

CRANBROOK AND SISSINGHURST PARISH COUNCIL



ANNUAL REPORT

2014-2015

Cranbrook & Sissinghurst Parish Council

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Councillor Tom Dawlings (Benenden & Cranbrook)	Tel: 01580 213468
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CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

This has been a challenging year for me as a businessman in Cranbrook and as Chairman of this most excellent Parish Council.

We have had triumphs as well as disappointments.

The outstanding achievement has been the completion of Cobnut Close in Sissinghurst and the first tenants being able to move in. This has been a special exception site in Sissinghurst. Councillor Bunyan will tell you more about it in her report. Suffice to say that I wish all those lucky applicants who secured a home there all the best for the future and especially to those who managed to get a home for the first time.

The application for about 65 homes in Common Road filled us with trepidation and worry as whilst we will always need more housing as the population increases, it has to be done with care and sensitivity to the area and its indigenous population and we were relieved when TWBC rejected the application. I believe we are still waiting to see whether the developer intends to appeal.

There is of course the other major application in the wings and that is for 250 homes to be built on the Parish Council's preferred site, on the field behind the CO OP with its exit joining the Angley Road near the junction of the High Street. I personally believe this will be a shot in the arm for the area as long as the mix of houses is correct with accommodation for key workers as well as for those who can afford a bit more. With the incoming residents bringing much needed enterprise and skills to the parish.

The car parks have proved a great success and without their undoubted advantage of being free to the end user, the Town's economy, I believe, would have suffered a great deal more than it did during difficult trading times brought on by the continuing trend away from shopping in the High Street and from the replacement gas mains work that dragged on and continues to drag on.

To give you an update. There is a small section in the High Street that is very problematical and SGN want to crack on with that as soon as possible with a new contractor called I&G. After that is completed, New Road will probably be next which would take us to Angley Road for the school Summer holidays. This work will then go to the top of the High Street by the War Memorial and back down to join into where they finished in the High Street. Whilst the disruption is incredibly annoying, believe me the work needs to be done. I have seen some of the old pipes that have been removed and it is not before time they are replaced.

This year's theme for the Annual Meeting is education and Carrie Beech and John Weedes - Head teachers of High Weald Academy and Cranbrook School respectively attended.

Here I must declare an interest.

My son went to Cranbrook School and from there achieved a place at Christ Church, Oxford University to read physics. I was incredibly jealous. My wife is now Vice Chair of Governors at the High Weald Academy, bringing her considerably 15 years' experience as deputy head of Sittingbourne Community College to the governors at HWA.

So my loyalties are equally balanced as they should be.

There are great changes afoot at both schools and when they happen and are bedded in, I am convinced the parish and parents will benefit.

And so to the Community Centre.

Councillor Veitch and her committee has worked incredibly hard on this project and for the first time we have managed to get in to planning application stage and with the obstacles that have strewn our path she has shown remarkable resilience in facing them and overcoming them with the consummate skill that is required of the project manager.

I can only apologise to her that my ill health meant that far more work rested on her shoulders than I intended.

We have now put most of our ducks in a row so that we will be able to start building as soon as the necessary permissions are granted and work on the Cranbrook Engineering site has reached a suitable point in its development.

You may ask what happens if it all fails on this site and the expected work does not go ahead. Well we do have a plan B and C and probably D but I do not want to even contemplate the alternatives until we have to and that is a long way down the line.

I was incredibly disappointed that the Cranbrook Ward of the Parish Council did not warrant a poll as the number of candidates matched exactly the number of seats so I warmly welcome those who did put their names forward and hope they enjoy the next four years.

Being a parish councillor can be a lot of hard work, far more onerous than a borough councillor as you actually have to do something. Whilst I used to complain on the planning committee that a ten hour session at the Town Hall was draining, Councillor Bunyan knocks that into a cocked hat with the work that she does on your behalf on the applications that come into this Council. And worst of all we have to write our own reports, no officer to do that job for us.

On that note I would like to thank all those councillors who have laboured long and hard for this council each bringing their own area of expertise.

