

M I N U T E S

of the

ANNUAL TOWN MEETING

held at the Assembly Rooms, Alton on Thursday
1st April, 1976 at 8 p.m.

Present: Councillor C. R. Read (Town Mayor)

Councillors M. C. Walker

D. A. Boxall

J. D. Mitton

M. Powell

C. O. G. Smith

G. D. Stratford

Mrs. H. E. West

Doctor M. B. Wilson

Colonel J. P. Archer-Shee, M.C.,

County Councillor for Alton

Lt. Colonel R. M. Digby, M.B.E.,

Chairman of East Hampshire District Council

Mr. R. M. Moores, Chief Executive,

East Hampshire District Council

together with approximately 12 members of the public.

26. Minutes

It was MOVED by Councillor Walker, SECONDED by Councillor Mrs. West and RESOLVED that the Minutes of the Annual Town Meeting held on the 22nd May, 1975 be taken as read and confirmed as a correct record.

The Minutes were then signed by the Town Mayor.

27. Apologies

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Miss P. J. Bradford, A. C. Brooking, L. E. Grant Ferguson and C. R. Miller.

28. Town Mayor's Address

The Town Mayor opened the meeting and introduced the guests.

He said he was not disappointed at the number of the public present as he felt this represented confidence both in the Town Council and in the policy it was pursuing.

He knew most of the members of the public present and felt that their interest in local government was such that there would be a quality of contribution that outweighed the quantity of those present.

The Town Mayor stressed that whilst he personally welcomed the opportunity afforded by such open meetings, that nevertheless the decision taking rested with the Town Council, all of whom were elected representatives.

Indeed without being too blunt he had to make the point that decisions were taken by the County Council, the District Council and the Town Council and nothing at this public meeting could bind such Councils, though he welcomed the opportunity to listen to the public's views.

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He felt that this was well illustrated by decisions taken by the Town Council during the past twelve months on various matters that had been raised at the last Annual Town Meeting.

A simple example concerned charges for football pitches on a Sunday morning and this had been happily resolved as indeed had other matters that had been raised, of which he gave both illustrations and the decisions taken by the Town Council.

He did however make the point that sometimes in an effort to keep costs to a minimum decisions were taken that proved more expensive in the long run and he feared this might be the case with Kings Pond and the filling in of the mud lagoons.

The Town Mayor recalled that last year concern had been expressed that the open air swimming pool might close but it had not been closed last year and so far as he was aware it would remain open during the summer of 1976.

The Town Mayor then referred to the proposed expenditure in the current year 1976/77 and remarked that whilst Alton still continued to levy the highest Parish rate within the District, nevertheless it did provide much better services than other parishes.

It had been possible to keep the equivalent rate poundage the same at 4.1p but there was still considerable capital expenditure to be undertaken.

The Council had decided to provide more car parking at Anstey Park and to replace the sewer; there was also a modest improvement to be made at Kings Pond which was dependent upon the widening of Ashdell Road.

Provided these schemes proceeded as scheduled then by March 1977 the Council's balance would be reduced to but £35,000 of which only £29,000 related to the working balance and he felt confident that no rate payer would feel this sum to be excessive, having regard to the obligations of the Town Council.

Even in being able to maintain the local rate equivalent to 4.1p the Council did not envisage bringing Chawton Park Road Playing Fields into use.

They were excellent playing fields with two pavilions, but fortunately the Council had been able to accommodate all sports at Anstey Park and there was no harm in allowing the grass at Chawton Park Road to become established.

He did however give a warning that if and when these playing fields were brought into use then the operating costs would be substantial.

There would be a need for a groundsman who would be heavily involved at week-ends with the increased rates of pay.

The pavilions were provided with water heated by electricity which was increasingly expensive and it was for this combination of reasons that the Council had decided for yet another year to postpone the use of these playing fields.

It was simply not possible to provide increased facilities at ever higher standards and to keep the local rate below the average for parishes within the District.

Alton did indeed provide better playing facilities than elsewhere.

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Playing fields however were not the only obligation of the Town Council which had responsibility both for the Assembly Rooms and allotments.

The demand for allotments in the past three years had been terrific; and this was quite understandable as food prices soared.

In an effort to meet this demand all allotment holders had been circulated asking if they would release half of their allotments and some had responded.

Elsewhere disused allotments had been brought into use and within the past year the exceptionally high figure of 70 allotments or half allotments had been let, leaving but 30 on the waiting list, but this list grew daily and further land would be required.

Efforts had been made to obtain planning permission on land at Cadnams Farm, Anstey Lane but had been refused.

There was now the possibility that land in Chawton Park Road could be developed and enquiries and a planning application were proceeding.

There would be a need for substantial fencing and the provision of services but the proximity of the Sports Centre must not be overlooked.

The Town Mayor next dealt with the question of Christmas Lighting and said the Town Council had resolved that for 1976 such lighting be provided.

