

The Topsham Society

(Registered Charity No 265073)

Minutes of the 54th Annual General Meeting, Matthews Hall, Topsham on Thursday 17 May 2018

Present: Mrs PMW Anthony, Mr & Mrs J Baldwin, Phil Bamford, Mrs Joyce Barkla, Jan Betteridge, Mrs Louise Belanger, Dr & Mrs S Bhanji, Tony Bradford, Dr C J & Mrs C Buckingham, David Burley, Rev David R Byrne, Mrs D Burdick, Mr & Mrs Charles Burnett-Hitchcock, Margaret Byatt, Dr L & Dr R Clarke, Jane Clement, Mrs Sally Coffman, Mr & Mrs Trevor Coleman, Mrs Sheila Curzon, Mr Tom Daveney, Mr & Mrs Mr Trevor Day, M de Jong, Sally Drane, Mr & Mr & Mrs R Drury, Mr & Mrs Charles Duthie, Ms C Edginton, Mrs Jenny Ellis, Jane Evans, Mr Garth Flint, Mr & Mrs Andy Graham-Cumming, Major General & Mrs J St J Grey, Beryl Gurney, Mr & Mrs Gordon Halliday, Dr & Mrs C Hanvey, Mrs J A Harries, Mr & Mrs Ray Hatrick, Mrs A Horton, Meg Knight, John Lawrence, Samantha Lelliot, Mrs Elizabeth McCann, Mr & Mrs D McLarin, Mrs J Manly, Sarah Martin, David & Lucia Morrey-Jones, Sheila Morrison, Mr & Mrs R Murray, Ms L Neal & H Lodder, Doug Newman, Mr & Mrs F P Nichols, Mrs J Northey, Mr & Mrs Nott, Dr Philippe Oboussier, Mrs B Oke, Sharon Patrick, Jenny Pearson, R C Pond, Mr Jeremy Rawlings, Gary Salter, Mr & Mrs K Scott, Mrs Carole Searle, Mrs G S Simey, Jackie Simpson, Mr R D Smith, Mrs D Sturley, Mrs E Sykes, Miss A R Symons, Mrs Mary Tamlyn, Mr J & Dr P Tremlett, Mr & Mrs M Trout, Mr & Mrs Jeff Try, Mrs Wendy Turner, Mr & Mrs Derek Wannell, Mrs C G Weedon, Rowena Whiter & Alan Hooper, Jill Whitehouse, Fr G Wilberforce, Mrs Gill Williams-Hawkes, Mrs Cynthia Wise, Mr & Mrs Peter Wormald, Ella Young.

Apologies for absence : Catriona & David Batty, Pat & Chris Brightman, Sheila & Keith Bolden, Pam & Freddie Bush, Morag Campbell, Tom & Gillian Epton, Chris James, Prof Brian & Mrs Rachel Kirby, Gabrielle & Jonathan Lyne, Francis & Tony Nedusznski, Andrea Patterson, Margaret Read, Caroline Shaffer-Heard, Diana Smythson, Dave Thompson, Roger & Jennifer Whiffen.

Minutes of AGM 17 May 2017 (circulated with 2018 Spring mail out) - amendments made were:

.1 Caroline Searle and Adrian Blackhurst were added to the Apologies for Absence.

.2 Treasurer's Report

Paragraph 1 - independent examiner's name changed from Steve Preston to Freddie Bush.

Item 6 - election of an independent examiner : recorded that Steve Preston's illness had led to Freddie Bush taking over this duty although at the time he hadn't been identified as his successor. Apologies made for any distress that might have been caused.

Acceptance of amended minutes proposed by Rachel Nichols and seconded by Chris Buckingham. Agreed unanimously.

Chairman's report - appended to these Minutes.

Hon Treasurer's report

Charles Duthie thanked Peter Betteridge for stepping in as Independent Examiner. In summary, there had been very few expenses apart for the calendar printing. However, this always made a profit which helped to redress the balance.

Membership had increased slightly from 365 to 378 so the year ended with £9,308 in the bank. A little bit of detail re income: Guided Walks income was down; 2016 had been exceptional and brought in £216 compared with £161 for last year. Sales of the Calendar, published every two years,

were £2,029 which was where most of the additional balance had come from this year. Other incomes were very similar to previous years.

Looking at expenditure, the main expense had been the calendar but that was recouped despite printing costs increasing significantly. Our regular printer had ceased business but alternatives were being sought.

The answer to a query regarding what the printing costs were derived from, was that they were mostly for the AGM mailing and Newsletters which were hand delivered to Topsham addresses. Until all members had email, a switch to using email exclusively for communication was not possible.