Councillor Veitch, who I have already mentioned, has incredible resilience and managerial skills, Councillor Swann, who has looked after our accounts being an ex-bank manager. Councillor Hemsted, coming back to this council bringing his in depth knowledge of Sissinghurst to bear on his stewardship of the cemeteries and properties. Cllr. Bunyan whose diligence and hard work meant that when her committee made a decision TWBC usually took notice. Cllrs. Rev. Cook and Rev. Goodchild never let us forget our moral duties to the population Whilst Cllrs. Bancroft, Marley and macLaughlin kept us on our toes with an alternative view. Cllr. Summers with his knowledge of the law and age concern has proved invaluable on the Community Centre committee and I hope he will continue in that post. Cllr. Fletcher who has kept an eye on what has been going on in the rest of Kent and without his hard work on the Community Centre we wouldn't have got this far. Cllr. David Hazelwood deserves a special mention for the continuing success of the armistice Sunday parade and Cllr. Holmes for all the work he does behind the scenes on tourism and business development and especially his in depth knowledge on insurance. Cllr. Fermor who has been a great support to all the committees she has sat upon and her skills as a wordsmith.

I would like to make a special thanks to David and Janet, our caretakers, who have cleaned and polished our Vestry Hall over and over again making sure it is open on time and closed at the end of every session. Ivor Hatcher, our contractor who looks after the day to day functioning of the cemeteries and playgrounds etc.

But now I come to the clerks, Coral and Lori. Lori has not been with us long in the grand scheme of things but with Corals tutelage and mountain of reference books she is rapidly learning the job. Coral's in depth knowledge of planning and the population of Cranbrook and Sissinghurst are second to none. This Parish would be a worse place without her.

Cllr. Francis Rook
Chairman

COMMUNITY CENTRE COMMITTEE

This committee was formed in 2014 and first met in May 2014. Its members are drawn from both the Parish Council and the residents of Cranbrook and Sissinghurst.

We succeeded in the submission of a full and detailed planning application in January 2015, slightly later than our target date of autumn 2014, but an achievement never the less.

In order to do this we did the following:

- agreed the minimum requirements for the Community Centre
- produced a short list of potential architects, and chose a firm after reviewing presentations
- held public consultation and public presentation on the architects design, revising the design after receipt of comments
- created a business plan, including the documentation of the basic need for the centre.

Over 70 sets of written comments were received on the design, the vast majority of which were in favour. Over 100 people attended the Public Presentation, and many more have inspected the designs displayed in the Weald Information Centre.

The planning application was submitted as a joint application with the enabling houses project (12 dwellings) on Wilkes Field. This made sense as many of the supporting reports were common across both aspects of the development.

From the press coverage, many of you will be aware of some of the difficulties that we encountered in the past year. The important one of the access permission needed from the Co-operative Society to reach Wilkes Field from the Tunbridge Wells owned car park is now well on the way to being resolved. The other, the question of the impact on the whole project from the halt in development of the Cranbrook Engineering site, has yet to be resolved. I would like to record my grateful thanks to everyone expressing their support for the project, and to all those councillors, our Member of Parliament, Tunbridge Wells Borough Council officers, and others who have been very active on our behalf to speed up these discussions and decisions.

The outcome of the planning submission, and the decision of the Secretary of State on the listing of buildings on the Cranbrook Engineering site are unlikely to be known before May.

The Parish Council granted the Community Centre Committee £40,000 out of general reserves in order to get to the stage of submission of the planning application. Only £28,605 of this money was used. It was spent as follows:

- £15,128 architects fees
- £2,682 lawyers' fees
- £1,300 quantity surveyors fees
- £3,000 business plan creation
- £3,850 planning application fees (TWBC)
- £2,000 planning consultants fees
- £645 sundries (accountants fees, Land Registry fees, printing costs, training costs)

The architects were very generous to the Parish Council in the amount of professional time used that was not charged. Our grateful thanks to them, and also to all the other professionals who were generous with their time and advice.

If it proves impossible to use Wilkes Field for the Community Centre we are determined that we will find another site instead, as the need for the Centre remains.

Our major task for 2015-6 is to plan in detail the raising of the capital necessary to build the Centre, and we will actively start fund raising once planning permission has been received. If a loan looks necessary to speed up the start of construction, rate payers will be consulted first.

My particular thanks to all my fellow councillors, and in particular the committee members, for their hard work and support, and to our hardworking clerks for everything they do.

Cllr. Bridget Veitch
Chairman – Community Centre Committee

POLICY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE

The purpose of the Policy and Resources Committee is to oversee the workings of the Parish Council, including its finances, staffing, general administration and the setting up and granting of contracts issued by the Council. We also set the overall policies of the Council.

