

# Chairman's Report, May 2020

We had scheduled Thorverton's Annual Parish Meeting in May, but that plan has of course been scuppered. At that meeting I, as Chairman of the Parish Council, would have been expected to have made a report on the Council's activities over the past year. This report gives such an overview. I should explain that it is inevitably a personal reflection.

The year started with the four-yearly election, which resulted in the Council comprising Stuart Crang, Bob Deed, Rob Flatt, Andrew Foster, John Hodge, Hilary Lawson, Graham Sims, David Waldron, Keeley Wells and myself. Hilary stood down half-way through the year due to work and home commitments, with Sam Fice co-opted to fill her place.

All activities carried out by the Parish Council should enact resolutions made by Council, so in order to draw up this report I decided to trawl through the last year's minutes. However, while I could give a strictly chronological report, I soon realised that I should actually start with looking at the aims of the Council, as adopted in September 2019, and consider how we had acted to implement those aims. I will not repeat those aims in full here – they have been well publicised on the Council's notice board and website and in *Focus* – but will use the four main headings of how the Parish Council aims to serve the local community.

## 1. We care for the wellbeing of the community

One of the key tasks of the Council is to set its budget for the year and hence the precept. We had a very thorough discussion at our January meeting, reviewing the budget line by line. Council took the view that it should draw on its reserves if necessary so that the overall precept figure was one which meant that households would actually end up paying just slightly less Council Tax to the Parish Council than in 2019/20.

With the help of John Hodge, Council developed an Emergency Plan last year, although we did accept that it was in reality only really an advanced draft and heavily focused on the risk of flooding. Nevertheless, it does contain a potentially very useful section for all householders of a Home Emergency Plan. One thing that the current pandemic should have taught us is the need to expand plans such as this so that they can be brought into operation for a wider range of emergency situations.

The Recreation Ground is a real asset for the community, and Council, acting as Trustees, is responsible for checking the equipment and ensuring that it is in good condition. I am grateful to Graham Sims for leading on this and for ensuring that repairs have been made as necessary. The floodlight at the Recreation Ground for the Devon Air Ambulance

Night Landing Site was installed and there was an official opening event at the WI Hut on 31<sup>st</sup> October which was well attended. David Waldron deserves some credit for driving this mini-project to an excellent conclusion. Parishioners will be aware that we have another asset - a defibrillator – which was sited on the wall of Parker's Insurance Office in The Bury. Unfortunately, the business moved, and so the defibrillator had to be relocated to the wall of the Doctors' Surgery. We are grateful to them for allowing it to be housed there and to Maggie Dunlop for co-ordinating regular checking and training. Council has recently agreed that we should seek to purchase a second defibrillator, to be housed on the WI Hut.

## 2. Community activities are promoted

A significant activity in 2019 was the Thorverton Community Archaeology Project. This took place in a field farmed by Nick Heard just to the west of the churchyard. It was a condition that the field should be surveyed for its archaeology before it could be considered as a suitable site for a new cemetery. The project had two principal planks: firstly, a geophysical survey in June, which included an Open Day and concluded with an Open Meeting at the Memorial Hall at which the project team presented the findings to more than 50 people; and secondly, an archaeological survey of the site in September which involved more than 300 people, culminating in an Open Day at which some of the artefacts were available and the project team was able to explain to people what had been found. Council also appointed an evaluator, Vanita Eden, to assess the project, and we should have that evaluation and the final report from AC Archaeology later this year. I am grateful to the Working Group for having organised the Archaeology Project. Council is now looking at the next steps towards using part of the area as a new cemetery.

Council does set aside a small amount of money for grants. During the course of the year awards were made to Thorverton Kids Club to help get the club going; to Thorverton Millennium Green Trust towards housing for their new mower; to Mid Devon Mobility for their assistance to people in the area; to the Citizen's Advice Bureau, given their assistance to some parishioners; and to Thorverton Parochial Church Council to help with their churchyard maintenance expenses.