Acceptance of accounts proposed by Trevor Coleman and seconded by Tony Bradford. Accepted unanimously.

Election of officers 2018-19: except for the vacancies for vice president and vice chair, all officers were standing again. No nominations had been received for vacant positions. Officers were duly elected unanimously following their proposal by Chris Buckingham, seconded by Tony Bradford. Committee members: no new nominations had been received. The re-election of Daphne Burdick, Trevor Coleman, Bill Dickens, Andy Graham-Cumming, Doug Newman and Andrew Williamson en bloc was proposed by Dr Oboussier, seconded by Chris Buckingham and agreed unanimously.

In conclusion David Burley thanked both the members of the committee and the officers in particular for their sterling work. He also thanked Andy Graham-Cumming, the Society's cyber guru, for his work on the website and at talks and presentations. Membership secretary and treasurer Charles Duthie, was thanked for the fantastic job done to bring together all the financial information, as was Secretary José Northey for whom no task seemed too great. In addition to managing the calendar and the secretarial role in the Society, she was involved with Charter Day, co-edited *Estuary* magazine together with a myriad other activities. Both Topsham and the Society would be significantly poorer without her input and David Burley asked that she and the rest of the committee were applauded.

Election of Independent Examiner: Peter Betteridge had agreed to stand again. Proposer: Chris Buckingham, seconded by Andy Graham-Cumming and agreed unanimously.

Any Other Business: no matters had been raised prior to the meeting.

.1 A cautionary warning re indiscriminate and/or modern developments in single house builds, such as had occurred on Mount Howe, came from the floor. They might ruin the very thing that the Society wanted to preserve about the town's architectural history. David Burley replied that this was partly why the Society had chosen not to make an Enhancing Topsham award this year because there were no schemes worthy of the award. The point was of interest because in the architectural profession of which he was part there was a reverse annual award called the carbuncle award and this might, perhaps, be worth the Society's consideration in the future.

The context of the town was undeniably under threat because of the national planning policy; this had resulted in the Council reneging on previous pledges to protect green space, heritage and encourage localism. Developers were, therefore, able to carry out development on green land with virtual impunity. The landscape setting between us and Exeter was a case in point because Exeter City council couldn't prove that it had sufficient housing allocation. The council was attempting to overcome this but as the framework of national policy stood at the moment and until Exeter was either able to achieve that allocation (unlikely) or able to form and have adopted the proposed

Greater Exeter Plan alliance with neighbouring local authorities (at least 4-5 years away), similar situations would constantly arise.

His personal view, particularly with regard to the development coming in to the town, was that this was alright as an architectural statement within the urban core of the City but it wasn't appropriate for the edge of a small town such as Topsham. The Society's numerous protests and direct presentations to the Exeter CC planning committee had had no effect: members were not particularly receptive to the Society's arguments and their hands were genuinely tied by central government policy. The best course of action, therefore, would be for individuals to write to our local MP and protest at the impact that this policy and the great expansion of the city - and other cities around the country in a similar manner - was having on small provincial towns such as ours.

The Chairman thanked members for their help and co-operation and called for an interval of 15 minutes before starting the second half of the programme.

David Burley opened the discussion on Topsham shopping with the anomaly that although Topsham was located in an East Devon parliamentary constituency its day-to-day affairs were governed by Exeter City council whose interests were not necessarily the same as Topsham's. In addition, Topsham no longer had either a town or parish council to represent it within ECC.

The concern this anomaly raised was that Topsham had become largely a franchise while local MP Hugo Swire barely answered the Society's correspondence and ECC had little regard for the Society because it was not within its parliamentary political remit. Suggestions had been received that it might be worthwhile to form a group to try and correct that anomaly in some way. Discussion ensued about how such a process might go ahead; the possibilities of changing the political boundaries; and keeping the status quo which was favoured by many. Any new, wider town group would need to secure mass support for any representations or action if it were to be taken seriously when lobbying the appropriate authorities rather than this being done collectively through the Society.

Acknowledged that East Devon appeared to be competent and to have achieved housing targets to meet the requirements of the national planning policy, principally with the help of Cranbrook. So it was not faced with a housing anomaly as Exeter was. Therefore Topsham would be better off in East Devon than in Exeter subject to any change in the future because figures were reviewed annually. The Society would look into this further to see how changes might be progressed should a group felt this would be appropriate.

No Enhancing Topsham award was to be made this year as had been already stated. Potential options had been considered but nothing justified an award as on previous years. However a competition for the re-use of the signal box had been held. The two entries from Sue Wright and Rose Scott were selected as joint winners. In principal it was proposed that the box could be converted into a local tourist information point or exhibition centre to show off features of the town. This was seen to be a very constructive use of the box.

