise by delivering by hand, we hope to start this with the next issue. Offers of help would be welcome.
- Our second organ of communication is the Website, which has been visited well over three thousand times in the last year. Again, however, there has not been a single response to my appeal for ideas on how we can use this better. Perhaps, like the newsletter, it is perfect.
- Meanwhile we have launched ourselves on Twitter and after some six weeks we have no less than 15 followers (!) This is helping us to develop an informed view of the plusses and minuses of novel modalities of communication, so that we can take the good and manage the bad. Thus we have rejected Facebook, while Twitter, which has a serious side which is entirely belied by its silly name, does seem to offer unique advantages. In fact it has the potential to enable the Society to punch well above its weight in terms of influence. I do encourage people to join in – it could be just the way of keeping in touch we have been looking for.
- Telephones are of course last century's miracle, and in many ways still the best of all, but emails are efficient and convenient for those who are connected. But don't forget that nothing makes more impact today than a hand-written letter!
- A quite different question is whether we should have occasional meetings on topical subjects, and, another is whether we should have subgroups (or 'delivery groups') involving members beyond the committee.

Finances

And now a few words about finances:

- Jan will be saying in her treasurers report that we are taking steps to manage our legacy fund to make sure it isn't eroded by day-to-day expenditure.
- Secondly, we are asking you today to approve a change to the constitution in the form of a resolution to change the way future alterations in subscription rates are decided. I would point out that this is merely to avoid the current situation in which any intended change to the subscription rates has to wait for the next AGM and cannot be implemented for a further 10 months after that. But you need have no fear the committee will keep merrily

upping the subscription, firstly because we want to keep you all as members, but also because every change requires a great effort to update all the standing order mandates.

- We have also decided to prepare a business plan to clarify how our money is intended to be spent.

Conclusion

I have given this report at some length in order to show you just how much the Society does, and how much it is more than just 'a bunch of retired architects', to quote a critical voice earlier this year. Thanks to the extraordinary ability, and the hard, dedicated work of our committee - not least its three architects, two of whom are indeed, and thank goodness, retired - our Society provides an irreplaceable source of information about what is happening to the town, and what is likely to happen to it in the future. It provides a unique forum for our members, and together we have a voice with real influence, largely because we are known to use it responsibly.

As one of our members, Olive Drakes, put it succinctly "It is good to know you are keeping an eye on things".

And another thing that we keep hearing is that Alton is 'such a friendly town with so many interesting things going on'.

Our ultimate goal as a Society is to do our bit to keep it that way.

James Willis
9 November 2011