In concluding his remarks the Town Mayor said he appreciated the concern of the public. However they were the elected representatives and as such it was only right for them to be kicked when the public felt they were wrong and he hoped praised when the public felt they were right.

This he felt brought him back full circle to his opening remarks when he said that the small number represented he hoped confidence in the policies of the Town Council.

At this point he felt he had spoken long and was only too happy to have a general discussion on any matters whatsoever be they the responsibility of the County Council, the District Council or the Town Council.

29. Consultation

Mr. Shardlow said he had found the Town Mayor's address both interesting and disturbing.

He was particularly concerned with the consultation by elected representatives and the electors they represented.

He did not always feel that there had been sufficient consultation or that the lines of communication were sufficiently strong.

The Town Mayor in reply said he found the question extremely interesting and he welcomed the opportunity for a discussion on the role of a Councillor.

His own interpretation was that whilst he was available he hoped at all times to listen to the views of his electors and indeed from members of the public who were not within his particular ward, nevertheless in the ultimate it was for a Councillor to vote as his conscience dictated.

Shardlow

He did not have to obtain a consensus of opinion before voting and it would be unfortunate if this had to be done.

He recalled that there were occasions when he himself had subscribed to a particular view but that during debate in the Council Chamber he had been persuaded to another view and this he felt was right.

The remedy after all did lie in the hands of the electorate and this was the great democratic safeguard.

If they felt that a member was not expressing their views or if they felt the Council as a whole was not carrying out their wishes then the opportunity for a change in policy occurred every three years when a new Council was elected.

In the meantime he would always defend his own personal attitude and his right to vote as he thought best having regard to all the circumstances at that time.

If one sought at all times to consult then you tended to have Government by Referendum and of the merits of this he was not convinced.

He believed it was the job of a Councillor to weigh up all the pros and cons of a situation and to honestly vote for what he or she believed to be the right answer.

More often than not that answer would be the one which the public wanted.

Mr. Shardlow reiterated his belief that some members of the Town Council did not consult and indeed communicate with their electors.

The Deputy Town Mayor, Councillor Walker, at the invitation of the Town Mayor said that for his part he did feel he was in touch with local feeling.

Alton was not a large town and the opportunities for consultation and discussion were numerous. He had himself brought matters from such discussions to the attention of the Council and he supported the attitude of the Town Mayor.

Colonel Archer-Shee explained that at County level it was very often necessary to make a decision on an area where one was not directly concerned; as such he should be objective.

Colonel Digby recalled his long experience in various levels of local government and he said that although Chairman of the District Council he did represent three parishes and it was the custom at a Parish Meeting which was held bi-monthly to allow an open forum before the commencement of the ordinary business of the Parish Council.

This forum gave any member of the Parish an opportunity to express his views, fears or doubts on any matter and Colonel Digby felt this to be a worthwhile innovation.

He did not agree that officers should be the links but that members themselves should be concerned with the matters in their area and raise such matters direct.

Councillor Smith said that he had attempted to inform and consult with the electors of his ward and because it was rather spread out he had arranged for two meetings to be held in separate halls on separate occasions within the ward so that he could learn of the wishes of the electors.

J. W. R.

It had been widely publicised but only five electors had turned up to one meeting and only four to the other.

At first he had felt disappointed but was consoled by the belief that it must reflect the view that most people were fairly content.

Councillor Boxall said he regularly stumped his ward and issued a frequent news sheet.

The Town Mayor in drawing this particular discussion to a close said he felt it had been constructive but that it was only fair that Mr. Shardlow should have the last word.

Mr. Shardlow said in conclusion that his fears were that Government was becoming too remote and as a "peasant in the hedgerow" it was a state of affairs that he deplored.

If Council members waited to be approached by the public then they may have to wait a long long time.

He was all for greater participation.

Mr. Hamblin then asked for comment from the elected representatives on the state of the roads which were more often up than down.

Colonel Archer-Shee also made a contribution as did Colonel Digby and Mr. Moores for the District Council.

In summing up the Town Mayor observed that the sewerage works had been extensive and it had also been necessary to replace a gas main in Turk Street because of the danger of an explosion.

Mrs. Barker then enquired about the roads at Ashdell Park which had not been taken over by the Council but which were not being maintained either by the appropriate authority.

Colonel Archer-Shee said that roads were the responsibility of the County Council and he would take up the matter with the County Surveyor.

Mrs. West said she had attempted to do so and had been instrumental in obtaining some success in that the roads had been gritted during the icy weather.

Mr. Camplin at the invitation of the Town Mayor enquired if the Town Clerk had been premature in announcing the departure of Victoria and Albert from Kings Pond.

With reluctance the Town Clerk admitted this was so.

Mr. Buck referred to the recent approval given to the construction of a new Police Station and Magistrates' Court in Nether Street and expressed fears about the loss of the Nether Street Car Park.

