

# **The Annual Parish Meeting for the Parish of Batcombe**

**was held on Wednesday 5<sup>th</sup> April 2023 at 7.30pm in the Jubilee Hall.**

Janet Jones, Chair of the Parish Council presided. Six members of the Parish Council and the Clerk attended, together with a further sixteen parishioners and the former District Councillor, Michael Gay. Apologies were received from Tom Price.

Janet Jones **welcomed** parishioners to the meeting.

**Minutes of the 2022 Annual Parish Meeting** were read by the Clerk, agreed and signed.

There were no **Matters Arising**.

Janet Jones gave the **Chair's Report**. Parish Council elections took place in May 2022. Eight people were nominated for seven places and so we had the first contested election for fifteen years. Jayne Cox, Peter Glaisher, Bryony Harling, Janet Jones, Clare Kingston, Tom Price and Ian Sage were elected to the Council. The elections had been brought forward a year to coincide with those to the new unitary council for Somerset, which saved the Parish Council money as the election costs were shared.

At the May 2022 Annual Parish Council Meeting, Janet Jones was elected Parish Council Chair in place of David Stevens who had not stood for re-election, and Peter Glaisher was elected as Vice Chairman.

Claire Sully and Alex Wiltshire were elected to the Mendip South Division which includes Batcombe. They were County Councillors until April 2023 when the new Somerset Council replaced the County and District Councils.

Jayne Cox and Clare Kingston were thanked for attending meetings regarding the new Local Community Networks that would be set up to provide a local voice under the unitary council. There would be 18 LCNs across Somerset and Batcombe was included in the one based around Shepton Mallet.

Michael Gay was thanked for his support to the Parish Council while serving as the Mendip District Councillor for the last four years.

In 2022/23 there were 23 planning applications, compared to 20 the previous year. Seven were for tree works in the Conservation Area, five for Listed Building Consent, one to vary the conditions on existing planning permission and ten were for full planning permission or householder planning permission. Of these ten, five were approved, two were withdrawn and three had not been decided.

The planning application for a Paragraph 79 House at Valley View Farm submitted the previous year was withdrawn in September 2022. Paragraph 79 of the National Planning Policy Framework allowed a house of "exceptional quality" to be built in open countryside, but the Parish Council had recommended refusal on the grounds that the proposed house did not meet these requirements. The application for a first storey extension to The Three Horseshoes was finally approved in June 2022.

The Village Hall Trust submitted an application for a new premises licence in April 2022 that would cover the Old School as well as the Jubilee Hall and the District Council had suggested extending the licenseable hours. Neighbours of the Village Hall were concerned that the extended hours could result in many more late night events and as a result the Village Hall Trust withdrew their application, submitting a new application that extended the premises licence to the Old School but without the extension in hours.

The Three Horseshoes submitted an application for a new premises licence in March 2023 and again the District Council suggested extending the licenseable hours. Neighbours of The Three Horseshoes were concerned that the extended hours could result in many more late night events with amplified music being played outside the building and the application was due to be considered at a hearing on March 31<sup>st</sup>.

The Parish Council contributed towards the cost of improving the track from Eastcombe Lane to Knoll Lane in order to provide a safe route for walkers, cyclists and horseriders from Batcombe to Eastcombe.

Tom Price was thanked for taking on the role of Parish Path Liaison Officer and volunteering to train to use a strimmer purchased by the Parish Council on the footpaths.

Kevin Gale from Wanstrow was thanked for cutting the Playing Field grass and had been awarded the contract again for the current year. Gary Butler was thanked for cutting the Playing Field hedge.

With the money left over from the fundraising the Parish Council had purchased a new self-closing pedestrian gate for the Playing Field and a new mat, nets and cricket stumps for the cricket net. Ian Sage was thanked for installing the gate and Ian, Peter Glaisher and Peter's son Jamie were thanked for installing the netting, mat and stumps.

The Parish Council also purchased a new bench for the Playing Field in memory of Dominic Conway, installed a seat in the bus shelter and moved the low seat to the bottom of the Playing Field. Ian Sage was thanked for installing these.

The Parish Council had the Playing Field hedge laid by an award-winning hedge layer in December and Jayne Cox was thanked for arranging this.

Peter Glaisher was thanked for co-ordinating with allotment holders to ensure that the allotments field was kept tidy. Several allotments had been vacant but by the end of the year all but one had been taken.

The Parish Council made a grant of £300 to the Village Hall Trust; half of which paid for its own meetings and the rest met the cost of village organisations using the Old School for committee meetings free of charge. The Parish Council also made a grant of £200 to the Parochial Church Council for the maintenance of the churchyard; and grants of £100 each to Mendip Community Transport and the Mendip Citizens Advice Bureau.

The Parish Council website had had over 296,000 visits since being established eleven years previously. The website contained a wide range of documents that the Parish Council was legally required to publish as well as details of local news and events. The Parish Council had also set up its own Facebook page in the last year in order to post information on the Batcombe Facebook page.

Jayne Cox was thanked for representing the Parish Council on the Village Hall Trust. Ian Sage and Tom Price were thanked for organising the lighting of the beacon on Burnell to mark the Queen's Platinum Jubilee. Tom Price was also thanked for organising the Batcombe Community Volunteer Group to undertake voluntary activities in the parish. And Bryony Harling was thanked for representing the Parish Council on the Coronation Committee. The Parish Council had agreed to fund the purchase of Coronation mugs to be given to people in the parish.

