



# The Otford Society Newsletter

Registered with the Civic Trust

Affiliated to the Council for the Protection of Rural England and the Kent Federation of Amenity Societies

DECEMBER 2005

The Otford Society  
wishes all its readers a  
Merry Christmas  
and a Happy New Year

*The Green*

# WHAT IS THE OTFORD SOCIETY FOR ?

RADIO (Residents Against Development in Otford) held an inaugural meeting in the village hall on the 9th November. The organisers, Richard McDowall and Keith Stockman, said the intention was to oppose development throughout the village, and specifically Laing's three proposals for Well Road, the subject of a 3-day Public Inquiry on the 22nd November at the SDC offices and Town Hall. They successfully called for volunteers for a committee and to distribute leaflets.

The Otford Society Chair, Ken Gunderson, thanked the organisers for inviting him to address the meeting. A full report of his speech is printed below, to remind readers of the record and policies of the Society.

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When you look at Otford today and realise the pressures this village has been under for over forty years from developers, it is actually remarkable that we still have a village identity, even if, inevitably, the volume of traffic has destroyed the rural atmosphere.

During those grey austere post-war years of the 1950s, a small group was formed calling itself the Otford Preservation Society. Its sole purpose was 'keeping Otford as an attractive village'. They did this mainly by planting trees and repairing and tidying the pond.

We have been fortunate in having many people beavering away for the good of our community over the years and fighting Otford's corner. None more so than Frank Weston, Chairman of Otford Parish Council for twenty-five years, and founder of the Darent Valley Consultative Association. His locally famous resolution of 1960 declaring opposition to 'all development, or extensions of shopping or commercial activities that paid no heed to the needs of the village' may look now like blowing in the wind. Even then it drew from *The Times* a headline that read 'Peter Pan village that does not want to grow'.

The Otford Society has inherited the mantle of the old Preservation team in its wish to keep Otford as an attractive village.

Our Society was formed in 1973, started – not surprisingly – in a similar fashion to this meeting tonight. An application to build a LITTLE CHEF restaurant in the Sevenoaks Road raised hackles, and the Parish Council called a public meeting. 350 turned up; a 98% vote against did not influence the Planning authority who allowed the development. LITTLE

CHEF has long since gone, so, a storm in a tea cup you might think. But residents at the time were frightened of attracting ‘motor-cycle gangs’ and of what they called the ‘Orpingtonisation of Otford’. (Not an easy thing to say after a meal at the LITTLE CHEF!) And so, with this sense of injustice, the Otford Society was formed with the intention of ‘promoting the general interests of residents of the parish, and securing co-operation between them and their representatives in maintaining the character and attractive features of the village’. The Society recognised that some development was inevitable, but sought to ensure that it would not be indiscriminate, and would maintain the scale and character of the place.

Public meetings serve the purpose of letting off steam, giving people a chance to have their say, and finding out what people think. They are usually well-attended because events on the doorstep have aroused feelings that ‘something must be done!’. We need to be realistic. Pressure groups have little power within the planning system. The best they can do is to try to influence authority. Their case has to be well presented within existing planning guidelines. They usually only have one shot at it, while applicants can get as many as they like. Planning is never black and white; there are many grey areas where rules are open to interpretation by District Authority committees and Planning Officers. In most cases, none of those with the final say live in Otford.

Against this background what has the Otford Society managed to achieve in over thirty years? Successes usually mean rallying other support, but cases where the Society has led the way go back to the M25 on the west side of the village where we gained the bund that hides the motorway and absorbs its noise. The inter-change on the M26 has been prevented at Otford. One man’s planning success is, as they say, another’s disaster, and we argued the case for the inter-change at Chevening. Some villages want it at Otford.

The rubbish tip on the Sevenoaks Road, which was monitored and then finally closed and, we hope, safely restored to grassland. We gained a Right of Way registered on the definite map across Billings farm between the two Shoreham footpaths, proving that this had been a Right of Way in living memory. The application for Parish Rooms – not opposed by the Parish Council – in the Church car park and over some of the graves, was successfully rejected.

Again, we opposed the Parish Council in a development they wanted on Telston Open Space, as it was called then, and we were successful. We supported Shoreham Road residents in their successful campaign against the Orange mobile mast by organising a petition.

Failures there have also been, but I have to say that it is only within the last year or so that I have thought these were mainly due to the inadequacy of the Development Control Committee of Sevenoaks District Council, rather than the case presentation.

Sparrows (now OBM) development was bitterly opposed at an unruly public meeting in the 1970s. It went ahead on the ground of the need for commercial activity and the fact that a local builder had previously operated from that site. We failed in pointing out that such a

large scale concern was not suitable in the High Street, that the Vestry Estate, only a mile away, had been established to take such businesses, and that heavy lorries delivering and leaving in the narrow street with a school close by was a hazard. I wonder – would the planners with hindsight say we were right?

