

## **RYE ANNUAL TOWN MEETING 2019**

### **MAYOR'S OVERVIEW OF THE YEAR**

#### **[Community assets]**

Last year, my predecessor, Councillor Jonathan Breeds, reported that the Council was close to commencing its first discounted accommodation tenancy.

Those of you who have attended this meeting over the last couple of years will be aware that, following a community consultation, the Council obtained a loan to enable it to buy a property in South Undercliff to let to a household with a strong local connection at a discounted rent.

As you can imagine, there was quite a lot of competition for the tenancy, so members of staff – in conjunction with a local lettings agent – shortlisted three applicants.

I am pleased to say that our successful new tenants – 2 grown ups and three younger folk – have settled in well.

In addition to the South Undercliff property, we continue to let the Town Hall Cottage – albeit at a market rent.

Last autumn – to the delight of many of you present this evening – emergency repair work was carried out to the Landgate Tower – or Arch (whichever you prefer), a Grade I Listed Ancient Monument. Although the bulk of the funding was provided by Rother District Council, other members of the Landgate Steering Group chipped in – including the Town Council, Rye Fund and the Rye Conservation Society.

It is hoped that the Steering Group will meet again in the near future to consider a longer-term plan for the Tower – as well as, in the short-term, one of my personal objectives: getting the clock working again. Currently, it is displaying the correct time just twice a day!

Closer to home – at least for the Town Council – we have now received Listed Building Consent to allow us to restore the Town Hall Cupola. Quotes are being sought for the tendering and project management stages.

#### **[Parking]**

I suppose I am going to have to mention parking some at stage – so it might as well be now!

Not long after our Town Meeting last year, Rother District Council asked East Sussex County Council (the responsible highways authority) to decriminalise onstreet parking by introducing Civil Parking Enforcement, or CPE, throughout the Rother District.

As a reminder, the background to this development was the Chief Constable firstly deciding to phase out Traffic Wardens – and then, some years later, issuing a directive that onstreet parking regulation breaches should be acted on only if a vehicle was causing an obstruction – and an officer was available to attend. The Chief Constable hoped that the resulting reduction in enforcement would encourage Rother to ask County to introduce CPE – and he was not disappointed.

The plan is to have Civil Parking Enforcement Officers on Rother's streets by April 2020 – most probably working for County's existing contractor. Thus far there has been one informal public consultation, which a number of you have responded to, expressing a range of concerns and comments – including:

- Where will vehicles displaced from Rye Town Centre's streets park?
- Can the Rye scheme be tailored to reflect Rye's unique features and challenges?
- Will businesses still be able to receive deliveries close to their premises?
- How large will the ticket machines be and where will they be located?
- Can there be more residents' parking in the Citadel?

The County has advised that, to ensure the April 2020 CPE start date is achieved, the existing Traffic Regulation Orders must remain largely unaltered. However, their intention is to monitor the operation of the new scheme for the first 12 months – with a view to refining it thereafter.

CPE might not be to everyone's taste – and it won't provide a complete solution to Rye's onstreet parking problems – however, the choice is simple: it is between CPE and, effectively, no parking enforcement. That choice has been made already – CPE **is** coming. If you have any concerns at all I would urge you to keep an eye open for the publication of the draft enabling Traffic Regulation Orders. These constitute the formal public consultation and, by statute, you will be given 21 days to make representations.

The spectre of CPE has served to highlight parking provision issues generally in the town and the absence of 'joined up thinking'. Consequently, the Council recently initiated the formation of a Parking Strategy Working Group - comprising Councillors, business representatives and residents - to explore how off-street parking provision can be enhanced and promoted.

### **[public realm]**

Last April we took over the cutting of Rye's urban verges from the County Council. Rye was one of only two parish or town councils in Rother to do this – and we are the only one to use our own staff. The others decided to accept a

reduction in the number of cuts provided by County and to pay County for the cuts that had been, well, cut! However, it turned out that they did not have to pay – and will not have to pay for this coming financial year either. Why is this, you might wonder?

Well, it is down to the fact that Bexhill still does not have a Town Council. When Bexhill Rother District Councillors realised that Bexhill's verges were going to be cut just twice a year – and that Bexhill residents might not be best pleased – an agenda item appeared seeking funding to make up for the proposed reduction in cuts. Councillors were advised that they could not charge this additional cost to the Bexhill Special Expense and that the money would have to come out of Rother's general funding pot. It was at this point that someone realised that Rother would have to offer to pay for additional cuts across Rural Rother – otherwise, it could legitimately be accused of favouring Bexhill.

