

MINUTES OF THE ANNUAL TOWN MEETING OF MUCH WENLOCK

held via Zoom video conference
at 7.00 pm on Tuesday, 11th March 2021

IN ATTENDANCE:

22 electors of the parish
2 non-electors of the parish
Town Clerk

Abbreviation used throughout: Shropshire Council - SC

1. WELCOME

The Town Mayor, Councillor Daniel Thomas, welcomed everyone to the meeting.

2. MINUTES

The minutes from the Annual Town Meeting held on 12th March 2019 were considered for approval.

NB. No meeting was held in 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

It was PROPOSED, SECONDED and AGREED that the minutes be APPROVED as a true record.

3. MAYOR'S REPORT

The Mayor gave the following report:

It's been a strange year for our Council and its 11 volunteer Councillors, who are now all well acquainted with Zoom, something we couldn't have said a year ago! Just like the excellent online Wenlock Parish church services, the Town Council has ably utilised technology to ensure that local democracy has been alive and well in our great town and surrounding areas.

It's truly been a tough year on all of us, but I'm incredibly proud of what this Council, its staff and Councillors have achieved. Arguably it was a rather miserable year to be Mayor, but it's made the things I have been able to attend more special. With many Cllrs considering retiring at May's election I have been nominated to become Mayor again (election pending). Nominated as Deputy is Cllr Duncan White, who has had a strong impact in his time on the Council and congratulations to him. I hope you'll find us a good pair if we both get elected in May.

On this subject, please do consider standing for Town Council election in May but expect to work hard if you do! There is an online event tomorrow night run by the Shropshire Association of Local Councils explaining what we do and what it's like to be a Councillor - link on the Town Council website.

As a Councillor, and certainly as Mayor, you see all the volunteer work that people do, making you really appreciate the spirit, friendship and feeling of belonging it creates in a community. From volunteer litter pickers, to Wenlock Clickers, to the Wenlock Walkers or the Civic Society – these things take time, but they add so much value and enjoyment to townspeople's lives.

Much Wenlock Mutual Aid

One big volunteer effort I've been involved in this year has been Much Wenlock Mutual Aid, which actually came about from a VE day meeting group. We started planning VE day celebrations here and ended up organising prescription runs, dog walks and much more across the parish and beyond. My wife and I coordinated the volunteers who came forward to help – over 140 of you! Most Wenlock people set about helping their family, friends and neighbours - which shows the measure of our town – but we helped around 90 people who could have slipped through the net. If you volunteered but didn't hear from us that's why, because so many people did. Decisions were mainly made on geography, although with an American wife it wasn't her strongest suit!

Number 10 High Street

When the property we know as Number 10 High Street was vacated by Barclays Bank the Town Council were quick to act. The Council purchased the property for the residents to ensure the continuity of the presence of the much-valued cash machine, which has been in place for some years now and is well used and one of the busiest in Shropshire. The self-contained flat above continues to be rented out and bring in revenue to the Council.

In the last year a working party led by Councillor White has been formed to help develop and find a new use for the former banking premises. A consultation took place with the residents of the town to consider possible future uses for the premises. The results are being analysed and the next stage is to research the financial feasibility of community use. We hope to visit similar projects in other towns that are already up and running, but of course this has not been possible during the pandemic. As soon as possible this stage will be commenced and then the full council can be advised and

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decide on the next steps for the future of the building. In the meantime, the frontage has been given a coat of paint to freshen it up and improve its appearance.

Small Market Towns Fund

In the absence of a Chamber of Commerce, Much Wenlock Town Council had the opportunity to bid for a small market towns fund. The Council was awarded £5,000, the maximum available. This money was used to provide business coaching by nationally acclaimed and local company Good2Great, a video promoting the town created by Virtual Shropshire and the Wenlock Edge Festival of the Spoken Word and some new signage, which we'll be putting up when it's safe and appropriate to do so. I hope to see this in April when Shropshire Council's car parks become temporarily free again, Covid-19 permitting.

Litter & Pigeons

Strangely, lockdown seems to have seen an increase in litter but thankfully Much Wenlock is blessed with a hard-working litter picking group. I'm pleased to say the Town Council has recently purchased a litter-picking buggy and new high vis vests to support their endeavours.

