

BOTHENHAMPTON AND WALDITCH PARISH COUNCIL

A HISTORY, OF SORTS – by Graham Styles *(with grateful thanks to Jane Read for the very kind loan of her notes from records of the period)*

At the end of March, Bothenhampton and Walditch Parish Council ceased to exist. Following a regular review of local government boundaries and responsibilities, the Parish Council, along with those of Allington and Bradpole, was absorbed into Bridport Town Council.

Like most changes, this can be seen both as a loss and an opportunity. A loss of something that had existed for over a hundred years; parish councils form the 'lowest' tier of local government, with representatives right at the heart of the community they serve. The change offers at the same time an opportunity for a fresh start, new energy and new ways of working, promising efficiencies and economies of scale.

Over the years, ordinary people have volunteered to serve on Bothenhampton and Walditch Parish Council and to grapple with issues of direct concern to their fellow residents: potholes, overgrown paths, street lighting, parking, and so on. Some have served for a year or two; others for rather longer – like Councillor Palmer, who served for 40 years, from the 1930's to the early 1970's, most of that time as Chair. He died around October 1971, shortly after resigning due to poor health.

Before the formation of the Parish Council in the late 19th century, local issues in the parish were often discussed in 'vestry meetings', held in the church vestry or in the village school room. Not surprisingly, these meetings usually dealt with church matters, such as the appointment of church wardens and 'overseers'. In December 1870, a vestry meeting discussed the collection of subscriptions for the building of a new school, "granting the premises known as the Bothenhampton Poor House to the Trustees of a school for the education of the poor".

In March 1886, the dilapidated state of Bothenhampton church was discussed and the possibility of building a new one "upon the site kindly offered by Mr John Hounsell", a churchwarden. In August that year, the vestry meeting decided to pull down the nave of the old church but retain the chancel and tower for the purpose of a mortuary chapel. Thus today, we can see around us the legacy of decisions taken in these small meetings over 130 years ago.

Like other parish councils, Bothenhampton and Walditch Parish Council was created under the Local Government Act of 1894. Its first meeting was held on 30 November 1894 in the school room. J Gundry was elected Chair and nominations were invited for candidates to serve on the council. An impressive 14 people responded; seven were elected. In a sign of things to come, the council agreed there should be an early meeting "to discuss the availability of lighting or otherwise making safe from accident the high pavement in the parish of Bothenhampton".

A few months before this, just before the Local Government Act came into effect, residents discussed a possible re-arrangement of local boundaries. Interestingly, in the light of recent changes, there was "very strong feeling in the parish against having any of their parish annexed to that of Bridport". The main reason seems to have been a concern that a re-arrangement might entail losing the right of free burials.

While co-operation over the years was invariably good, the Parish Council's relations with its bigger brother in Bridport could sometimes become strained, especially whenever the threat of possible absorption by the Town Council loomed. It was, for example, considered and rejected in 1947, in 1980 and again in 1994. In the latter instance, the Parish Council expressed "its displeasure and annoyance at the arrogant attitude of the Town Council."

From the word go, in 1894, Bothenhampton and Walditch were joined together. The people of Walditch passed a resolution at the time favouring the amalgamation. However, there was some concern then that Walditch might be “swamped” if it joined with Bothenhampton and “have to sink its name”. The population of Walditch was then 108 and Bothenhampton’s 365, so Walditch wasn’t deemed big enough to have a parish council of its own. Mr Gundry, the Chair, recommended a grouping if the name could be retained. A Mr R Hawkins asked at the meeting if it was intended to build a Council chamber on Botham (sic) wood “as to be central for Bothenhampton and Walditch (laughter)”.

That said, it seems not until nearly 100 years later, on 1 January 1990, that ‘Walditch’ was formally added to the Parish Council’s name.

The Parish Council considered splitting itself in two in the late 1990’s, following the addition of around 200 electors in Walditch due to the new housing development in Lower Walditch; but the idea was eventually shelved in the light of the upcoming general election in May 1999; plus, the electors themselves anyway weren’t keen.

