

RYE ANNUAL TOWN MEETING 2020

3 MAYOR'S OVERVIEW OF THE YEAR

[Heritage Centre]

Over the last 12 months the Council has expended an even greater proportion of its time and energy attempting to reduce the public subsidy given to the Heritage Centre via the Town Council's share of the Council Tax – support estimated to have averaged £22,000pa over the last 3 years.

When we last gathered, I reported that the Council had just carried out a strategic review of the Centre and had agreed a number of immediate actions intended to put the Centre on a sounder financial footing. Some of these – including more external signage, targeted opening hours, increasing the proportion of locally sourced stock and replacing the till with an electronic point of sale system – were introduced.

However, despite realistic targets, continuing uncertainty on the part of overseas visitors about Brexit - which was supposed to have been signed off by Parliament last March – meant that retail sales, in particular, were disappointing. Heritage Centre revenue for the months of April, May and June was consistently down on the previous year by around £2,000 a month.

Reluctantly, the Council concluded that it needed to take urgent steps to further reduce expenditure at the Centre and find ways to make savings elsewhere. The Council was conscious that if it did not act its General Reserve would be depleted by the end of the financial year. Between 2015 and 2019 the General Reserve decreased from £90,000 to £10,000 – and the principal cause was the need to subsidise the Centre.

Consequently, the Council decided to: leave the vacant Assistant Town Steward and Town Hall Admin Assistant posts unfilled; suspend the giving of grants; not to replace the Heritage Centre web site; reduce the Centre's stock holding - and review the Council's assets.

Looking ahead to the 2020-21 financial year, the Council was acutely aware that, after staffing and stock purchasing costs, its largest Heritage Centre expense, at around £12,500 a year, is business rates.

Considerable time was devoted towards trying to find a new – and more cost-effective - home for the Town Model and our face-to-face visitor information service – the continuation of which remains one of the Council's top priorities.

Eventually, it was agreed that, as at this April, visitor information should relocate to the Town Hall and be combined with the general information service provided

to residents – the advantage to parishioners being that the Town Hall will be open for longer – 7 days a week during the main visitor season.

Unfortunately, we were unable to identify alternative accommodation for the much-loved Town Model: its sheer size – and the fact that its somewhat ageing and delicate electronics are woven into the fabric of the Centre – proved too much to overcome.

Aware that registered charities have a mandatory entitlement to 80% relief on business rates, the Council decided to try and find a charity to rent the Heritage Centre with – or without - the Model.

Fortunately, the prospect of the Model being placed in storage and, possibly, never seeing the light of day again, prompted one of our parishioners, Simon Parsons to kick start a 'Save the Town Model' campaign via Facebook. An open meeting of concerned parishioners, former and current members of staff and Town Councillors was held in the Model Room. This resulted in prospective trustees coming forward to form a new Rye Heritage Centre charity to run the Centre – and preserve public access to the Model – from April this year.

To help ensure the success of this initiative, the Council has agreed to lease the Centre to the charity for 5 years at an annual rent of £1 – and also to sell the Model to the charity for £1 (subject to the Council having the option to buy it back if the charity no longer wants the Model for any reason).

Although we are delighted that, by working together, a positive outcome for the Heritage Centre has been achieved, this has come at a cost for some of our members of staff. The necessary restructuring process resulted in the loss of our Heritage Centre Manager, Louisa O'Shaughnessy and Senior Sales and Information Assistant Gill Pascall. I would like to take this opportunity to thank them both for all they did whilst employed at the Centre – as well as the help and advice they have given to the new charity.

The two remaining members of staff will be transferring to the Town Hall to staff the Information Point – and I am delighted to report that Gill has agreed to provide cover as, and when, she can – as has Valerie Wright (who worked at the Heritage Centre last year) – and also Paul Goring (Town Crier and Town Sergeant) and Michael Blumel (Deputy Town Crier).

[Neighbourhood Plan]

On 27 June last year, 677 of you (that's 86% of those expressing a preference) voted 'Yes' in a referendum – (and the question wasn't even *Do you want Rother District Council to abolish itself?*)

(The actual question was: *Do you want Rother District Council to use the Neighbourhood Plan for Rye to help it decide planning applications in the Neighbourhood Area?*)

Fortunately, you said 'yes' – otherwise, 5 years' of hard slog would have been for nothing!

Of course, it is doubtful that the Plan would have developed – to the extent of getting past the beady eye of a Government Planning Inspector – without the eye-watering amount of time contributed, voluntarily, by one of Rye's best known former military men, Colonel Anthony Kimber. I never doubted that he would see the process through – his personal motto being *Failure is not an option*.

