

Good evening and welcome to the Annual Parish Meeting.

There have been no changes in the membership of the council since last year, with two members representing Ashleyhay and five for Ildridgehay and Alton. The council has followed its customary pattern of meeting bi-monthly on the second Wednesday, normally at the village Corn Store, and there have usually been some members of the public in attendance. One extraordinary meeting has been held during the year and I will come back to this later in this report. Councillor David Taylor regularly attends our meetings in his capacity as our District and County Councillor, and is very active on our behalf. The Community Police Officer attends when she can.

As last year, the three principal matters that the council has dealt with have been planning matters, the Neighbourhood Plan and the Black Swan. Amber Valley notifies the clerk of all planning applications in the parishes and the council then considers each one on its merits and submits comments that are considered appropriate. We are most anxious to uphold and protect the integrity of the Special Landscape Area, which covers most of the parishes, and likewise the Conservation Area in Ildridgehay.

The Extraordinary Meeting of the council was held on August 12th 2015, principally to consider a pair of applications Amber Valley had received regarding the pig farm just off the Wirksworth road. The first was for an additional storage shed and the second to double the size of the existing pig unit, so increasing its capacity from 500 to 1000 pigs. With a good attendance by members of the public a lively debate ensued. After due deliberation a strongly worded letter of objection was sent by the council, pointing out what we believed were very strong reasons for its refusal. To no avail, and unfortunately both applications were approved by Amber Valley's Planning Board on April 18th this year. This is a great disappointment and bad news for the residents and the future of this valley. The residents of Ashleyhay had spearheaded a spirited but ultimately unsuccessful campaign, a considerable number of residents had objected in writing and quite a number spoke personally against the applications at the Planning Board meeting. It is very disappointing that our request for a site meeting with the members of the Planning Board before their April 18th meeting was turned down, apparently on a technicality.

I am pleased to report much better news as regards The Neighbourhood Plan. The Plan's referendum took place on October 15th, when it was passed by 110 votes to 9, with a 31% turnout of the parishes' residents. It was shortly afterwards formally adopted by Amber Valley and now forms part of the planning regulations for our parishes. It has taken a considerable amount of time and effort by the members of VIA, to whom we all owe a very large debt. We are told its' policies are now being taken into account when planning officers are considering applications in this area. We hope this is the case, and shall be monitoring applications to ascertain that it really is. The Council hopes that with the Neighbourhood Plan in place the end result will be a more sensitive, sustainable and intelligent application of planning policy which will enhance the parish and provide ongoing protection for our very fine landscape in the future.

The third item I initially mentioned was the Black Swan, which has lain empty since its closure nearly four years ago. As I reported last year, we had arranged two meetings in the church which were very well attended by residents and after the second one a steering group was set up to explore the way forward. The steering group met a few times and attempted to make contact with the owner, Crostone Ltd., which proved very frustrating and ultimately fruitless and the Black Swan has since been offered for sale at £375,000, well above any realistic valuation of it as a pub. The Parish Council has consulted with a number of people in the pub trade about opportunities for re-opening as a pub and these are on-going. However, it must be admitted that currently any attempt to get the Black Swan re-opened is, I am sorry to say, in the doldrums.

During the year three parish newsletters have been produced and distributed and the parish website has been updated. We are very grateful to Councillor Ibbett for editing and creating the newsletters and for the work he does in tending the website. The snow warden scheme remained in operation, with Hazel and Michael Haslam as wardens and the free supply of grit was again received. We have actually had a mild winter with no snow, so we may get by without needing to order any grit next time.

I must again thank our excellent Parish Clerk, Ros Hallam, for the highly efficient and enthusiastic way she does her job and congratulate her on just obtaining her CiCLA qualification, which means she is now even better qualified, and will be able to serve us even better! We are very fortunate to have her and she is a real asset to the council.

To finish, I also want to say how very encouraging it is to see so much support shown by residents, particularly the newer ones, in village events. The VIA group have worked incredibly hard on the Neighbourhood Plan and I'm delighted their efforts were crowned with success. The Village Fete in July was our most successful yet with more volunteers than ever, the Christmas Party at the Corn Store went very well and the Christmas and Spring Fayres in the church were highly successful. There is to be a celebratory Vintage Afternoon Tea in the church on Saturday 11th June to mark the Queen's ninetieth birthday which I trust will be well attended. The council and the PCC work closely together, with a group of volunteers maintaining the churchyard and others the millennium garden. We may be only a small community, but at least we are all singing from the same hymn sheet!