The membership of this Committee is the Chairman and Vice Chairman of the Parish Council together with the Chair of each committee. We may invite others to attend. I would like to thank all the committee chairpersons for their hard work both within and outside the committee room. A lot goes on in their own time.

The real value of this Committee is that it is a discussion point, a plain talking shop, where ideas are tossed about. We discuss what has been happening in the Parish and what we can do about any problems and what we would like to see happening in the future. These ideas are then taken to our various committees.

We work closely under the wise guidance of our amazing Parish Clerks, Coral Kirkaldie and Lori Ham, without whom we would not be able to function. A big thank you is due to them.

The Parish Council aims to improve the “Quality of Life” for its parishioners and the economic viability of the Town and of Sissinghurst Village. You will hear more specifically what has been going on from the reports of the other committees.

The Parish Council has an excellent website www.cranbrookandsissinghurstpc.co.uk which is kept up to date with all the news of what is happening, giving much information about Cranbrook and Sissinghurst. There is a Parish Diary onto which we would like you to enter all the events that you organise, this will hopefully increase the attendance and will help you choose a date that does not clash with other events. You can also be kept informed about things happening in the Parish by signing up to our “Be in The Know” email circulation.

Please keep coming into Cranbrook to shop and join in the many things going on in the Town and in Sissinghurst, and enjoy the free parking which we hope we have secured for many years to come.

Cllr. Brian Swann
Chairman – Policy and Resources Committee

Finance Report for the Year 2014/2015

This report looks at what your Parish Council has done from the perspective of its finances for the year to 31st March 2015.

The accounts show the precept and expenditure for each committee as follows:

	<u>Precept</u> £	<u>Expenditure</u> £
Policy and Resources	148,700	188,394
Burials and Properties	14,250	41,504
Economic and Community Development	9,500	9,211
Environmental Management	73,050	57,548
Planning/Preservation/Housing	Nil	Nil
General, including Contingency Fund	3,000	3,400
	<hr/> 248,500	<hr/> 300,027
Earmarked Funds not spent from 2014/15 Budget (put aside for future projects) including Car Parks (£15,000):		£37,600

We have taken £28,606 from general reserves which has been spent on initial planning and Architects fees etc. for a new Community Centre, this is included under Policy & Resources expenditure.

Total earmarked funds for future repairs etc. to the car parks now stands at £71,000.

Our staff – the Clerk and Deputy Clerk, Vestry Hall Caretakers and Parish Warden (self-employed) – are our most essential resource and we could not run the Council without them. Our staffing costs, including National Insurance and pensions amounted to £85,267.

Other significant items of expenditure were as follows:

	£
Insurances	9,752
General Administration	15,925
Street Lighting	10,514
Vestry Hall - Rates & Utilities	8,443
- Repairs, Maintenance & Cleaning	7,373
Bus Shelters, Benches & Noticeboards	2,905

New Computer system	1,905
New Entrance Doors to Information Centre	5,815
Burial Grounds – Business Rates	1,960
General Maintenance of Cemeteries & Churchyard	4,234
Contracts for maintenance of Grounds, Cemeteries, & War Memorial	36,125
Playground equipment, repairs & maintenance	2,417
Recreation Grounds – Repairs & Maintenance	3,090
Crane Valley – Upkeep of Nature Reserve	3,500
Car Parks	45,162
Grants to Voluntary Organisations	8,641

These and all our other payments were funded by the precept of £248,500, various grants, monies earmarked in previous years and the following income:

	£
Bank Interest	845
Rents Received	3,905
Hire of Vestry Hall and Council Chamber	21,591
Burial Fees	11,615
Tomlin Murton Playing Field Trust	6,000

At the end of the year there was £222,300 held as a reserve earmarked for future specified expenditure, and £109,798 held as a general reserve.

The accounts are examined by our Auditor from Kent County Council and then sent as part of our Annual Return to the Accountants appointed by the Audit Commission for approval. Once approval has been received the accounts are available for inspection at the Parish Council Office.

An explanation of the precept set for the year 2015/2016 can be found in the March edition of the Parish Council Newsletter.

If you would like any further detail or information please contact me via the Parish Clerks.

Cllr. Brian Swann
Chairman – Policy and Resources Committee

BURIAL GROUNDS AND PROPERTIES COMMITTEE

I am one of the four councillors representing Sissinghurst.