The Council has formally recognised Anthony's contribution – more on that later – however, I can't let this moment go by without also thanking those former, and current, councillors – and members of the community – who sat on the Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group.

Aside from having more control over development within the Parish – and the Town Council now being eligible to receive 25% of any Community Infrastructure Levy paid by developers – one interesting thing to come out the Neighbourhood Planning process is that Rother now accepts that Rye's two remaining allotments are statutory (meaning they benefit from a degree of protection). Previously, Rother insisted that it held them as 'Temporary Allotments' under the 1972 Local Government Act. We argued that they are statutory because they have existed since the 19th century and, because Parish and Town Councils are the local 'Allotment Authority', they should be transferred to the Town Council.

It is fair to say that relations with Rother deteriorated further over this – in fact, we even contemplated a legal challenge.

However, something good emerged: the impasse saw the Rye Amenity CIC being formed so that the sites could be managed locally.

[George Fire]

Another momentous event that occurred in 2019 – and one which had a profound and long-lasting impact on the lives of many – was the devastating fire at the George.

Employees lost their jobs; local businesses continue to lose revenue that would have been derived from guests staying at the George; an iconic Listed building has been severely damaged - and life in the High Street will be disrupted for some considerable time to come.

It has taken a tragic event to appreciate fully just how much a 'thriving George' contributed to the local economy. The Town Council has not escaped unscathed: weddings at the Town Hall have been cancelled because a convenient combination for those wishing to wed or form a civil partnership is to have the

ceremony at the Town Hall and the reception at the George – where there is (usually) plenty of overnight accommodation.

We were all frustrated that it took so long for the building to be protected – during a time when we have experienced unprecedented amounts of rainfall. It was something of a relief when scaffolding was finally erected and, despite the inconvenience, we must hope that the splendour and vibrancy of the George is reinstated in the not-too-distant future.

[Parking/CPE]

The matter of parking – more specifically, the virtual absence of on street parking enforcement – has continued to be foremost in our minds as the County Council pressed on with the statutory requirements necessary to introduce civil parking enforcement within Rother.

Although the Town Council initially supported CPE in principle, by the time the formal consultation had concluded, it felt it had no choice but to rescind this support and urge the County Council to address local stakeholders' concerns – including the loss of one hour of free parking in, and around, the High Street and the proposed installation of large and unsightly ticket machines.

Originally, Rye Town Council – and other interested parties - were asked whether they would prefer CPE to be introduced as quickly as possible – which would mean that the Rother scheme would need to be based on the existing Traffic Regulation Orders. Most – perhaps all – stakeholders favoured this approach; however, it became apparent that the County Council was proposing to make some modifications – including removing the ability to park for up to an hour without charge; the introduction of disabled parking spaces (not a bad thing in itself) and the creation of a loading area in Cinque Ports Street. This prompted the question: *If some changes to the existing Traffic Regulation Orders are acceptable why can't the proposed scheme be tailored further to meet Rye's unique circumstances as an historic town with high visitor numbers and narrow streets?*

As it currently stands, County's Planning Committee has dismissed all objections submitted by Rye stakeholders. However, on the plus-side is the reduction of the number of ticket machines by about 50%. Although no amendments to the scheme presented to the Department for Transport will be allowed, the County Council has promised to review the scheme 12 months after its implementation – estimated to be some time between August and September.

Flat Mouth

There was much excitement when it was drawn to our attention by someone cataloguing publicly-accessible sculpture, that we had, unknowingly, been harbouring a native American Indian in the Town Hall attic.

A marble bust that Bonhams had told us many years ago was of Dante (I thought that it was either Max Wall or John Izod without his beard) turned out to be of *Aysh-ke-bah-ke-ko-zhay* – or ‘Flat Mouth’ to his friends – and there is an identical one in the museum of the US Senate.

Given the Council’s financial situation – and because no connection to Rye could be established – it was decided to auction the bust with Sotheby’s in London. Much to our astonishment, Flat Mouth greatly exceeded his £15-£20,000 guide price and, after the deduction of auction costs, generated just over £111,000 for the Council’s coffers. Although various suggestions have been made, no decision has yet been made on how the proceeds might be applied.

[Elections]

Following the Town Elections last May, we gained 3 new faces - David Bookless, Chris Hoggart and Sam Wood - and regained 2 familiar ones – David Amphill and Sam Souster. Those who chose not to stand for re-election – and who gave sterling service – were Sam Barnes, Justin Erswell, Berni Fiddimore, Charlie Harkness and Ray Prewer.

Our thoughts are with Councillor Bookless who has been very poorly since Christmas.

