

## **THE TOPSHAM SOCIETY**

### **Chairman's Report to AGM 17 May 2018**

Good evening everybody. The mainstay of our work as a Society revolves around planning and I'll start by thanking David Burley, who heads our planning team, for the sterling work he and they do on our behalf, on the town's behalf, in relation to planning, drafting representations to the City council and site visits. There's a variety of work done by him and the team so thank you all.

I will not bore you with the long list of issues around planning and what's happening. You only have to drive up the road towards Exeter to see what's happening to the town. What you may not be aware of is that the Clyst road/Towerfield development which was *initially* refused by the City council, is now going to public inquiry later this year. So we will refresh our energies on that and make representations on the Society's behalf as and when the basis of that appeal is known.

The worrying fact is that the City council still doesn't have its total housing allocation sorted out. There are pockets of land in and around Topsham and the city of Exeter that are ripe for development and, if the City council can't bat them away, developers will exercise loopholes to build new houses. It's a sad fact of modern life that they have to do that. We, of course live, in a very pleasant part of the world and, I suppose, we should be pleased that more and more people want to come and live here.

Moving on to the Goat Walk, Frances Nieduszynski and I have been your representatives on the Board of Trustees for the Goat Walk land for some time. There is also a Management Team who act under the Board of Trustees which has done a sterling job of managing that land. It's not easy to manage a piece of land of that size to ensure that it is looked after. I don't think people realise how hard it is to maintain the meadow and to cut the grass. So the Society has a great deal of gratitude to the Management committee and, of course, to the other Trustees.

Other areas of our work are the talks and walks. The winter programme of talks has had some very interesting topics. Sad to say that Derek Smithers, our talks organiser and a member of our committee for a couple of years, now feels the need to step back from that role. For the moment we can't replace him. No one has come forward despite various pleas at various talks and other things. It's not a particularly arduous job but there is only so much that the committee, as it stands, can do. If you can think of somebody who might be good at organising a series of talks during the winter season, please ask them to get in touch. We'll offer as much assistance as possible; it's mostly about communicating and organising the dates.

I said to you, probably 3-4 years ago, that one of my wishes was to update the Society's constitution which in one part says, rather patronisingly, that its role was "to educate the people of Topsham." I know what it meant and, at the time, the language was right but now the language is wrong. It's not about educating the people of Topsham about their surroundings. Only so many talks can be given on the surroundings of Topsham, beautiful as it is. So we've stretched our wings...one fascinating talk was on local business Gregory Transport whose lorries day in, day out, travel up and down the road.

The guided town walks continue through summer and some of you are guides. Gill Yates organises these so a great thank you to her for putting up with me, organising leaflets, running around like a mad thing and still doing a really good job. Thank you too to all the guides and if that's something you would be interested in doing, I'm sure Gill would be glad to hear from you. It's always useful to have new blood coming through.

There isn't an outing this year because there isn't anybody to organise it! It would be nice if there were someone who would like to take on this role. There are lots of lovely places to go to and we could always repeat the best ones. Again, it's like organising talks...you don't have to come on to the committee, we're not asking you to get involved and come to meetings. You can do it in your own time.

This year the Topsham School art cup competition took the topic of Charles Darwin and his expedition to the Galapagos Islands as its theme. Key stage II pupils were asked to make pieces of artwork linked to this and imprint patterns on paper. Our thanks to Daphne Burdick who organises that.

We also ran a competition concerning the future of the signal box. It was brought to our attention that this lovely part of our heritage on the end of the platform, had not seen much use as offices for some time and might go the way of many other defunct signal boxes and be removed. So we ran a competition and there were two winners. I'll say no more because David Burley is doing the presentation and will talk more about it after the interval. That was a nice thing to do and a positive thing for the town.

We are actively involving ourselves with the traders in the town. Just like you, the Society is very aware that the trading scene is changing: the shop frontages, the types of shops we have and what we used to have; losing shops and how some traders are finding it very difficult to survive. Various organisations have sprung up and you'll hear more about that after our interval.

We've tried to take an active part where we can because, of course, the architectural fabric of the town and its landscape is part of our heritage. If shops stop being shops and change to residential usage, we'll just end up with a street full of houses. Essentially, Fore street is the heart of our town; on a Saturday morning on your way to pop into the greengrocers or the butchers it's hard not to bump into somebody you know.

Parking is another ongoing issue. Messages and photographs have come to me today about the Council notices that have gone up in the town about a proposed residents parking scheme. The Society didn't know they were going up. We knew there had been consultations and that there would be an exhibition at some point. This exhibition is now set, at very short notice, for 23 and 24 May in the rugby club. Everywhere there is a Devon Highways parking notice, we are going to put up a notice about the exhibition to ensure everyone knows about it.

Some issues in the town don't fit our remit but might perhaps fit between the TCA and ourself. There's also the town's Facebook presence. I'm not an active user of Facebook but I get views from people who do. There are two groups; one is the main Topsham page and the other is Topsham Born and Bred which was set up, I believe, as a result of something that appeared on the Topsham page. I think this is purely for people who are Topsham born and bred.

Concerns that have been raised on Facebook pages recently ranged from shops being empty, the state of the town generally; the state of the uncut grass on the rec where children were expected to play football in grass that was above their ankles and dog walkers who were having similar problems in the dog walking field. Those sorts of things are outside of our remit and whether we've actually got the manpower to do things about them, I don't know. But it is something the committee will look at going forward.

The only other thing I would say is that we have had a very successful meeting with potential new volunteers who would help the Society if called upon. If any of you are here tonight, I thank you for

your offers of help and I am grateful too to those committee members who went to that introductory meeting.

But there's always room for more. You don't have to be on the committee and come to meetings. There are little bits and pieces people could do for the Topsham Society so come forward if you can. Membership is slightly up for the year, which is good news, and you will hear more from Charles Duthie in his report. We need to keep money coming in because we never know when we might, as a Society, need to call on our funds...perhaps to launch a plan ourselves or to join in a community project like our contribution to assist with the buying of the Goat Walk land.

Thank you very much for your support of the Society. I would like to say a personal thank you to all of the committee for the work they do on all of our behalves and members of this Society and in particular the work they do to help me as Chairman. My work life is such that I'm all over the place and an awful lot has to be done by email. And to that end, we don't have a vice chairman, which is a committee position of course. If there was somebody who felt that they might like to be vice chairman, please make themselves known or put themselves forward this evening.

Going forward, do have a think about it; you could become involved in some way with the work that the Society does. We wouldn't make it an onerous task but it would be good though. My tenure as Chairman was limited, I thought, to three years which was in fact up last year; then I discovered that I could do another two years! But my time is growing ever and ever limited because of work commitments so it would be useful to have a vice chairman to help out.

**Jeremy Rawlings**  
**Chair**  
**May 2018**