Visit Exeter, the tourist wing of ECC, had supported the idea in principle and had opened talks with the rail authorities which were ongoing.

Rose Scott received her winner's Champagne from David Burley and the absent Sue Wright would receive hers at a later date.

Topsham Shopping at the Crossroads. The Society had been aware for quite some time of the issues and concerns about the decline of the town centre. It had approached various local groups to identify how this might be arrested or reversed. In brief the concerns were:

- A significant change in Topsham from being a very self-contained town serving its own geographical area to broadening its base outwards. That had impacted on the type of shops and the way they operated.
- Shops were closing with much greater frequency than a few years ago; the periods that they remained vacant seemed longer as well.
- Both banks had gone; the Post Office had moved to a more peripheral location in a more subsidiary role within a normal shop. Local shops serving local people were becoming general "resort shops", serving a broader population. So if enough visitors to the town were not attracted, those shops might struggle to survive.
- An increase in charity shops was in common with other town centres.
- The number of Topsham restaurants and pubs had declined.

The town's traditional customer base appeared to have changed. People were less likely to shop locally generally than they had once done and instead went to out of town shopping centres, took home deliveries, did internet shopping - a whole range of things were now available which put a great deal of pressure not just on Topsham but on towns like Topsham.

Exeter had upped its game, with the Princesshay development in particular, and was now a busy vibrant centre attracting visitors and customers away from local shopping places such as Topsham.

Darts Farm, which provided high quality shopping under one roof with ample free car parking, probably might have had an impact on the attraction of Topsham where parking was difficult. Michael Dart had denied that position, believing that Darts Farm didn't take trade from Topsham; that his customers were just as likely to be Topsham people while others who came to Darts Farm subsequently went on to Topsham. The Society was not necessarily convinced by that argument and would discuss further with Michael Dart.

Location of Aldi. Not known what impact this shop might be having on town shopping habits but there was an element of passing trade which must have some impact.

Operating costs - business rates and rates' exemption, rents and start up costs for small businesses also impacted on the town's traders. High rates had a prohibitive effect and resulted in a large number of businesses being outside the small business relief rating.

Several traders who were present were invited to comment. Sarah Martin of Nourish said her landlord gave her an exceptionally low rent so business rate exemption could be claimed; otherwise she would not have been able to afford to run a business. A general discussion ensued about rateable values in the town and how these were arrived at.

Residents' Parking Scheme: this was intended to strike a balance between the parking needs of residents and businesses with visitors and customers coming into the town. Spaces were finite. General discussion ensued re increased activity of traffic wardens; business vehicles parking all day in street spaces which could be freed up for shoppers; special parking rates and hours for shoppers.

Empty shops were thought to deter people coming to a town because of less commercial activity. The merits of other businesses taking over vacant premises short term, as had happened with Cooks Aweigh and Wilkinson Grant, were arguably good and helped the town show it was open for business.

Opening days were still very traditional with shops generally closing on Sundays and one other weekday, usually Monday, rather than 6-7 days a week as was frequently the case elsewhere. The practicalities of varying opening hours, what costs running one's own small business would attract because of turnover or employing extra staff, and whether Sunday opening was really worthwhile were discussed.

Action that the Topsham Society had taken included discussions with other local groups such as the Community Association and Love Topsham group and also with business owners about the re-use of their empty buildings . The prominent NatWest site was now in great need of repair and was a blot on the town. The Society had received assurances that a planning application for constructive re-use was in hand but nothing had so far been forthcoming. Any sensible, good quality proposals would get the Society's support.

A revival of the Traders' Association had been proposed so businesses as a body could better represent their interests . Retail being a very specific industry required people with a specific knowledge of what they were doing to actually make it work.

The new Love Topsham group had evolved from the one founded several years ago by the late Geoff Bowen of Pebblebed Vineyards. The new group had concentrated its initial efforts on marketing which included a Love Topsham leaflet to be distributed to residents and a website which was soon to go live. The Visit Exeter website now featured Topsham and discounts were available to local businesses who joined the Visit Exeter marketing set up; also in preparation was a new Topsham map. Visit Exeter had, as previously mentioned, taken up the case of possible funding of a signal box makeover.