In the years that followed the council’s creation, councillors devoted themselves to trying to make the local environment as pleasant as possible for all residents, and to respond to those residents’ concerns as far as possible. This, as now, needed regular appeals to higher authorities, for work to be done; and, again as now, appeals often went unheeded or needed numerous reminders. There were letters to the District Surveyor over topics ranging from blocked drains, the poor state of Green Lane (in 1961), or, in 1966, over the dangerous state of the steps outside the George Inn in Bothenhampton; letters went to the Ministry of Transport in 1949 about the speed limit in Crock Lane; and in the late 1950s and 1960’s to the South West Electricity Board about street lighting (youths incidentally sometimes had a tendency to vandalise street lights).

Often, the Parish Council tilted at windmills, trying to argue a case which hindsight shows was doomed. For example, the Clerk was instructed to lodge an objection to the proposed ending of all passenger services on the Bridport to Maiden Newton railway in 1965. In 1968, the council was concerned that the construction of a new highway from the Crown Hotel along the disused railway line (now the A35) would greatly increase traffic along the “already congested” Crock Lane. In 1992, the council opposed the application to close the George Inn in Bothenhampton (70 people signed a petition to retain it). Following this loss to the village, the council vowed to “keep a close eye” on the future of the Bothenhampton village shop, which in time itself went the way of the pub. In the same vein, in 1966 136 people signed a petition pleading for the Walditch Post Office to be re-opened, “consequent on the village stores being available.”; the year before, the council had heard of the difficulties of finding a successor to the Walditch postmistress.

Nowhere was the sense of frustration more evident than over the saga of the rubbish tip at the end of Long Lane in Bothenhampton, originally called the “old brickworks tip”. This was a source of irritation for the council and residents of Bothenhampton alike, from the 1960’s to the 1990’s. The Dorset County Council representative, Rear Admiral Pritchard, was assiduous in lobbying higher powers for it to be closed and in keeping the Parish Council informed of his efforts. Closure, however, was constantly being postponed, mainly due to the difficulty of finding an alternative site. Meanwhile, residents complained of leaks, smells and rubbish strewn along Main Street from untethered lorries. It was claimed in 1987 that some 350-450 vehicle trips were made to the tip on some days. In 1989, there was a “very lively discussion” (in other words, a heated argument) over the future of the tip and in particular the need for an alternative route to it, aside from the one through the village. In July 1991, the parish council supported a route to the tip via Shipton Gorge; the following month, the councillors’ opposite

numbers in Shipton Gorge said they were “astonished” B&W had approved a route through their parish. The site was eventually closed in 2000.

Anyone even glancing at the records or reports of Parish Council meetings over the course of its existence would be struck by the familiarity of the issues discussed. Any Parish Councillor from current days transported via the Tardis back through time would feel quite at home as their 19th and 20th century counterparts chewed over their agendas.

For example, in May 1895, the Parish Council was concerned over the state of the Hollow Way high pavement. The Clerk subsequently reiterated a request to the Highways Department for some protection to be erected along the “raised causeway” leading from the railway bridge (then at the bottom of Hollow Way) to Bothenhampton church; the Clerk stressed the Parish Council was not asking for the protection of intoxicated persons or for tessellated pavement but asked simply for something to be done to render the footpath safe. According to the local paper, at the meeting of the wider Council to discuss this request, the reference to intoxicated persons provoked laughter.

In time-honoured tradition, the Council returned the matter to the Parish Council, giving its sanction to the latter to do whatever it considered necessary - at its own cost, naturally.

Things didn't improve. In 1922, the local paper reported that the high pavement was the scene of “yet another accident” when Mr M T Thorne fell onto the roadway. In 1941, the pavement on Hollow Way became dangerous due to the slippage of earth. Needless to say, the state of the Hollow Way pavement remained a concern of the Parish Council throughout its existence.

To take another, slightly more recent, meeting, almost at random: in 1955, as well as in 1960, the Parish Council asked Dorset County Council if it could widen Crock Lane because of increased traffic and before any more building could take place (not possible, replied DCC). A few years earlier, in 1948, probably again at the request of the Parish Council, the DCC had asked the Ministry of Transport for the whole of Crock Lane to be included in a speed limit.

In May 1962, the local Women's Institute requested a 30mph speed limit for Walditch village; the Council agreed and put the request to the County Surveyor. This remained on the back burner for some time, the Parish Council finally succeeding in getting suitable signs installed only a couple of years ago.

