

M I N U T E S

of the

ANNUAL TOWN MEETING

held at the Assembly Rooms, Alton on Thursday 16th May, 1974 following the Fifth Meeting and the Annual General Meeting of the Alton Town Council.

Present: Councillor J. D. Mitton (Town Mayor)

Councillors C. R. Read
 J. R. Ambrose
 D. A. Boxall
 Miss P. J. Bradford
 A. C. Brooking
 L. M. Grant Ferguson
 J. H. Knight
 C. R. Miller
 E. Morgan
 M. Powell
 R. M. Sidaway
 C. O. G. Smith
 G. D. Stratford
 M. C. Walker
 Mrs. H. E. West

together with approximately 20 members of the public.

1. Apologies

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors E. T. Hutley and Doctor M. B. Wilson.

2. Town Mayor's Address

The Town Mayor opened the meeting by welcoming the members of the public and stating that the meeting was open to all local government electors of the town.

They could discuss matters which were peculiar to Alton.

It was a great opportunity for electors to air their views and let Councillors know of their complaints.

Electors were fortunate in having such an opportunity and it was a pity that the District Councils and the County Councils did not have any comparable meetings.

He said that irrespective of political creed, all Councillors had the interest of Alton at heart.

He expressed the hope that everyone wanted a constructive meeting, during which time members of the public could criticise the Council, bearing in mind that the purpose of the meeting was for the good of Alton and its electors.

The Mayor then invited questions from the public and said that the Councillors present would do their best to reply.

3. Rate Estimates

Copies of the Alton Town Council's rate estimates for 1974/75 were made available to all members of the public.

4. Time and Venue of Meeting

The first questioner was a Mr. Wyeth who suggested that the time of the meeting i.e. 6 p.m. was much too early for 90 per cent of the working population.

Mrs. Kerridge wondered where future meetings of the Town Council would be held and was told they would be held in the Town Hall, in the Market Square.

The Town Meeting was being held in the Assembly Rooms as there was insufficient space in the Town Hall for many members of the public.

The Mayor gave an assurance that the Council would bear Mr. Wyeth's point in mind when fixing the time for the next Town Meeting.

5. Swimming Pool

Mr. Manning then made several points regarding the Swimming Pool.

He understood the machinery had broken down last season and that this could have been rectified during the winter. He thought the proposals to close the Pool earlier in the evening than in previous years, and to close for a period during the day were unsatisfactory as it prevented people from having a "lunch-time" swim. He also felt the Pool could be opened earlier in the morning.

He asked questions such as how much the Attendant was paid for the enormous responsibility he had, whether the Swimming Club paid sufficient and also whether the schools paid for their use of the Pool and whether they in fact paid enough.

He thought it was a great pity that the Pool was not opening to the public at the same time as in previous years and suggested that this must mean a loss of income.

The Mayor replied by reminding those present that these criticisms had been set out in the Parks and Open Spaces Committee Minutes deprecating the fact that the Pool was not working as well as in previous years and that the proposals were to reduce the service to the public.

The questioner was informed that the schools did in fact pay for the use of the Pool as did the Swimming Club.

A sum of £6,000 had been handed over to the new authority so they had a sizeable balance to start with.

The East Hampshire District Council had set higher standards for safety and hygiene than had hitherto been the case. The Town Council hoped that the new authority would see the public could enjoy the facilities at the Pool as in the past.

Mr. Carr was concerned that the Pool had been built for Alton and money had been raised by the people of Alton in the first place; therefore the people of Alton should have a prominent voice in the running of the Pool.

It was believed that the constitution of the Committee would be subject to the approval of the Department of Education and Science.

It was pointed out that the representation on the new Management Committee would be 6 representatives from the East Hampshire District Council, of which not more than 2 would be residents of Alton Town, 2 representatives appointed by Alton Town Council and 4 from other bodies.

Councillor Grant Ferguson made the point that Alton had, in his view, been lucky in having had a low accident rate at the Pool.

He felt the supervision of the Pool had not always been what it should be and the standard of hygiene needed looking at; the Attendant should have a break during the day and should not be expected to work from 9 a.m. to 7 p.m. if he was to be alert and prepared for an emergency at any time. The Assistant Attendant engaged last year had suffered from deafness.

Questions were put as to why the East Hampshire District Council had taken over the Pool when it could have been run by the Alton Town Council and continued to have made a profit as it had in the past.

The Mayor explained that the District Council thought it marched naturally with the new Sports Centre and therefore the District Council had had the last word.

Mr. Manning questioned the policy to allow only 300 people in the Pool at any one time and speculated as to how it would be possible to count the 300 heads.

The suggestion was made that a high seat such as is used for tennis umpires could be installed to enable the Attendants to watch the Pool more carefully.

Assurances were given that the Alton Town Council was keeping a close watch on the running of the Swimming Pool through their representatives on the Committee.

6. Parish Rate

Mr. Martin commented on the fact that there was a 60 per cent increase in the combined District, County and Parish Rate.

In particular he asked how the Town Council could justify levying a rate of 5.5p when Petersfield was levying a rate of 1.5p.

In his view the Town Council had kept functions that were a liability and had "given away" things that were paying.

By this he meant the amount of £36,000 on playing fields.

He thought the Town Council was doing work that the District Council should be doing.