I have been asked to say something about the Otford Society's relationship with RADIO. This I cannot do; that is up to this meeting. My first reaction to the group was disappointment that a long-serving amenity group such as ours was perceived to be inadequate to speak for the community. Then I thought if that is the case, we must look to the reasons why this should be so. Is it because we are seen as 'elderly' and not vigorous enough? Surely our record does not support this view. We have long sought to involve new and younger people to help our organisation. Perhaps this meeting might produce some new faces? We welcome and support any organisation that seeks to spread awareness and concern about village matters, so there is no animosity. But I have to say that I think ginger groups would be better off within an existing structure such as our own; there are, for instance, residents associations within our village that act independently, but still have Otford Society membership. I see no clash of interests, but experience tells me that no organisation will get 100% support from within *all* of the time.

I conclude with a few words about the Otford Society, membership 1,100, for those who may not know what we are about. We have a Constitution and an Executive Committee elected annually at an AGM held in the Memorial Hall. Our only other formal meeting is in the Autumn, although extraordinary meetings can be called at any time. We are non-political. We publish a NEWSLETTER three times a year which aims to be a platform for comment and opinions. There is a modest membership fee. The £1 subscription for pensioners does not even cover the cost of printing their NEWSLETTERS. We are affiliated to several national and county bodies: the CIVIC TRUST, CPRE, Kent Federation of Amenity Societies, the GreenBelt Council. The subscription to the CIVIC TRUST alone costs £175 a year. As a registered charity we have to account for and be careful how we spend our money, and I can assure you our Treasurer is a very careful man.

In the belief that a Society such as ours, which is naturally against some things must stand FOR something, we support other village activities. We are FOR good and appropriate planning and design. You may know that we have recently sponsored the village Trafalgar bi-centenary commemorations by planting oak trees, sponsoring a local art exhibition and dramatic presentation. We have £5,000 standing by for pond repairs. We have an annual celebration for St George's Day and Shakespeare's birthday. We give to village projects, and we have just bought at a cost of over £500 exhibition boards and display stands donated to this hall for use, at their discretion, by any village society. You will have seen the mosaic in the High Street placed there as a public work of art to commemorate the Millennium, and to stand there for all time as a memorial to the history of this marvellous place in which we live. We want to generate amongst all who live here a feeling of affection and a sense of identity, so that when new residents and visitors arrive, they will recognise that the people of Otford have done their very best to preserve the beauty of a village in Kent – with a pond.



# THE DAY PEACE BROKE

We cannot let this year pass without mentioning that it is the 60th anniversary of the end of World War II. Unlike our neighbours in Shoreham, there were no great commemorations in Otford, except for a memorable '1940s' tea organised by Marian Wills and ladies of the WI.

Although we cannot truthfully say that 1945 was the beginning of peace, it was at least a starting point on the international scene. One of the happy things that 1945 brought about was the return home of thousands of servicemen from overseas to resume home life with their nearest and dearest.

Wally Kirsch, known to many in Otford for his service in village organisations, was a Sergeant with the British Army in the Middle East. He has allowed the NEWSLETTER the privilege of seeing one of his letters to his beloved wife Irene, written towards the end of 1943, recounting a visit to Jerusalem and Bethlehem, a welcome respite from the usual daily routine of weapon training. Having managed to get a lift from a truck carrying Polish soldiers to Tel Aviv, he caught a bus to Jerusalem along the 'seven sisters', the spectacular winding road that descends from the mountains. Arriving in the city, he became worried that his money would not last out, as everything was a lot more expensive than he had imagined.

2/6d (12½p) for a dinner, 7½d (approx. 3p) for a small ice cream. Getting fed was a problem; he found a vegetarian meal which included spinach and beans, which he hated! He got lodgings at the YMCA; 4 shillings for bed and breakfast (20p). The downside was that he shared a room with Polish soldiers, none of whom could speak English.

In the Christian Science Rest Room for Soldiers he started to write a long letter home to his wife recounting his leave, before deciding to relax in one of the several modern cinemas close by. He saw and enjoyed a British film, 'Pied Piper' about an elderly man who guides a party of child refugees out of war-torn Europe. On his second day he explored the old city, wishing he could show his wife the extra-ordinary sights.

He visited Bethlehem. The young soldier was vividly impressed by his tour of the Church of the Nativity; by the beauty and history of the place, and by the prayers led by one of the Sisters. One can imagine his emotions; the contrast of that quiet, peaceful and holy place with the life of a fighting man in a theatre of war.