The mower used at the Recreation Ground to keep the grass under control is nearing the end of its life and Council has been exploring with the Football Club how it might replace the mower. This has yet to be concluded satisfactorily, so remains on our "to do" list. Council has also sought to strengthen the relationship with the Cricket Club, but that is rather on hold for the moment due to the current restrictions on sporting activities.

Another activity that has had to be postponed is the training and support which we wanted to see offered to parishioners wishing to be more IT proficient. This is something that Keeley Wells had set up through Devon Digital Lives, and was due to have been delivered in March.

### 3. There is engagement with the community

Council has an active website, maintained by our Clerk, Alison Marshall. This includes the Council's policies, which in 2019 were adopted by Council for the four-year term of the Council, without routine annual review (although of course they can be updated or amended if required, with agreement at a Council meeting). There is also now a Facebook page for Thorverton Parish Council. We will use this to post messages and also to receive comments. We have continued - until March anyway - to have a presence at Saturday Markets so that parishioners can speak to a councillor.

I am pleased to say that Council meetings have included some lively discussion over the past year. There hasn't always been agreement on all points, but councillors have been able to put their views so that any resolutions made have been properly debated. We have tried to make our minutes comprehensive so that people can understand what was discussed and what was resolved.

We held our first annual satisfaction survey in November 2019. We did not receive a large number of completed survey forms, so will be hoping to attract more in 2020. We really do need to understand how people perceive the Council if we are to make improvements.

Council agreed a climate emergency plan in September, which included support for the Thorverton Climate Action Group, established by John Spivey. Council has invited help in developing three ideas: for an electric car charging point; for a local share shop; and for a communal compost bin. To date no parishioners have come forward to offer to help develop a plan for any of these, so if you feel that you could draw up a plan that could then be considered by Council, please don't be shy.

### 4. The parish is regarded as a lovely place to live

For the first half of last year we had Colin Marshall employed as our handyman keeping the village in good shape. Since October, when Colin decided that it was time to pass this on, Neville Matthews has taken on the role. And what a great job they have both done! Many people have commented on how great Thorverton is looking. We had been renting garage space for equipment at Bridge House, but have now taken garage space at Broadlands, where we keep the equipment for the handyman, including a trailer which

the Council has purchased. Council also organised a Tidy-Up Day last July at which people were able to help with tasks around the village. We have another Tidy-Up Day arranged for 27<sup>th</sup> June, which might need a bit more careful organising this year given the restrictions.

I am sure that most of you will be aware that Hulk Lane is now open as a bridleway. Council did seek some clarification from Devon County Council's Highways department over the exact status of this and that resulted in two meetings with them. We are fortunate to have such a lovely pathway to use and Council will be seeking to ensure that it remains so.

The wall in Dark Lane has been in need of repair for some while and it is a shame that we have not been able to complete the work yet. Given the condition, it was not practicable to repair the stonework and so we have pursued the option of railings, which should be put in place once coronavirus restrictions are eased.

Council had been interested in purchasing the Sheep Dip, making it into a pleasant area to sit or play, using section 106 funds (money from planning applications). We had had a conditional offer accepted by the Church Commissioners. However, we felt that we should first have a contamination survey carried out given the chemicals which would have been used at the Sheep Dip, albeit some years ago now. That survey indicated high levels of arsenic and other chemicals, and so the Council concluded that it would be irresponsible to carry on with the purchase. The area should be avoided.

More recently, Council agreed to support the local C19 Support Group of volunteers and made some money available should it be needed by this Group for any emergency. That has been added to by grant from Devon County Council's Prompt Action Fund.

I hope that some of you have found this whirlwind tour a helpful reminder. Do feel free to comment because if we don't receive comments we are very much left to our own views and these may not always fully pick up the concerns of parishioners. All that remains is for me to thank all councillors for their input over the year, and our clerk, Alison Marshall, for managing so successfully to make sense of our ramblings and for carrying forward our actions.

*Neville Lane  
Chairman, Thorverton Parish Council*