Looking back over this past year there did not seem to be many items to report on. There was the review of fees and hiring charges that took place in October when it was agreed to leave the Vestry Hall hiring fees as they were but we did need to increase slightly our burial fees in line with increased costs.

New glass doors had to be put on the entrance to the Weald Information Centre and the Parish Office as the old ones had become unsafe.

I looked deeper into what we had been doing and it was interesting to note that there is a continuous stream of little things; the branch that is overhanging a footpath which needs to be removed, the brambles that need cutting back and the yew trees that need a little attention and then there is the noticeboard that requires a bit of tender loving care, the bus shelter that needs to be placed and arrangements made for installation, and so it goes on and all this makes the difference between living in a pleasant environment or where everything is just below par.

All these things have to be reported by either members of the public or by fellow councillors usually to the clerks and then decisions are made and arrangements made to get something done about whatever it is. It is appropriate here to thank a couple of people who have done things for us free of charge.

1. The Sissinghurst and Cranbrook War Memorials were cleaned by Dave Howell and look better for it.
2. The Penny Farthing in Sissinghurst was repaired by Robert Longley, who built it in the first place to commemorate the Tour de France coming through the village
3. The Cadets painted the Howitzer at Cranbrook War Memorial.
4. The local undertakers for supplying a new noticeboard at Golford Cemetery.

Another important task undertaken annually is the budget. Once a year we sit down with the Treasurer and decide what major expenditures we are likely to incur in the next few years and put monies aside for these. In this way we were able to put in a new floor and kitchen in the Vestry Hall and new gates at Golford Cemetery, just two examples.

There is also the smooth running of the Golford and Sissinghurst cemeteries, working with the undertakers. A lot of this is done by our clerks and helped by our Parish Warden.

On a personal note I would like to say that after eight years I am not standing for re-election but would like to take this opportunity to thank my fellow councillors for their support and encouragement during these years, particularly the members of my committee.

And finally a word to new incoming councilors, do look to join the Burials and Properties Committee – you will find it very interesting and diverse in its coverage.

So thanks to all of you and particularly to our brilliant Clerks.

Cllr. Denis Hemsted
Chairman – Burials and Properties Committee

ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE

The car parks have now been under the control of the Parish Council for a full financial year and they are looking much improved. The concrete litter bins have been replaced with better looking heritage designed bins, and some have been relocated to reflect current usage of the areas.

The hedging between the Regal car park and the Crane Valley play area and Nature Reserve has been thinned and layered by the High Weald Partnership. This has successfully opened up the view from the car park, and has been favourably commented upon by residents. We also removed the hedging around the back of the recycling bins as this was proving to collect litter which was difficult to collect. A programme of trimming and pruning of all the hedges and trees has been done. Councillors have reviewed the car parks on a frequent basis, collecting litter at the same time.

Large planters, a gift from Cllr Holden, have been placed in the Regal car park, and have been planted and cared for by Cranbrook in Bloom. They also planted some crocuses and two other areas with flowers which are a colourful welcome addition to the car park.

We are to experiment with different types of lights in the Crane Valley as some have been a target for vandalism, probably by catapult.

Concern has been expressed in the past that coaches might be unable to use the coach park area in the Regal car park, due to the variation in surface heights on the exit to the car park. This has hampered the marketing of Cranbrook as a tourist destination.

The concern was indeed evidenced when a double decker bus on a test run got stuck last summer, causing several hours of traffic chaos. It has proved difficult to get estimates from engineering firms for a reworking of the exit surface, due to the uncertainties of what is underneath the surface and the potential impacts on the nearby houses. Hopefully this whole problem will go away, as the most modern coaches have the ability to adjust their chassis heights, and can cope with the exit.

The Committee decided that the Winter Strategy for the car parks for 2014-5 would be to supply salt and grit in the yellow bins, and to encourage residents to use this supply for the icy patches when necessary. This decision was taken on the basis of the experience of the previous winters, when scheduled salting and gritting to KCC guidelines proved to be expensive, even when there was a mild winter. Each occasion that the three car parks were gritted by a contractor was costing the Parish Council £200, and even the mild winter of 2013-4 cost approximately £3,000.

Icy patches did appear on the footpaths in the Crane Valley, and residents needed to take care, but these paths have never been scheduled for salting and gritting. Unfortunately it is not possible to include shovels or spades in the bins, as they tend to disappear.

It has been noted that the car parks are now much used, and spaces are not always available in the smaller two car parks. A survey of the usage will be needed in 2015-6 so that we can consider ways of ensuring efficient use of the space.

