

Since the last Parish Meeting the Council has met 9 times and has discussed more than 50 topics. As usual I will give an outline of the most important ones, and you are then welcome to ask questions and make comments as you wish.

### **Village Green**

I had a look at the first report I compiled, which was in 2001. The first topic was Village Green. This was, of course, a hardy annual as far as Longhorsley is concerned, and remains so. However, this year we have been able to take some steps to make the Council's, and therefore the Parish's, position clearer and more secure. Some of you will know that under the Commons Registration Act 1965 all Village Greens had to have an owner. If no claims to ownership were registered, it was vested in Parish Councils. However, the Land Registry did not recognise this, as there was no evidence of title, and Parish Councils were left in an insecure position if their ownership was put to the test in any way. About a year ago, the Registry offered Local Authorities the chance to prove their title voluntarily, and we decided to take this up. As you would expect, it was a complicated process, but the Registry at Durham was extremely helpful, and gave us a lot of advice. They charged us the minimum fee, and provided us with a map which is far clearer than the one we originally had. There were legal fees, of course, but these would have been far greater without their assistance. Kate and I went to a seminar about this, and were reassured that the Council was doing the right thing. For one thing, we were told it would become compulsory at some stage, and then would inevitably be more expensive. We also learned that Longhorsley is not the only Parish in Northumberland to have Village Green problems. In one village in the Tyne Valley people are extending their gardens, and in another, not a million miles from here, a developer is including sections of Village Green in the plots being built on. This could not happen if the title was registered, because it is guaranteed by the state. One of our main concerns was to be sure that we were registering only the parts of Village Green which were not in private hands. They remain Village Green, but the Council has no power over them. The registration has been verified at County Hall. I am not foolhardy enough to suggest that all the problems will go away, but the Council will now be able to make decisions as a landowner, not just as a guardian.

### **Church View Play Area**

As I said in 2001, Village Green is not all bad news. Large sums of money have been received by the Council in association with land exchanges. The main source of this was the development of Church View, and along with that came the playground, which the Council adopted. This year it has been transformed, largely as a result of very hard work by a group of parents led by Rachel Robbins. They raised most of the money, and dealt with the overall design, but the Council was able to make a contribution out of its capital fund.

### **Village Hall**

Unfortunately, the Village Hall was not as successful in its fund raising. Rules and policies of funding sources were repeatedly changed, and the New Hall Committee eventually decided that enough was enough. A new plan of action is being developed, and the Council will support them in any way it can, including the money already set aside for that purpose. I will say more about that later.

### **Relationship with Higher Tiers**

We are consulted by Castle Morpeth Borough Council about all Planning Applications, and from time to time our views are taken into consideration. Unfortunately, this is not always the case, and the Borough does not always seem to follow its own policies.

We do our best, including speaking at meetings of the Development Committee, and it is also helpful if enough people make individual comments to Castle Morpeth. As always a balance has to be found between what people want to do with their own property, and the effect that has on the wider population. If we have comments, we try to make them based on our knowledge of the general view, but it is not going to be possible to please everyone.

We also make comments on proposals by the Borough, the County, and other bodies like Strategic Partnerships, Area Agreements, and even Central Government. There is an increasingly complex array of bodies which are supposed to work together. Not all of these are elected, their responsibilities seem to overlap, and they go out of existence, only to be replaced by others which start all over again. It can be very frustrating trying to get action from them, and some seem to exist only to talk.

It goes without saying, that our dealings with the Borough and County are made much easier and more successful because our corner is fought, both at County Hall and Longhirst, by Glen Sanderson.

One important issue on which no one has been effectively consulted is the proposed change in the government of the County. It may be that it was thought wise not to ask a question the answer to which could not be predicted. It could be that it was thought even wiser not to ask a question the answer to which would not be the preferred one. For what it is worth, this Council expressed a preference for the two Council model – one for the South East, and one for the rural part of the County. The Government will make what the White Paper calls “preliminary decisions” on the proposals by the County and the Boroughs at the end of this month. It will then have a period of consultation with what these days are called “stakeholders” before making its “final decisions” in July. Any one of three outcomes is possible – the single Council which may or may not be favoured by the County, the two Councils favoured by almost everyone else, or leaving things as they are with a greater emphasis on co-operation at all levels. Whatever happens, Parish Councils will have a continuing important role in being representatives at the level closest to the electorate.

### **Change**

There are several aspects of life in Longhorsley which are changing. Some of this is because people who have made a significant contribution have moved away, or have run out of steam. The Village Hall Committee finds it difficult to cope with day to day management, the more so because of the increasing burden of legislation and regulation heaped on small organisations. At present, the Hall has a nucleus of four very competent and hard working people to do the work. The Hall is a vital part of the Parish, which has been run by a loyal band of workers for many years. For various reasons they are gradually withdrawing, and if they are not replaced, there will be serious problems. Running the existing service will become impossible, let alone any scheme to renovate or replace the building.

Attempts are still being made to organise Village Day for this year. It always seems to be a cliff-hanger, but this time there is a serious risk that it will not happen.

We can only hope that Longhorsley’s reputation as an active village and Parish will not dwindle away, and that new people will come forward to replace those who have willingly carried the burden for so long.

### **The Future**

This is an Annual Report, but it is also something of an end of era report.

This Council reaches the end of its term at the elections in May. Not all of us are standing again, so we need new recruits for what is likely to be an interesting time in Local

Government. The deadline for delivery of nomination papers to the Returning Officer at Longhirst is Midday Wednesday 4 April.

When I joined the Council in 1999, I had no idea that I would be Chairman a year later. I did not expect to be in the same position seven years later. I have been greatly helped and supported by the people who have been on the Council during that time. Believe me, they have made significant contributions to the well-being of Longhorsley, and I am very grateful to them for all they have done.

But we have all had enormous support and help from our two officers – Kate and Ruby. Ruby became Responsible Financial Officer about 12 years ago, and has kept the financial records impeccably since then. She had a lot of extra work when the Audit system changed, but we have had no problems with the Auditor, and we could give answers to all questions raised because all the necessary information was accessible.

Kate became Clerk in 1985, following on from her husband. Her longstanding residence in Longhorsley, and her immersion in all aspects of village and Parish life, have made her a fount of knowledge and wisdom which she has readily shared with all newcomers. She has had to deal with the successive changes in personnel on the Council, and an endless stream of legislation. She was the first Clerk in Northumberland to be awarded the Certificate in Local Council Administration, which enabled us to become only the second Quality Council in Northumberland. Her knowledge will be impossible to replace, but we have been very fortunate to appoint a new Clerk who will take on the responsibilities of Kate and Ruby. We hope Louise will settle quickly into her role, and will have a long and fruitful relationship with the Council and the people of Longhorsley.