Questions put to the floor were:

- Was high street shopping dead in Topsham and were we trying to stand against the unstoppable?
- What, if anything, should Topsham do to counter these threats?
- Could Topsham shops survive on just local domestic trade?
- Should Topsham encourage upmarket, big brand names chain stores as found in Salcombe, Padstow and Dartmouth to attract more people in?
- Should Topsham's shopping street concentrate shops in a smaller part of Fore street? Or was a mix of shops over a broader area, characteristic of large town centres, more desirable?
- Was the Quay a sensible location for the antique centre?
- What should be done about the vacant banks?
- Should vacant shops be used by other businesses for advertising/selling?
- How could landlords be encouraged to work with traders re rents?
- Did any of this really matter? Was the shopping centre that key to the town?

A discussion followed, led by new traders Sam Lelliot (The Beauty Lounge) and Sarah Martin (Nourish). Sam commented that regular passing trade was infrequent, especially if the weather was bad. Sarah said that despite overwhelming support initially, it wasn't reflected greatly in people buying her products; customers still went out of town shopping. In her view a real push was needed in the local community to make people more aware of the benefits of still having special local shops like Arthurs and Richards.

She added that opportunities for greater footfall in shops, cafes and restaurants were being missed by not reaching out to the new estates that had sprung up around Topsham.

Stella McClarin commented that the shops had lost out by moving the primary school out of the town centre which took away the regular flow of mothers and children to and from school.

This round of debate concluded with the comment that the removal of both banks and post office from the town centre had undoubtedly contributed to the fragmentation of the town.

Questioned on how parking affected customers, comments ranged from no issue with customers, who often came in by train for the day; uncertainty about how the proposed residents permits/parking hours would work and the effect they might have on current use of street spaces to a possible Park & Ride based at Darts Farm and/or an electric bikes facility at Darts or the Quay. It was also agreed that a better balance/integration was needed with the very successful Darts Farm business; this overlapped and replicated some of Topsham's specialised shops so taking trade away from the town.

The meeting was urged to take a very serious interest in the key parking issue by attending the residents' parking exhibition on 23 March (10am-noon) and 24 March (3pm-5pm) at the rugby club; feedback to be submitted by 8 June.

Small business owner Lily Neal stressed that anything done about Topsham shopping had to be done seriously and with some kind of accountability. Some business owners, she said, had no money worries and could choose their opening hours; others had a problem just making a living. Her radical proposal was that groups like the TCA, Topsham Society or Love Topsham should raise funds to employ "regeneration" officers whose task would be to sort out who owned our empty shops and ask the estate agents why empty shops were not selling or being let. Without action, more empty shops might be lost forever if returned to residential use as had happened to Mortimers Stores. In Radical plans would be needed - for parking and perhaps to cover over Fore Street to give it a traditional pannier market look.

A consensus view on the pros and cons of big national brands appearing in the town was that they might attract shoppers but the character of Topsham would change and not necessarily for the better.

Chairman Jeremy Rawlings reminded the meeting that neither Topsham Society nor the TCA were representative of the town; this would weaken any stance that might be taken on behalf the town's interests as had already happened when recent housing developments had been opposed. How to rally the whole community behind something, like tackling the regeneration of the shopping centre, was the big question and one which Topsham Society would ever seek to answer when and where it could in the future.

Regarding footfall only anecdotal evidence was available regarding numbers and ages of shoppers; the times they chose to shop and where they came from. A park and ride option between Darts Farm and Stagecoach, with a discounted ticket for the journey between the two, might be worth looking into.

Sam Lelliott had asked the Exeter Bid team to help her get Topsham interested in setting up a similar bid for Topsham businesses. A public meeting had been called, a leaflet drop had been made to shops but only seven people turned up. So nothing had happened. She thought it might still be possible to talk again with the Exeter Bid team if there were support for it in Topsham.

A revival of the defunct Traders' Association was supported and any lead the TCA or the Topsham Society could give to help take the strain off small businesses would be welcomed. Love Topsham, in

its new guise, was still an unknown quantity and not likely to be of immediate help. Strong retail initiatives, organised by someone with retail knowledge was what was needed.

Generally agreed that Topsham should not copy Exeter and welcome large chains. Instead, it needed to concentrate on its small, specialist shops in addition to the basic ones that could be found in Budleigh, Totnes, St Ives and Falmouth. Small specialist shops drew people in from a wide area. Also, being able to park outside a shop for an hour was an attractive incentive for people to stop off en route to buy goods not readily available, for instance, in Exeter.

The contribution that the antique centre made to drawing people in from far and wide was also acknowledged.

Lily Neal's made a final point that although sometimes necessary, paying an employee to work in a shop could affect the viability of that small business owner.

David Burley thanked everyone for attending and in particular to everyone who had contributed to the debate. The meeting closed at 9.45pm.

Signed.....

Date.....