

Wroxton & Balscote Parish Council Chairman's Address May 2018

This meeting marks the end of the old Council's fourth and final year and it falls to me to summarise what has happened over this past 12 months.

Outcome of PC Election

As you all know, there was a PC election 10 days ago, so I should start by thanking the four Councillors who have left us for their service – Suzie Bates, Mark Harris and Nicky Hodges who decided not to seek reelection and John Daly who did stand, but missed the cut. They all played important roles in their different ways and both villages owe them a debt of gratitude.

Equally I should introduce and welcome the newly elected four who join the three of us who were reelected from the old Council Those who were re-elected were Miranda, Duncan and myself. The new faces are Geraldine Collinge, Nick Watkins and a returning bad penny, Bob Jesson. The fourth is Harvey Markovitch who cannot be here this evening but will be known very well to many of you. A big welcome to all four of them.

It is worth saying that we had a record eleven candidates at the election and it was sad that some were bound to fail to get elected. I am actually a strong believer in having an elected council as it does I think give us a legitimacy that can be lacking if the usual suspects are simply coopted as vacancies occur, There were only four parishes in the whole Cherwell area that had contested elections, in our case for the fourth time in a row. It does cost money but in my view it is money very well spent.

Wroxton Sports Club

Turning to the past year's activities, I will start by mentioning two successes carried over from last year. The Sports Pavilion was completed with a lot of help from the PC and a new and longer sub lease was signed in September thereby giving the Sports Club a proper home and very good security. I know few village residents use the facilities but forever is a long time and younger residents will sooner or later I am sure start using it.

Wroxton Traffic Measures

Secondly we completed the speed calming project with 30mph roundels painted along Stratford Road. It is not a perfect solution but was what we could achieve on the funding that we had available and I personally think the roundels have had a calming impact. As and when Highways deliver on their promise to repaint all the road markings through Wroxton I think things will improve still further. I count this as a success and I know that many residents of Wroxton share that view.

Telecoms Masts

The next major topic concerns leases. The PC is lucky to own a couple of stonepits.

Stonepit 6 along Horley Path Road is quite big and houses two telecoms masts and a logging business all of which contribute rent to the PC. Of the two masts, we entered the year worrying about the lease to Air Waves Solutions as they had lost their contract to supply the emergency services signal throughout the UK and we expected that lease not to be renewed. In fact it emerged that Vodafone, who had won the tender process, did not have good coverage in remote parts of the UK and as a result Air Waves got a stay of execution.

There is currently little being said, but rumour has it that Vodafone may yet decide not to press ahead with the

contract and that this may leave Air Waves surviving after all. Anyway, a lease which we expected to lose was renewed, albeit at a slightly lower level. I should note that there is a break clause exercisable at any time, but we did negotiate a requirement for 12 month's notice of cancellation which was not there before,

The other mast serves a commercial operator Arquiva and this one is fine. So we get more money from our leases than we do from the precept despite the slight increase in the precept for which I do apologise. We did feel the need to guard against the risk of losing the leases and we did need to offset the impact of decreasing grants for things like grass cutting.

Disposal of Stonepit No 5

Still on the topic of stonepits, we own (or think we own) another smaller pit at the corner of Ironstone Lane and Horley Path Road, just by the Apollo Office Park. While it stretches to over half an acre, its location and nature have never suggested any way we could make use of it and, as a former rubbish dump used by Wroxton before bin collections started, it is highly unlikely that we would ever get planning consent to build a house there. It therefore never generated any income and, on the contrary threatened to start costing us as it was in such a poor state.

A year or so ago we decided to put it up for sale and actually got a pretty good offer from a charitable trust, which we accepted. However, to complete the deal we needed to register our title which we were assured would be a formality. Not so! The Land Registry rejected our application and the deal fell through. The reasons given were odd – that we had not, as it were, used the land as an owner and had not kept the fence in good repair which would of course have cost thousands.

Undaunted, we had the idea of leasing the site and getting the tenant to clear and re-fence it as a condition of the lease.. This would, we felt, address both the objections that had led to our title being refused. I am pleased to say that, at the end of the financial year, we signed this revised deal, this time with Apollo themselves. They will pay us £500 annually in rent and they have a purchase option to buy the site for £11,000 – lower than the previous deal due to the uncertainty of title, but still not bad for a site which was of no real use or benefit to us. In due course we will reapply to have our title registered and, if granted as we now think likely, Apollo will then exercise their purchase option,. The deal is that we will deduct the amount of rent actually paid from the purchase price. So we should end up achieving what we wanted in the first place albeit a bit later. However with very low interest rates the delay will not cost us a lot. If the lease ran for 12 years (we don't plan to leave it that long) we would have received £6,000 in rent and Apollo would still owe us £5,000 as the balance of the price.

It is a neat deal and solves what was beginning to look like an awkward problem for us, and on what ended up as very amicable terms

Other Activities

For the rest, we continued to do what Parish Councils do, keeping the grass cut, the dog bins emptied, the litter picked and passing comment on planning applications - the things I am sure both villages take for granted but which don't happen by themselves. I wish I could claim greater success over fixing potholes but we have to leave ourselves at least one challenge for the next four years.

Last but not least, we ended the year by replacing the three notice boards and that I am really pleased about, because we can now fit our stuff on them and do so without agonizing pushing in of pins and behind glass which you can actually

see through. They really are quite a pleasure to use! I am aware that one or two residents have complained about the reduced space for their own notices and I am indeed sorry about that. Unfortunately, we are obliged by law to display ever increasing amounts of information as a Parish Council and the old ratio that had more space for residents's notices simply left too little space for the council information to be displayed in a legible manner. There really was no alternative!

That pretty much covers what we have been up to . Thank you for listening and now I will open the floor to any questions you may have either about what I have said or on anything else you would like to ask about. We will between us do our best to answer.

Michael Roberts
Chairman

14 May 2018