In Rye, we accept a modest grant from the County Council to cut the urban verges at least 6 times a year – which is the number of times urban verges are cut in Bexhill and most of the Rother parishes. However, here in Rye we cut the verges when they actually need cutting, we cut them to a high standard – and we cut them as often as is necessary. I've noticed the difference – and I'm sure you have too.

Our Rye Town Steward Service, headed by Nicky Ledger, continues to receive positive feedback – and those in Bexhill who are continuing to push for a town council - are keen to emulate the service there at some future point.

### **[Planning]**

On 18<sup>th</sup> October 2012 we held a public meeting at the Tilling Green Community Centre to establish community interest in developing a Neighbourhood Plan for Rye. Fingers crossed, on 2 May 2019, there will be a referendum resulting in an adopted Rye Neighbourhood Plan.

The draft Plan is now at the Independent Examination stage - and both the Town Council and Rother have until next Tuesday to address a number of questions raised by the Examiner.

Every year, for the last five or so, successive Mayors have stood before you to pay tribute to the colossal amount of work undertaken on the Plan by Colonel Anthony Kimber, who has acted as both the Rye Neighbourhood Plan Co-ordinator and also its principal researcher. I believe it is indeed the case that we would not have got this far without him. So, on behalf of the Town Council – and the wider Rye community – I thank him once again – adding that, should I have the good fortune to be re-elected and re-appointed Mayor in May, I very much hope that I will be standing here next year to say to you all: 'Job done!'

During the year there were a couple of large or contentious planning applications that we opposed.

The first was an application to build 65 (down from 72) residential properties on the former Lower School site in Ferry Road. We supported refusal on the following grounds:

- Overdevelopment
- Unsafe access
- Insufficient parking spaces
- Loss of habitat (part of the woodland railway corridor)
- No sustainable drainage scheme
- Loss of a public amenity (the Queen Adelaide)
- No statement on the proposed affordable homes mix
- No indication that the applicant recognises the additional stress that would be placed on community infrastructure (eg GP services)

However, we added that, in accordance with the Rye Neighbourhood Plan and the Rother Local Plan Core Strategy, Rye Town Council accepts that the site has been allocated for housing and we would welcome an appropriate and sensitive proposal that addresses its concerns.

The Town Council also opposed no less than two applications submitted by BP to build a filling station and store adjacent to the entrance to Valley Park. Our objections can be summarised as follows:

- Adverse affect on the rural character of the area and the entrance to the High Weald AONB.
- Extension of the development boundary into green countryside
- Unduly prominent and intrusive impact on the landscape
- The proposed illumination would impact adversely on the amenity of neighbouring residential properties and impinge on the intrinsically dark night skies of this rural location
- Non-conformity with the emerging Rye Neighbourhood Plan

### **[Community support]**

The Town Council has continued to do what it can to support our many and varied local voluntary organisations – all of which play a vital role in the social, cultural and recreational life of the town.

Since the last Annual Town Meeting the Town Council has agreed grants to a number of these groups. These include:

<b>£2,000</b>	Rye & District Community Transport – 326 service
<b>£1,000</b>	Rye Community Centre – replacement windows
<b>£5,000</b>	2018 Rye Christmas Festival
<b>£550</b>	Encompass Care – rent

- £500**            Pett Level Independent Rescue Boat Association - refurbishment of a reserve launch vehicle
- £2,400**            Music Well CIC - music therapy

In its capacity as the sole managing trustee of the Rye Relief in Need charity the Council gives grants to help parishioners in conditions of need, hardship or distress. If you know of someone who might need support please have chat, in confidence, with the Town Clerk.

### **[Awards]**

During the year, the Council awarded Honorary Freemanship to two more parishioners – both of whom are well-known to most of us here tonight.

In September, Rex Swain was made a Freeman primarily for *rendering 19 years' eminent service as Town Crier*. Although still very much alive, after the Council meeting to bestow the honour I unveiled a plaque to mark Rex's contribution in the Town Hall Garden.

A few months later I was delighted to present another Honorary Freeman scroll – this time to Priscilla Ryan *in recognition of her rendering over 30 years of voluntary service to the town, particularly in support of the RNLI*.

### **[Staffing]**

Fortunately for the Town Council, for many years staff movements have been irregular – turnover has been low. I like to think this is because they are happy in their work – but, of course, it could simply be the case that we are paying them too much!

Regrettably, much of the year was taken up with a matter that restricted our ability to take forward new Council initiatives; however, I am pleased to say that this is now behind us.