The allotments continue to be a much used and appreciated resource. There is an annual competition, with prizes awarded to the best kept allotments, and to the best novice held one.

There are three areas with equipment for children and youngsters to use, all of which have an annual ROPSA inspection. There is the area in the Crane Valley, with slide, swings and the skate board area. We are investigating further means of improving the drainage in this site. The children's playground in the Ball Field (Cranbrook) is much used. The one in the Jubilee Field (Sissinghurst) is less used, and is need of updating. We have discussed requirements, with the help of Sissinghurst residents, and had visits and estimates provided by three manufacturers.

Although there are some funds set aside, it is not enough to buy the desired equipment. As a result some fund raising will be necessary, and the new equipment will have to be phased in. It should be noted that the Ball Field equipment was also purchased as the result of fund raising.

The proposed changes to the layout of the junction of Waterloo Road and Angley Road have been the subject of much discussion. The plans have been modified as a result of the comments from residents, and the work is scheduled to be done in August, taking three weeks. We hope that this will prove to be a safer and more satisfactory layout than the current one.

I am disappointed at the amount of litter that appears on our roadside verges. A litter picking session has been scheduled for Saturday 25 April, with volunteers meeting at 10.00am both by the Recycling bins in the Regal car park and by the entrance to the Jubilee Field in Sissinghurst. Please do join us.

Overall this has been a busy year for the Environmental Management Committee, and my thanks to everyone who has been involved, particular the committee members and our hard working parish clerks.

Cllr. Bridget Veitch
Chairman – Environmental Management Committee

PLANNING & PRESERVATION MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE

Firstly, I would like to thank my committee for putting in so much time at meetings and also, of course, our two fabulous clerks for all their help and advice.

It's been both a busy and frustrating year. The frustrations came because of the transfer of the back room – validation – operations of the planning department at TWBC to the joint Mid Kent Partnership situated in Maidstone. It was supposed to make a huge saving by amalgamating the work of Maidstone, Tunbridge Wells and Swale Councils in one place. Unfortunately in practice it caused a huge disruption to the applicants of all three councils with no applications being validated for the whole of June last year and since then there is still a backlog of several weeks. I understand that TWBC are now intending to return this work to Tunbridge Wells – let's hope they can find qualified staff – I imagine that the majority of the previous members of staff will have found other employment.

As far as applications are concerned, the numbers have increased considerably although not yet back up to the numbers of 10 years ago.

The Self and Custom Build Bill has now received Royal Assent which will be good news for prospective self-builders although I'm not sure that the Borough Council will be that pleased – it will involve extra work for them in keeping a list of those looking for a plot and plots that are available and then offering them to those on the list.

After the election and when the new Parish Council is bedded in, we will be considering the matter of producing a Neighbourhood Plan and we will be looking for a lot of volunteers to help with the process. A Neighbourhood Plan seem to take 2-3 years to produce and then it has to be accepted via a referendum, by the parishioners and pass the inspector's test that it complies with local and national policies. We will be advertising the start of the process and hope you will all want to take part. One of the requirements is that the community should be involved at every stage.

The consultation period for the Land Allocations Document has now finished. This document shows details of where the borough expects the new houses to be built - up until 2026. Tunbridge Wells had a 6000 allocation for new homes between 2006 and 2026 and as soon as the current allocation document is finalised, they will start the process all over again and this time it is suggested that Tunbridge Wells may identify a need for up to 18,000 more! I just hope that's scare-mongering.

The project of which I am most proud. The identification of the site, the enthusiasm of the land owner to help us, the negotiations with the housing association, achieving the planning permission and the completion of the 11 new affordable homes in Cobnut Close in Sissinghurst. The new residents, who were mostly already living in unsuitable homes in Sissinghurst, are delighted with their cosy new homes. You may recall that we tried to get 30 housing association homes for Cranbrook on Longfield some years ago and failed so I have spent 8 years in the process. If the politicians' promise of selling housing association homes to their occupants comes to fruition, we will be looking for lots more plots for replacement housing association homes!

And finally the Sissinghurst ward of the Parish Council will be having an election in May – so just to say good luck to the five candidates for the four places. I hope that I can return for the next four years – there is always plenty of work to be done – so let's roll up our sleeves and get stuck in.

Cllr. Alison Bunyan
Chairman – Planning & Preservation Management Committee.