He agreed that Parish Councils were necessary, but he thought a figure of £14,841 for running the Town Hall out of a total expenditure of £100,000 was excessive.

Mr. R. Ormond also held this view. He felt that the Swimming Pool should have remained the responsibility of the Town Council and the playing fields should have been passed to the District.

The Mayor explained that the Parish Rate had been fixed at 5.5p to allow for the project of Kings Pond to be continued, to open up a further open space at Windmill Hill and to complete the Chawton Park Road playing fields. These being projects to which the Council was already committed.

He agreed that Alton was paying a higher rate than Petersfield, but they were getting greater benefit.

Councillor Stratford pointed out that the people of Alton had enjoyed a level rate for the past 10 years. This had been brought about by the skill of the Councillors and the Officers who had managed their affairs in the past.

As a result ratepayers had been lulled into a false sense of security.

Alton was a better place to live in than Petersfield; it had far more amenities.

He said that Alton wanted a capital reserve, of which 2p had been allocated out of the 5.5p, to be able to set aside for future projects.

Councillor Grant Ferguson admitted that the increase in rates had shocked the country from top to bottom.

The rural areas had been hit particularly hard.

He also thought Alton's parish rate was too high.

He said that he and his colleagues had been rather worried about paying for the running of the new Sports Centre.

He thought it was pride that made the Alton Urban District Council pay for the construction of the Sports Centre themselves and that it would now have to pay for this pride in the running costs.

A Mr. Webster asked why the cost of Allotments i.e. £1,000 was so high.

It was explained that there were loan charges and maintenance costs of fencing, hedges and footpaths etc. with very little income.

Mr. Gostelow asked whether something could be done about the footpath on the allotments at the end of Nursery Road as they were unable to gain access to the Allotments.

The Mayor promised that this matter would be investigated.

Another questioner (unknown) asked why the Town Council was running the Parks and Open Spaces and the Mayor explained that these were traditional functions of Parish Councils.

Councillor Stratford considered that Alton had some of the finest playing fields in the district.

Mr. Buck considered the Capital Fund to be much too high at 35 per cent and he wondered if there was a maximum rate that the Council was allowed to charge.

The Mayor explained that there was now no maximum.

Councillor Stratford did not think it was the Council's intention to continue a capital levy forever.

Once a good reserve was reached it could be omitted as the interest would bring in an income.

The Town Clerk told the meeting that local authorities could operate capital funds and there was a great advantage in doing so.

It was not possible to embark on a scheme like Kings Pond without the necessary funds. It was considered a purely local amenity but to bring it into use was an expensive operation.

A dredging contract had been started which it was hoped would be paid for by the District Council as the order had been placed before the end of March.

Unless the Council started off with some reserves no schemes could be contemplated.

There was also Windmill Hill. If residential development in the area took place then the Windmill Hill Open Space would have to be opened up and financed.

The Town Council had not yet run for even one year so it was not yet known if they could cut down on administration costs.

He hoped the estimates had a reasonable margin built in but it was all money that was intended to be spent essentially for Alton.

Before Government Grant was deducted it represented a rate of 5.5p out of a total rate of 61.8p.

He said Alton's past record had been good and he would try and exercise restraint and care and try and see that costs were kept to a minimum. This was the Council's aim.

On being asked whether he had in mind a ceiling figure for the Capital Fund the Town Clerk said he thought something in the region of £50,000 but that it would depend on a number of factors.

A member of the public asked why gravel had been laid at Kings Pond around the perimeter making a footpath and then weeds allowed to grow through and nothing further done.

The Mayor pointed out that the gravel had been put down so that the people could walk around the pond with safety, but that money was not available at the time to carry out further works.

Mr. Phillips pointed out that the public was worried about rising costs, that two-thirds of the expenditure of the Town Council was on sporting amenities and many people felt they would not benefit from this expenditure.

He thought they would have preferred a small rate to start with and then a gradual increase.

Mr. Manning pointed out that Chawton was getting all the facilities of Alton and not paying a penny for them.

Councillor Stratford said that so far as the District Rate was concerned over a period of four years everyone would pay the same, but at the moment there was a differential because the increase in the rural areas was higher than in the urban areas.

It would eventually be levelled out.

A lady, who described herself as working for the East Hampshire District Council, said she was fairly new to Alton and that people were proud of Alton, but they wanted to know just what the Town Council did.

The Mayor said his only suggestion was that the Alton Town Council should give themselves more publicity, and perhaps the Press could help in this way.

Councillor Grant Ferguson said that if the District Council took over the Parks and Open Spaces, Alton would no longer have complete control over the amenities.

6.

Councillor Grant Ferguson then MOVED that the Council look very carefully at its rate estimates and explore any means of bringing them back to a more acceptable level.

SECONDED by Mr. Phillips.

On being put to the vote the motion was CARRIED by the members of the public present.

7. Traffic Regulations

Mr. Carr asked when the Traffic Regulations Order would be coming into force and if it differed in any way from the previous Order approved by the Council.

The Mayor explained that it was virtually the same Order as the previous one except for a few minor alterations such as extra signs on the edge of the town to divert traffic away from the centre and with the addition of width restrictions.

Mr. Huck asked if the Town Council could be very stringent in seeing that the Regulations were enforced by the Police.

The Mayor agreed to bring this point to the attention of the enforcing authority i.e. the Police.

The meeting closed.



Chairman.