

Chairman's report to Castle Acre's Annual Assembly May 2020

My report covers the first year of the new four year term of Castle Acre Parish Council (PC) that runs to May 2023. This term is governed by the same Cllrs as those who served in the previous four years because with all standing for re-election and with no other candidates, a public vote was not required. At its meeting in May 2019, Cllrs voted unanimously for Martin Hickey as Chairman and Laurie Fisher as Vice-Chairman of the PC.

There were, however, changes to the Council's makeup during the past 12 months. After many years of dedicated service to the village, Charlie Williams resigned her seat in January 2020. Cllrs paid tribute to Charlie at their meeting and wished her well. The Parish Council is permitted to co-opt a resident onto the Council, voting by secret ballot, but only after a period of advertising the vacancy by the Borough. The lockdown restrictions have delayed this vote to the June 2020 Council meeting.

After nine years of selfless and good humoured work on behalf of the Council, Linda Roast retired as Clerk last September. Cllrs were very sad to see her go and expressed their appreciation through gifts to Linda and wished her and her partner Alex all the best in their new home in Cromer. However, Cllrs were delighted last September to have appointed a new Clerk, Libby Firth, a village resident, who has settled well into her role and is making a significant contribution to running the PC's affairs.

Reporting on the main events of the last Parish year while the village is in Coronavirus lockdown is somewhat surreal. The Council has been active in keeping residents informed about national, local and parish matters that affect or could benefit residents through its weekly online and printed newsletters. Libby organised 12 volunteers to assist any residents in collecting food orders, prescriptions etc. The PC is confident that all village residents will applaud the efforts of Rash, Sam and their staff in keeping the shop open, full of stock and helping in so many ways. It was good to see the village coming together, helping neighbours and making individual contributions to VE75 day through buntings and some 'own front garden' parties. With public meetings banned and the village hall closed, Council business was conducted in April by circular e-mail, minuted and published on the village website and noticeboard. We hope to return to normal life soon, perhaps by June.

In last year's Chairman's report, I confidently reported that the final version of the Castle Acre Neighbourhood Plan would be put to a resident's vote last summer. This was before the bureaucracy took over and insisted that the Steering Committee had to appoint independent contractors to undertake a detailed Habitat Regulation Assessment, Strategic Environment Assessment and Site Options Assessments. Each report ran to over 35 pages. This was all because the Plan is proposing a maximum of 11 new dwellings spread over two small parcels of land which are outside the development boundary and not flagged by the Borough in its call for sites last year. In my view an excessive and costly approach for land with a combined area of 1.23 acres or 0.04% of the square miles of the parish, neither near the Nar river, identified flood plains or the SSSI.

Having cleared these burdensome hurdles by February this year, the drop-in session of the public consultation of the draft Plan, set for 27 March, was cancelled by lockdown, though it is encouraging to see over 48 responses from residents and those from the main stakeholders. After assessments, the NP will then go forward for official examination followed, finally, by the referendum, possibly in September 2020, physical distancing regulations notwithstanding. That will be just over four years since I first called a public meeting and set up the Plan's Steering Group. It

has been a long slog and I again pay tribute to both the Chairman, Martin Tate, and the Steering Group members for hanging on in there!

What other achievements, failures and frustrations has the PC experienced over the past twelve months?