[Planning]

We have continued to let Rother have our views on Rye planning applications – whether they want them or not!

One of the lowlights of the year was Rother approving a 63-dwelling development on the former Lower School site in Ferry Road, with no requirement for the developer to build any ‘so-called’ affordable homes. By rights, under both Rother’s Core Strategy and our Neighbourhood Plan, 30% of the dwellings should be affordable. To say that this decision was disappointing is the understatement of the Century.

The developer provided Rother with sufficient evidence to support a claim that constructing affordable homes was not a viable proposition. Rother’s independent assessor agreed that the claim was justified and, under the current rules, was left with no choice but to approve the planning application – albeit subject to numerous conditions.

The only crumb of comfort is that the developer must pay the Community Infrastructure Levy and the Town Council will receive around £170,000 of this – which, subject to confirmation, could possibly be put towards the provision of affordable accommodation.

More recently, the Town Council opposed the outline application for the construction of 7 dwellings between Mill Lane, off Ferry Road, and the railway track – on the following grounds: height and density; adverse impact on the

privacy of the occupants of neighbouring dwellings; loss of green space; poor vehicular access and sightlines at the junction with Ferry Road; the location is prone to flooding, which would be exacerbated if the application site is developed – and insufficient sewerage capacity.

[Town Steward service]

Because we had difficulty recruiting a seasonal Assistant Town Steward last year – and then froze the post on financial grounds – we weren't able to do quite as much in the public realm as we would have liked.

That said, on behalf of the County Council, we continued to cut verges many more times than is the case in other parishes in Rother – and we know this is noticed and greatly appreciated by our parishioners. We also took on cutting the grass at the Love Lane Allotments on behalf of the Rye Amenity CIC.

We are looking to free up some time by purchasing a ride-on mower; however, there are a number of considerations that still need to be resolved – including finding a secure home for it.

I am pleased to report that our Town Hall Keeper has, additionally, taken on the Assistant Town Steward role. He successfully completed his Signing, Guarding & Lighting training before Christmas and both the Town Steward and Town Clerk completed their re-accreditation in the New Year.

[Landgate Clock appeal]

As many of you will be only too well aware, in recent years the Landgate Clock has fallen into disuse – and is now in need of repair and restoration. Consequently, I have started a fundraising appeal with the aim of returning the clock to its former glory. This clock is the Town's memorial to Queen Victoria's Consort - Prince Albert, and was paid for by public subscription.

Leading clock conservators, Thwaites & Reed have assessed the clock and have advised that £25,000 will be needed. Very good value, compared to Big Ben!

I hope you agree with me that such an important part of Rye's heritage needs to be functioning again – and that you will consider making a contribution. Details are within the papers you were given when you registered at the door. Many thanks to those who have already done so.

[Community support]

Although we were unable to distribute as many grants as we might have wished, once again we part funded the Rye Christmas Festival – which consistently receives high praise and is run entirely by volunteers – and also again froze the rent that the Rugby Club pays us to use the Freda Gardham Playing Field.

[Awards]

We were delighted to grant Honorary Freemanship to two more deserving parishioners during the year: Anne Wood and Anthony Kimber.

Anne was anointed by virtue of her rendering over 40 years of voluntary service, both formally and informally, to the Town and its Townsfolk.

Anthony's award was bestowed in recognition of his rendering nearly 20 years of voluntary service to the Town, notably co-ordinating and drafting the adopted Rye Neighbourhood Plan.

They join 5 other distinguished recipients: Frank Palmer, Lois Benton, Lesley Brownbill, Rex Swain and Priscilla Ryan.

W J Bennetts received a certificate from the Council to mark its centenary of trading.

[Staffing]

Now, in case you are thinking that the Town Clerk is looking somewhat jaded of late, this is not surprising given that, on 17th of January of this year, he had chalked up 20 years' service.

We thought this level of resilience should be rewarded – so we've made him share his office with the Deputy Town Clerk!

[Council Tax]

We are conscious that some of the organisations that charge you Council Tax every year will be levying larger increases than usual. I am pleased to say that Rye Town Council's increase for an average Band D tax payer will be 2.5% - that's 4 pence a week.

[Mayor Making]

This year's Mayor Making – and Hot Penny Throwing – will take place on Friday 8 May. Much to the chagrin of publishers of diaries, the Government recently decided to move the 2020 early May Bank Holiday from 4th May – so that communities had the option of marking the 75th Anniversary of Victory in Europe over 3 days – that is, over a long weekend.

In Rye, there will be a combined Mayor Making ceremony and VE Day commemoration on the 8th – including a Wurlitzer concert at the College to raise funds for the Rye Wurlitzer Academy – a registered charity.