Sadly, early in the year, we had to say goodbye to Jo Notley, our Town Hall Keeper, for family and health reasons. Jo loved the Town Hall (and still does) and ensured that the Chamber, in particular, was cleaned to an exceptionally high standard. Luckily for us she was replaced by Steve Lippross, a former employee of Tenterden Town Council who appears to be able to put his hand to almost anything of a practical nature.

Some congratulations are in order: to Paul Goring, our Town Sergeant, who succeeded Rex Swain as Rye Town Crier; and Jessica Neame who, from 1 April, becomes Deputy Town Clerk Designate.

We welcome also, Michael Blumel – who succeeded Paul as Deputy Town Crier.

We wish Pam Hanwell, who had been our longest-serving Heritage Centre Sales & Information Assistant, a happy (albeit delayed) retirement.

Finally, I would like to thank Judy Pettitt, who left our employment by mutual agreement at the end of February, having worked for the Council for nearly 20 years.

### **[Heritage Centre]**

Somewhere in the documents handed to you at the Registration Desk you will find the report of our Heritage Centre Manager, Louisa O' Shaughnessy – so I don't propose to say much about the Centre.

What does need highlighting though is that, in common, with other retailers in Rye, the Centre is finding that it needs to find ways of countering rising online sales whilst developing resilience to the knockbacks that can sometimes manifest themselves in the form of periods of adverse weather, or security concerns that make people think twice about travelling overseas.

The Council asked Jessica to oversee a strategic review of the Heritage Centre. The result, adopted by the Council, was a plan to help to ensure that the Centre remains relevant and stands a better chance of 'washing its face'. Actions include:

- Significantly increasing the proportion of stock that is made or sourced locally.
- Introducing an Electronic Point of Sale system (bar codes and that kind of thing).
- More targeted opening hours.
- New and replacement signage.
- Replacing the energy-hungry old storage heaters.
- A greater emphasis on the 'visitor experience'.

Don't forget that the Centre is not just there for visitors – for example, if you are looking for a gift do try the Heritage Centre first. You will be helping to ensure that we are able to continue to provide a public service that directly supports our local visitor economy – as well as local craftspeople and producers.

Before moving on I must commend the team at the Centre for their superb restoration of the Town Model over the winter – it now looks positively vibrant. It is difficult to believe that it is now 41 years old.

### **[Banking]**

The town's last 'proper bank', Barclays is due to shut up shop on 10 May, despite assurances the Council received from its Chief Executive's office last year, that the Rye branch was not scheduled for closure.

Of course, Rye is not alone, Battle lost its last bank last year and Glastonbury went bank-free in 2017. Interestingly, in 2017 Nationwide Building Society decided to open a new branch in Glastonbury – and one can envisage small-medium size market towns across the land having no banks and a single Nationwide! However, although Nationwide offers commercial savings accounts it does not provide commercial current accounts.

Rye is fortunate in that it has 1 internal and 3 other external ATMs; Battle has just one at the Tesco filling station.

Uncertainly around Brexit, high commercial rents, new Government regulations (such as Making Tax Digital), a National Living Wage that consistently increases faster than inflation, online shopping, no local banking services and customers struggling to obtain cash, all combine to cause you to wonder how businesses in small market towns can possibly survive.

### **[Highways]**

The Rye Highways Forum – comprising Councillors and representatives of local stakeholder groups - continues to meet regularly.

One of its recommendations that the Town Council has adopted, in principle, is the purchase of a portable Speed Indicator Device.

The idea is that, for maximum effect, it would be rotated around roads in Rye that are well know speeding hotspots. The devices can be fixed to most poles and display the approaching driver's speed for about 2 weeks before the battery needs to be replaced or recharged.

Previous attempts to form a local Community Speedwatch group had floundered because of insufficient volunteers.

The Forum also intends to cost the introduction of appropriate town gateways. Highways England considers them to be particularly effective in controlling speeds on the main approaches to built-up areas.

### **[Elections]**

Hopefully, it hasn't escaped your attention that District and Parish & Town Council Elections will be held in Rother on 2 May.

A number of my Council colleagues have indicated that they will not be putting themselves up for re-election – and so I would urge anyone who might be interested in joining the Town Council to have an informal chat with the Town Clerk about what is involved. The Town Hall office can also supply the Nomination Pack that you will need. Please be aware that completed nomination papers must be delivered to Rother District Council at Bexhill Town Hall, by hand, between Monday 25 March and Wednesday 3 April.