Similarly, the Town Council has invested in anti-pigeon measures for the town, in particular proofing the Guildhall. As I think we can all agree, at best it looked a mess and at worst was a public health hazard. I'd also like to thank our handyman, Andy Firmstone, for cleaning the church bench by the Guildhall regularly - it is an unpleasant task but very important.

Finance

The precept for 2021/22 will be £208,203.00. This is an increase of 1.84% on the current year and equates to a £5.52 annual rise per Band D Household. The council expects to finish this year on budget, despite reductions in income from Guildhall exhibition sales and market stall rental. I will cover financial information for Gaskell Ground projects under the appropriate agenda item.

Ironbridge Power Station & Transport

The Town Council has grave concerns about the effects of development in nearby parishes and its effects on our infrastructure. The Town Council has objected to the Ironbridge Power Station development. We are very concerned that the additional traffic from the Power Station will add to the rat-running through the Town. The Council's Transport Working Group has submitted some technical support for our objections, and we hope to address the special Shropshire Council Planning meeting on 23rd March to reinforce those objections.

To help address these concerns and those of residents on Sheinton Street, Queen Street and other parts of Wenlock already affected badly by traffic problems, the Town Council has set up a Transport Working group of Cllrs and members of the public. Next Council permitting, this Group will seek to carry out a residents' survey to gather views from all members of the community on transport matters, including the level of support for a bypass.

Other Matters

I'm eagerly awaiting the outcome of a project to produce a book, provisionally titled "Much Wenlock in the Pandemic", and I'm pleased to hear from Councillor Hill that we have submissions from a range of people across Much Wenlock about their experiences. The plan is to print a reference copy for the Wenlock Archives with a number of paperback copies being produced for sale locally.

On a personal note, I'd like to mention that it's been a real honour to have been Mayor of the town I grew up in and love. It's been an incredible experience and one I will always remember; I've had fantastic support from a range of people, too many to mention. A special mention to my fellow Town Councillors who've been a pleasure to work with and, of course, our staff, who have been brilliant.

4. REPORT FROM THE TOWN COUNCIL PLANNING & ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE

Cllr Mary Hill, Chair of the Planning & Environment Committee, gave the following report:

The Planning & Environment Committee has continued to scrutinise and comment on all local planning applications forwarded to us by Shropshire Council. During the past year the majority of applications have been straightforward and in no way contentious. We are, however, continuing to see applications for the conversion of garages or other small garden buildings to residential dwellings. A recent application was for a large three bay garage. The plot in question housed a small cottage already with a detached garage. From past experience, the committee concluded that sometimes in the future the footprint of a large three bay garage would very easily be turned into an annexe and then into another residential dwelling – all on a small plot. We have consistently opposed this kind of creeping development.

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During this past year we have received two instances of the use of Certificates of Lawful Development, which concerned us. The recent changes in the National Planning Policy Framework now allow extensions or other development to take place which previously would have required a full planning application. The Planning & Environment Committee is informed of the applications for Certificates of Lawful Development but there is no opportunity for the Committee to make any comments or representations. A particular instance of this occurred recently and we received a number of adverse comments by neighbours regarding a proposed first floor extension. We were simply advised of the application by SC, but not allowed to comment.

The second instance of lawful permitted development concerns Shadwell Quarry. Nick Allen from Avon Estates, the new owners, agreed to join us (remotely) at a Town Council meeting to explain the plans they had for the quarry. We were perturbed to hear that the number of proposed chalets on the site would be increased significantly. Recently we were informed that the original number of 53 would be increased to 130, again by means of a Certificate of Lawful Development. The following statement was sent to the Planning & Environment Committee by a Shropshire Council Planning Officer when we expressed our disquiet that we had no say in the huge increase in the number of chalets: "The process of considering a certificate of lawfulness for proposed development does not change due to the numbers proposed, but the legal issue of whether intensification can amount to a material change of use will be one of the main considerations here. There is complex case law on this issue which will have to be looked at. It is concluded that the proposal is not lawful the applicant will have the choice of appealing against a refusal to the Planning Inspectorate or submitting a planning application. The latter would be considered in the same way as any planning application and the Town Council would be consulted."