In January 2023 the Parish Council decided to leave its precept for 2023/24 unchanged at £9,925.

Griff Williams was thanked for undertaking the internal audit of the Parish Council's accounts.

Janet Jones then gave a talk on **Highways Issues** in the parish. Maintenance of the highways was the responsibility of the Somerset Council through Somerset Highways and the Parish Council got involved when issues affected local residents.

The bad weather in February highlighted the problem of ice on the roads. Winter weather had always caused problems due to the topography of the parish with snow and ice making it impossible for cars to get in or out. The road through Batcombe and Westcombe used to be gritted but this was no longer the case, partly due to issues with parked cars, and the parish would not be included on the Council's gritting route in the foreseeable future.

In the past Somerset Highways had dropped piles of grit by the roadside, but this often went unused and then when needed had frozen solid. Grit was deposited in bins but apart from Hincombe Hill and the area by the Westcombe phone box, there were few appropriate places for them on the road verges. A bag of grit had been delivered to Ian Sage at Portway Farm, who had distributed it to these two locations.

The Parish Council would be working with our Councillor Claire Sully and Somerset Highways to look at locations for more grit bins as well as general winter preparation. When snow was an issue, Bruno Cristofoli at Lower Farm had a Council-provided snow plough attachment for a tractor.

We have been fortunate in the recent past that parishioners have been willing and able to distribute the grit. Somerset Council were keen to emphasise self-help under the slogan "Grit and determination". However, there was a need to ensure that volunteers who used mechanical equipment to spread grit were insured by the Somerset Council, something that they had not offered in the past.

Another seasonal aspect of the highways was the cutting of roadside hedges. It was a rural myth that this was the responsibility of the Council, in fact it is the responsibility of the landowner. Another myth was that hedges on a farmer's field can be left overhanging the highway under the stewardship scheme - they cannot.

A newish resident was amazed at the debris left on the roads after hedge cutting. Cuttings should be cleared from the highway, but this rarely happens. The Parish Council regularly published a diagram in the parish magazine about suggested tree height overhang on the road and parish councillors had reminded individuals of their responsibilities for the highway near their property. Another rural myth is that those who cut the hedges do the work for free - they don't and should be paid!

It was good sense for householders to look after the front of their property, adjacent to the road, removing any weeds, leaves or vegetation debris that might cause a blockage to water run-off.

If there are problems on the roads with pot holes, worn surfaces, blocked drains or any other issues, these can easily be reported by anyone to the Somerset Council via the roads, travel and parking section of the somerset.gov.uk web site. Those without internet access can phone. There had been a good response to issues raised this way.

Another highway related matter was speeding and unsafe driving. The speed limit in the parish was the national speed limit of 60mph. However, the Highway Code was clear that this did not mean it was safe to drive at that speed irrespective of conditions. Drivers must proceed with due care and attention, adapting their driving to the type and condition of the road, giving pedestrians on roads without a footpath plenty of room and passing them carefully and slowly. When approaching horse riders they should be patient and when safe to do so pass wide and slow. Incidents of bad driving should be reported to the PCSO and serious issues to the police. And nothing should be thrown out of a car.

A perennial highways issue was lorries getting stuck on the narrow roads and causing delay and potentially damage to the highway and properties. While there were signs on all the main roads into the Parish of varying sizes and styles, these were either not seen by or ignored by

some drivers. Local businesses were aware of the issues and advised delivery drivers of the problems and that car sat-navs were not appropriate for small rural roads. Any issues should be reported to the Parish Council as this would help our case for better signage.

Car parking, particularly on Kale Street and at junctions could be an issue and residents were asked to consider their neighbours and other road users when parking.

Another highways matter was the state of the traditional fingerpost signs dotted around the parish. Three Parish Councillors had travelled to Bridgwater for training on the repair of these only to be informed that they could not work on the signs and the work needed to be done by contractors. Peter Glaisher had undertaken a survey and detailed seven finger-post signs and their current state of repair. Each sign was likely to cost around £900 + VAT to repair. The Parish Council was considering how best to approach this and would be potentially looking for sponsorship or using its own funds to renovate the signs in a phased way.

**Questions or Comments from Parishioners.** Michael Gay felt that the school bus routes should be gritted as there wasn't space at Upton Noble School for everyone to drive and noted that other villages in the school catchment area were also having problems in icy weather. Volunteers with shovels could not replace mechanical gritting and volunteers were working at their own risk without insurance. It was noted that farmers were insured for snow clearing but not for gritting. Rosie Prebble noted that a decision on whether it was safe to use the school bus used to be taken by the bus company but now the decision was taken by the schools. Peter Glaisher noted that volunteers cannot work on the fingerposts as traffic lights were needed because there was no speed limit in the parish. Brendan Cox noted that surface water was a major problem as it created ice in freezing weather and issues needed to be reported. It was felt that Somerset Highways needed to clear the gulleys in the parish.

**District Councillor's Comments.** Michael Gay noted that learning to be a District Councillor was a steep learning curve and that his term in Office had been blighted by Covid and the unwanted change to a unitary council. He urged parishioners to support their Parish Councillors and the new Somerset Councillors and he thanked the Councillors and the Clerk for their hard work.

Janet Jones thanked everyone for coming; and Jayne Cox read a poem on the problems of the roads in Batcombe.