Returning to the YMCA his heart was gladdened by the arrival of a friend; at last someone he could talk to and discuss mutual interests. Listening to the BBC broadcasts from London also

brought a sense of contact with home. The news told him that Prime Minister Churchill was not optimistic of an early conclusion to the war. On his second visit to the cinema he saw Walt Disney's 'Fantasia', which was not quite his cup of tea. Having, as he said in his letter, 'been forced to spend £3 in three days,' he decided he must return to camp before all his money ran out.

His detailed letter to his wife gives us a glimpse of the sort of situations people were thrown into during those long years of war. The interruption of lives; the loneliness of separation, the longing for home endured by so many men and women who won for us the quality of life we enjoy today.

K.L.G.

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## TRAFALGAR BI-CENTENARY CELEBRATIONS



The Otford Society-led commemorations saw two 'Trafalgar Oaks' planted by four Otford schoolchildren on the Recreation Ground – Ben Southgate, Georgia Chandler, Liam Turnbull and George Slinger.

John Allen, Chairman of the Parish Council, spoke about the environmental value of English oak, and the Society's Chairman said that when the trees reached maturity, he hoped the children would be able to look at them and remember that they were planted on Trafalgar Day.

An art exhibition in the Church Hall, with a sea theme, attracted over 200 visitors, and 'Trafalgar Remembered', an original community celebration in words, music and vision, played to a full house in the Memorial Hall. It was attended by the Town Mayor, Mr Robert Piper, and the OPC Chairman. A video (VHS or DVD) made by Barbara Darby is available from the Parish Rooms, or from Barbara Darby (523339) at £6.50. £1 of this goes to the Heritage Centre, and £1 to Otford Players.

The Otford Society has given display boards and stands to the Village Hall for use by local organisations, and would like to thank the Fete Committee for a gift of £100 towards costs.

*Next Otford Society Newsletter and AGM - Spring 2006*

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# otford matters

## **51 KNIGHTON ROAD (new house (4-bed))**

Otford Society has objected that the house is too big for the site, and out of keeping with the street scene. It would have no objection to a bungalow similar to its neighbours.

## **FROG FARM, PWW**

Demolition of old farm house and erection of new dwelling with new vehicular access. The Society has made no objection to a new house, but has expressed concern at the access point on the A225, suggesting that a new bus bay and stopping point might be safer.

## **ROUNDAABOUT AT SAINSBURY'S A225**

Andrew Barber is once again trying to get the Highways Authority to improve the road signing here, citing the Highway Code to prove his point. He says:

‘I am once again writing to the Highways Authority to press them into spending money on a pot of paint, a brush and a couple of man-hours putting road arrows on the north side of the roundabout dedicating the inner carriageway to be Sainsbury's only, and the outer lane straight on to Sevenoaks.

On my last attempt, in May 2003, various excuses were made by Local and County Highways departments, so avoiding action. With the increase in traffic the incidents of being cut-up by the fast boys are becoming more and more regular, and the sudden breaking when they pull in front at the restricted exit has greatly increased the danger.

When PIPEWORK had one-way working to the south of the roundabout and signs for the Supermarket on the inner lane, and on the outer lane for straight-on, the problem was solved. Although the Authorities may not be able to afford road signs, I think they might be pressed to a tin of paint to make driving on a very busy road safer, and with less chance of being involved in “road rage”.

If you feel the same please write to The Manager, Sevenoaks SDC, Argyle Road, Sevenoaks, TN13 1HG.’

## **OTFORD MATTERS** (continued)

At the time of going to press we are awaiting the outcome of the Public Inquiry into Laing's applications for 9, 17 and 21 houses at Well Road. The Society has supported the Parish Council and local residents' objections of inappropriate development, and has submitted a traffic survey taken over a two-day period. Fears about the sewer capacity, which we have expressed, we understand are not a matter for this Inquiry.

**CASTLE HOUSE** (new driveway, with new crossing point at Public Footpath SR50, Bubblestone Road.

The Parish Council wants English Heritage and Department of Culture to comment on the archaeological disturbance, and the KCC Footpaths Officer to give his views on the proposed footpath changes at the entrance to the new driveway; otherwise no objection. The Otford Society has supported these comments.

**METHODIST HALL** (High Street Conservation Area)

There is no date yet for the work to start for the replacement of the 1970's brick building and the older wooden structure, but the builders may move in after Christmas. It is hoped that the new building with its modern facilities will be ready by the summer. Parking places in the village will be severely restricted while the work is in progress, as the Methodist area will no longer be available for short-term parking for those visiting the Library, the butcher's, or for overnight parkers. The Methodists are making arrangements for parking during Sunday services.