He recalled from the Minutes of the previous Annual Town Meeting that Colonel Digby had indicated the District Council's concern for the loss of parking that would occur.

Mr. Radford still felt there should be some parking for the public provided in this area.

Colonel Archer-Shee commented that there would be 70 or so car parking spaces provided in conjunction with the Police Station and Magistrates' Court but agreed that some would be occupied by officials and some by reluctant attenders at the Court.

W. G. C.

The Town Clerk said he could not recall provision being made in the original Town Map for an extensive car park in this area but that the map did provide for car parking at the rear of the area from the Assembly Rooms to Turk Street and also for the enlargement of the Turk Street Car Park to include the former stables of Courage's.

Mr. Moores regretted he could not help because it was essentially a matter of finance and it was most unlikely that funds would be available for at least twelve months to provide extra car parking in that area.

Councillor Powell felt the popularity of Nether Street was associated with its close proximity to the station and the fact that at present it was free, whereas a charge was made at the station.

Mr. Radford commented on the location of the Town Centre and felt the provision of a car park in Nether Street should be a pre-requisite to the construction of the new Police Station and Magistrates' Court.

Indeed he felt such car parking had been provided in the Town Map.

The Town Mayor said there had been a number of variations in the Town Map and the Town Clerk commented that from his recollection there was no large provision for car parking in the Nether Street area.

In addition to the Police Station and Magistrates' Court there was a substantial number of Council dwellings to be provided.

Mr. Buck felt the loss of the Nether Street Car Park would cause more parking in the side roads which in turn would lead to further parking restrictions.

Mr. Mann enquired about the condition of the Alton roads which were very bad and he did have experience as he travelled extensively.

Colonel Archer-Shee said that whilst much of the condition of the roads was due to the relaying of services nevertheless he would make a note of the complaint.

Mrs. West said that from the road safety angle they were also making representations to the County Council but the same answer was received - it was one of finance or rather the lack of finance.

At this point there was something of a hiatus but upon encouragement by the Town Mayor Mrs. Self was persuaded to enquire as to when the condition of Nursery Road would be improved.

Mr. Moores said the condition of the road was due to the modernisation of the Council dwellings and that in the fullness of time the road would doubtless be resurfaced by the County Council.

Mr. Buck then expressed concern at the danger for pedestrians at the Whitewall Lane/Chawton Park Road/Butts junction because of the increasing traffic to and from the Sports Centre and hoped that a pedestrian crossing could be provided.

The Town Mayor explained the difficulties of locating pedestrian crossings in positions that were satisfactory to all concerned.

Mrs. West said that from the road safety aspect representations had been made to the County Council who were investigating.

Mr. O'S

The Town Mayor was then delighted to break a confidence and enquire at the Town Clerk's behest as to Mr. Paul Buck's views on the signs in the Market Square, unfortunately adding the Town Clerk's comment that if Mr. Buck had no comment to make then would he kindly keep out of the Town Clerk's office in future.

Thus goaded Mr. Buck said that three large poles had been erected in the Market Square and he had attempted at considerable expense to find out their purpose and he gave as the surprising explanation that the Minister of Transport had to make a personal decision as to the type and size of wording of any signs that the poles would carry.

The audience, though impressed, did not really believe one word of this, but were too polite to say so.

Mr. Mann returned to the question of the improvement to the Council dwellings in Nursery Road and expressed the opinion that it was a great pity the opportunity had not been taken to underground the electricity cables.

He was associated with this work and his experience lead him to believe that very often the costs of the copper overhead wiring contributed substantially towards, or indeed exceeded the cost of underground cabling.

The Town Mayor said that from his experience such proposals for overhead lines had been opposed by local authorities but they had always been lead to believe the cost of underground cables was prohibitive.

Mr. Mann pointed out that with the modernisation there would be an increase in the consumption of electricity that would also reduce the deficiency from undergrounding.

Mr. Ron Moores indicated that in view of Mr. Mann's expertise if he would care to write explaining the position as he saw it to the District Council then his criticism would be investigated.

Mrs. Lewis then enquired as to the location of the 6th form college and on being told by the Town Clerk that it was to be on the playing fields in the Old Odiham Road with two accesses from the Old Odiham Road wondered if such accesses could be provided in view of the steepness of the bank.

There was then an abortive discussion on education and in particular the ages of entry to the various schools, but neither the County Council representative or the Governors of Eggar's School present were quite clear of the issue, but all felt that in the fullness of time that the position would become clear.

There being no other questions the Town Mayor drew the meeting to a close, by thanking first of all the members of the public for their attendance and to Colonel Archer-Shee, Lt. Colonel Digby and Mr. Ron Moores for accepting the invitation to be present and for answering questions.

The Deputy Town Mayor then proposed a vote of thanks to the Town Mayor for the way in which he had conducted the meeting.

The public graciously endorsed this vote of thanks.

Town Mayor.

31st March, 1977

Wm C. R. H. S.