Achievements

- Restricting vehicle access across South Acre ford. The PC appealed directly to NCC's Executive Director Community and Environmental Services who made a site visit last August and expressed support for a traffic regulation order, subject to the standard consultation process. NCC Highways has been supportive in consulting with the PC on how and whom to consult. The consultation exercise was planned for April 2020 but then delayed due to Coronavirus restrictions.
- Encouraging the Playing Field Association last October to apply to FCC Communities Foundation, a not-for-profit business that awards grants for community projects through the Landfill Communities Fund. Their sub-committee was awarded a grant £100,000 to replace and extend the current 20-year old playground area. An application to the Lottery Community Fund secured a further £10,000. Children in Castle Acre are now set to get a new playground with facilities for under sevens and a separate area for older children. Lockdown has intervened in the installation timetable. September 2020 looks the earliest date to celebrate! Congratulations to everyone on this great achievement.
- Resisting overtures from Greene King to permit development of eight dwellings on the land behind Back Lane, known as Further Pond Close. The land was eventually sold privately.
- Surface water flooding. Thanks to Martin Tate's persistent chivvying of both Highways and Anglian Water, progress is finally being made in identifying the blockages in pipework and the need for remedial work, some of which has already occurred. It didn't help that BT put its broadband cable under High Street straight through AW's drain! It would seem this is not the first time that this has happened.
- Planning applications: Cllrs supported ten applications in the past twelve months and objected to two. The most controversial were amending conditions to the water tower (amendments dismissed by the Borough) and a modern re-build of a house in Pales Green (subsequently approved).
- Again the PC kept to its annual income and expenditure budget and maintained reserves. Recycling credits remained constant at £1,000. Expenditure was down, mainly due to less tree maintenance work.

Failures

- Despite strenuous objections from both the PC and the village hall committee, English Heritage (EH) is persisting in its plan to charge for parking at their Castle car park. Parking will remain free at the Priory car park. Not yet introduced due to lockdown, the PC will be closely monitoring its effect on parking in the village centre.

- Losing our second bid for a Heritage Lottery (HL) Fund grant for a programme of archaeological investigations and activities in and around Castle Acre including wildlife surveys and improvements to habitats, aimed at both residents, their families, special interest groups and visitors. Losing in the sense that HL stopped all outstanding bids in March, redirecting the funds to supporting existing EH properties during the Coronavirus lockdown. CAPC is again very grateful to Anne Mason for all her hard work in preparing this bid. We will try again.
- Eradicating dog poo from village footways and paths despite adding to the number of collection bins, signage, written pleas, even marking the offending poo with luminescent paint. The PC was disappointed to note the Borough's Safety and Nuisance team lose interest in making regular checks to catch offenders after their first uneventful sortie into the village.

Frustrations

- .The PC is very grateful to Philip Lines for maintaining the SAM2 speed registration unit and with supplying the data which continues to show a high number of drivers exceeding the 30 mph limit on Newton Road. Frustratingly, the police have been slow in organising proper speed gun checks, the one last March being ineffective as drivers were not pulled over.
- Old School. It is so disappointing that the Old School remains unloved in and uncared for more than four years. Both the PC and the Borough's Enforcement Officer have been in contact with the owner but to date, no progress in either repairing the flint rear wall or clearing and making good the building and its grounds.
- Despite some grumbings, the wooden posts on either side of Bailey Gate are generally discouraging HGVs and farm vehicles from trying to drive through, though there are always exceptions! English Heritage will reinstall the portcullis below the arch once Highways makes the agreed changes to directional signs on the 1065. Cllrs also approved purchase of a strong warning sign at the bottom of Bailey Street whose installation was delayed by lockdown.
- As ever, Highways with its drawn out way of dealing with our simple requests for road and sign improvements, safety traffic orders, flooding and drain clearance - the speedy response to repairing major potholes being an exception.
- Not yet reaching a fully satisfactory conclusion in our negotiations with Holkham over public access to their lands around the village, particularly across the water meadows and along the River Nar. Holkham agreed to declare the footpath from Bailey Street across Minns Meadow to the ford as a Public Right Of Way (PROW) and is giving sympathetic consideration to declaring another PROW from the ford right round to Common Lane. This has been hampered by Holkham's surveyor leaving last summer, no replacement and then lockdown affecting NCC staff who would process the PROW. However, I remain optimistic that the PC will achieve its objectives in the long run while there is goodwill on both sides.

Thanks to

- Libby Firth, our new, enthusiastic and conscientious Clerk.

- Our Borough Cllr, Jim Moriarty, for his continued support and assistance.
- The village litter group for tirelessly collecting litter around the village, putting up dog poo warning signs and generally keeping the PC on its toes!
- Frank Moister for rescuing and repairing the wooden bus shelter, blown onto its back during Storm Ciara!
- My fellow Parish Cllrs.

Martin Hickey
Chairman
May 2020