The Planning & Environment Committee has worked alongside the volunteer Flood Group when commenting on some applications. In the recent past the Connexus Housing Group put forward proposals for a 14 house affordable development adjacent to their existing Callaughtons Ash estate. Whilst we supported the principle of a Callaughtons Ash 2, we could not support the planning application in its current form because the drainage plan was totally inadequate. A revised drainage plan has now been produced and we shall discuss it at our next meeting.

The Town Council has been keen to support the Climate Emergency declared by SC. Lockdown has made it difficult to put plans in place to meet the Church and other environmental groups, but the intention will be to form a working group once the new Council is in place."

A member of the public commented with regard to permitted development:

- There were two types of permitted development, one which had applied to the application for changes to a dwelling at Hunters Gate and another for Shadwell Quarry. Although Shropshire Council had no duty to consult with regard to Shadwell Quarry, they could have done. Even without an invitation, the Town Council could have submitted comments and concerns, including to the local MP.

Councillors responded that concerns had been expressed to the appropriate SC Planning Officer with regard to Shadwell Quarry. In future Town Councillors would be better prepared for such new types of application and would ensure their voices were heard.

5. GASKELL RECREATION GROUND

Cllr Daniel Thomas, Chair of the Gaskell Recreation Ground Charity, gave the following report:

This year has been a massive year for the Gaskell Ground, where we have largely finished the drainage project and completed the path and access through to William Brookes School. We have agreed that once it's safe with Covid-19 the gate at William Brookes school will be open, allowing people to walk through onto the field and make use of the two disabled parking spaces. We have advanced well with the Gaskell Management Plan and I'd like to thank everyone involved who has made this possible.

The new path has benefited people of all ages, people with wheelchairs and pushchairs, children learning to ride bikes and runners/joggers using the path, as well as those walking. The path has been welcomed by the community and is being very well used. The LEADER grant funding we successfully applied for still left a shortfall of around £20,000, despite a contribution from William Brookes School.

This shortfall in funding was of great concern but thanks to significant contributions to the project from the Much Wenlock Forester Charitable Trust and the Lady Forester Trust we managed to complete the project. I cannot express my gratitude enough to them for their generosity and for allowing the project to go ahead.

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Projects such as these require time, commitment, patience and determination. The projects have taken a heavy toll on our Council: I became Chair due to resignations from Cllrs Kare Southan, Adam Davy and Graham Edgcumbe Venning, who all worked very hard on this. Not to mention my thanks to the Town Council staff who really went above and beyond to get this over the line and to Chris Bowden who, as Wenlock Estates member, has stayed throughout and his knowledge has been invaluable.

A special mention must also go to the volunteers who helped to cut down the hedge by the play area last year, which saved us towns people's money - although it meant my long-suffering father had to do all the chainsaw work.

There were many obstacles to overcome to complete this Gaskell project but, as we now see, it was all done just in time for the essential benefit to our whole community. This year's achievements represented a great community effort and again I am proud to be part of such a community.

6. OPEN FORUM

Electors of the parish were invited to ask questions and offer their views.

- Q1 A representative of the Civic Society asked about the Town Council's response to consultation on the Ironbridge Power Station development.
- A The Town Council had submitted a 13 point response on 18th February, highlighting concerns about the traffic model used by the application and the impact of the development on the Gaskell Corner. A copy of the response could be provided for the Civic Society.
- Q2 A member of the public expressed thanks to the Town Council for the hard work and time of its members. Members of the public might not always agree with the actions of the Town Council, but the town owed a debt of gratitude to Councillors for their time and commitment.
- A Councillor Mary Hill responded that she would be retiring at the forthcoming election, having been a Councillor since 2011. She had found the experience enjoyable and rewarding, although hard work and overwhelming at times. She encouraged anybody to stand if they had the time.
- A Councillor Yvonne Holyoak, another long serving Councillor, also encouraged people to stand for election to the Town Council. Parish Councils were closest to the community and Councillors had the opportunity to meet many interesting people, however, the role was time consuming.
- A Councillor Milner Whiteman advised that he had been a Town Councillor for over 50 years. He had been only slightly older than the current Mayor when he started on the former Borough Council in 1965 and had subsequently served on the district and county councils. He had enjoyed his time as a Councillor and would encourage others to join, especially younger people.

The Mayor thanked everyone for coming to the meeting and contributing to the discussions. There being no further questions or comments from those present, the Mayor closed the meeting at 7.40pm.

Signed: _____
Chairman

Date: _____