The roads are better than they were, of course. In January 1910, the muddy state of Crock Lane was described as “almost intolerable”.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, there were discussions over the poor state of Green Lane, off Crock Lane; at one point, stones were dumped there. Refuse was reportedly still being dumped there in 1966.

Anyone concerned nowadays over parking can rest assured this isn't a new problem either. In April 1988, for example, the Parish Council decided that its “consent should be withheld” for the proposed development of eight houses and garages at Manor Barn on the basis that this would increase the demand for on-street parking (the development, as we know, went ahead).

In the early 1990s, in particular, there were regular discussions about the lack of parking in both Bothenhampton and Walditch. Double yellow lines have been considered, but rejected, at various times (for example on the south side of Main Street).

In early 1997, the Parish Council sent out 700 questionnaires seeking views on a possible car park in Bothenhampton. 85% of the 141 respondents were in favour. The Parish Council agreed to take this further, but only if suitable land became available.

This is one example of the Parish Council's interaction with local residents. A more regular dialogue was established in 1975, with the introduction of a "democratic half hour" in all meetings. The take-up was, however, usually pretty modest, unless a contentious planning application was being considered.

Until comparatively recently, the Parish Council was helped in its work by a Neighbourhood Watch team and a Bothenhampton Residents Association (the latter formed in June 1988); both bodies regularly attended and reported at Council meetings. Occasionally, slightly unusual issues came onto the Parish Council's radar. In 1972, it "strongly objected" to a proposed "gypsy site" at Branscombe Lane in Walditch, especially as there had been no consultations on the matter. In 1994, "hippies" were spotted at Ling's Field in Lower Walditch Lane.

The Parish Council's work revolves very much around local issues. But, from time to time, the outside world would intrude. For example, on 12 June 1995, there was a disturbance in the meeting and six youths had to be forcibly ejected (probably not what Councillors had in mind for the democratic half hour).

More seriously, and not surprisingly, the Second World War impacted in various ways on the Parish Council and local residents. The installation of a phone kiosk in Bothenhampton at the foot of the steps opposite Hoskins shop was delayed in 1940 due to "too much military activity" (it, and its counterpart in Walditch, are now much-loved "book boxes"). The Clerk resigned in June 1940 because "she felt it her duty to give her full service to work of national interest". She was followed by Councillor Jenkins, who resigned in July 1941 to take up "duties of national importance" away from the area.

In October 1940, the Council wrote to the County Surveyor asking for the coping on the high pavement to be painted white for safety during the blackout.

In January 1941, air raid precautions as well as fire services were discussed. The roads in Walditch were reported in February 1943 to be covered with mud and the drains choked due to the amount of military traffic emerging from the fields.

The water supply in Walditch was a regular concern around this time: in July 1942, the Council wondered if it would be adequate for firefighting purposes. A shortage of water was reported there in 1948 and again in 1952 after a recent fire. In 1987, poor water pressure was reported in Walditch.

The difficulties faced by local residents immediately after the war are illustrated by the fact that a gift of food aid was received from the Australian Government in 1946; this was allocated to 32 "aged and needy" persons of Bothenhampton and 14 in Walditch. Further food gifts were received from New Zealand in 1952 and distributed to those over 60.

Threats from the outside world loomed again in the early 1980's when concerns over nuclear weapons were in the headlines. In March 1982, the Parish Council asked for volunteers to give local assistance in an emergency (14 people responded). In January 1983, Councillors and residents were addressed by a representative of the Civil Defence team in Dorset County Council on the subject of "nuclear fallout".

We should end on a happier note. With the interests of families in mind, the Parish Council pushed forward the creation of the John Holt Play Area in the late 1980s and in 1997 Mr

Gundry kindly agreed to give to the Parish Council a plot of land at the end of the allotments to the west of Uplands for the creation of what became the John Gundry Play Area in Walditch.

Reviewing the work of the Bothenhampton and Walditch Parish Council since its conception in the late 19th century, albeit with some relatively blank spots given the absence of records from the early decades of the last century, one thing is particularly clear – that the nature of the work and the dedication of local volunteers as councillors have remained remarkably constant over the years.