

Chairman's Report for 2019-2020

Our first AGM was now more than a year ago and it's disappointing that we have not been able to have a public meeting but must settle for a delayed, virtual, second AGM.

The 2019 AGM was hotly followed by the opening of the Thoburn playground on the Harold Vyvyan Harmsworth Recreation Field. It immediately proved extremely popular and has been further enhanced by some additional equipment. Both here and in Iden Green, new benches have been given in memory of Peter Cooper; our thanks go to his family.

During the year, Trustees have been involved in basic day-to-day issues, in wider issues of month-by-month management and in longer-term strategy. The day-by-day matters – I nearly called them the simple issues, but that would be silly – included such things as broadband in the office, security posts and gates for both recreation fields, the re-siting of litter bins, taps needing replacement, doors needing adjustment, and complaints about footpaths.

Month-by-month issues have included a professional Fire Risk Assessment and Health and Safety Audit at St George's, and the creation of an Integrated Policy on Maternity, Adoption, Paternity and Parental Leave and Pay. One trigger for this was when our Hall cleaner, Jenn Gurr, informed us that she was expecting a child, and we were delighted by news of the safe arrival of a daughter in May this year. The management of the Village Hall is much the biggest recurring responsibility. Here, we are all much indebted to the devoted work of Lorraine Jones. Lorraine decided that she needed to pass on the baton and resigned in October with the intention of handing over at the end of November; she then generously continued in post until the end of January, giving us time to revise job descriptions, advertise successfully for a Village Hall Manager, to short-list and finally appoint Holly Clayson, who was born and grew up in Benenden. Holly had just begun to get going when the pandemic struck and we had to close down operations. Trustees took the view that we should retain the Hall Manager, Caretaker (Karen Saunders) and Cleaner during shut-down and they have ensured that the Hall was fully ready for reopening, enhanced by repairs and repainting and with a full understanding of the health and safety issues. We have further strengthened the management structure by revising the role of our Clerk to become the Benenden Village Trust Manager, with day to day responsibility for all aspects of the Trust's activities. Trustees are volunteers - they need to have systems which allow them to deal with decision-making promptly and to carry out their responsibilities. professionally. We are very fortunate in having Caroline's expertise, efficiency and commitment at our disposal. We now have a simple management structure, from Cleaner to Caretaker to Hall Manager to BVT Manager. As Trustees, we have assigned ourselves in small teams to take primary responsibility for different areas, with the ability to make judgments which we can as a body review. This has achieved a reduction in the need for meetings and in the length of meetings and an improvement in the process of decision-making. Our response to lockdown was made easier as a result and we have been able to use email to create virtual meetings.

We have made a start on longer-term strategy, but with no specific intention. We have identified just how much less than ideal St George's Hall is for both the Club and the Pre-School; we are aware of previous ideas for rethinking public toilet facilities and reworking the current building. There are also pressures suggesting alterations to the Village Hall and ideas for improved changing facilities for sports. We have so far commissioned up-to-date plans of St George's Hall and the area round the Village Hall and published a questionnaire asking for views about the best use of the Trust's resources. Progress in analysing responses and meeting to explore ideas has been slowed by the lockdown. The same is true of plans for the replacement of the play facilities at Iden Green, but we are grateful for the news that Julie Lewis has gathered a team to draw up plans and raise the necessary funds.

Chairing the Trust has been a privilege and a challenge, but one which has been made pretty straightforward by the commitment of others to the community enterprise. Key to smooth operations and identifying the right way to do things is Caroline Levett, and I thank her for the consistent good humour and flexibility she practises. Each of my fellow Trustees has done valuable work for the Trust, and I don't want to be invidious, but I need to single out Kent Barker and Jonathan Strong for the time and effort that they have given. I also want to thank Barrie Jones for bringing us his legal expertise which proved invaluable during the early stages; he has resigned as a Trustee, but offered himself for consultation as needed. My thanks, personally and on behalf of the Trust, to all of them. I am delighted that three candidates have been willing to stand as new Trustees and commend them highly to you for what they will be able to bring to the Trust.

I'd like to record our thanks to the numerous local businesses and tradespeople who have provided services to the Trust: this is another way in which it can support the community. Thank you, Members, for your involvement. This year we have used email and the website more for communication; thank you, Rohan Barnett, for creating and maintaining it. Please do give feedback on what is valued and what more could be helpful.

As I step down as Chairman of the Trust, I wish it, its Members, Staff and Trustees every success in developing this important asset for community life in our wonderful Parish.

David Harmsworth