



# The Otford Society Newsletter

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of Amenity Societies

OCTOBER 2006



*Norman Catt rescuing the fish*

## Home Improvements for Otford?

The last major alteration to our village centre was in the 1970s when, not without misgivings, the route of the A225 was diverted further west from between Bubblestone Cottage and Holmesdale to create the new approach road from Sevenoaks, losing the Old Otford Road as the main highway to town. This fashioned the present pleasing aspect of our well-kept Green, much admired by visitors and residents alike.

The main attraction is the Pond.

Denis Clarke and Anthony Stoye wrote in "Otford in Kent – A History" – "... residents...regard their village as distinguished for its picturesque willow-sentinelled pond..." How right they were. Although ponds conjure up that image of enduring tranquillity, they have to be looked after, and ours has been in need of attention for some years. The ancient structure has been weakened by the increasing heavy flow

of traffic around it, at times almost non-stop. Much expert advice was sought before it was decided that the pond should be drained and examined before the correct remedial work could go forward. The fish have been removed, the silt dredged out prior to re-puddling for the first time for more than half a century. The area, at the time of writing, is a building site, with the promise of restoration. Renovations cannot be made without mess, and residents will feel happy if the work now going on restores the historic structure for another generation to come. Once more there will be children running to feed the ducks and marvel at the size of the fish.

As it happens, the pond has been emptied in a year of drought, when for the first time in living memory the supply of spring water from Friar's Pool has almost run dry, a situation we hope is only temporary.

Across the Green further major building work is going on, where the new annexe at the Parish Church is taking shape, with barriers guiding pedestrians over a diverted pathway to the Church gates. The extensive building site that is the Conservation Area also stretches down the High Street to the Methodist Church where the new hall, looking quite large in its unfinished state, already has a nearly completed roof. These new meeting places may not come fully into use before 2007, but they will surely be invaluable amenities, contributing to village life.

2006 will go down in the annals as a year of changes in Otford. Almost 100 years ago the Parish Church Hall was built by Lutyens in the High Street at a cost of £500. The people of that era instrumental in placing that building there would be overjoyed to know that it still serves its community purpose, and is still going strong. The new Methodist Hall is arising on the ashes of the old wooden sectional buildings erected in the late 1930s – one of them later changed into a simple brick structure which could not be readily modernised.

If one takes into account that a new pavilion has opened on the Recreation Ground, the Library has been completely refurbished, and residents have raised a large amount of money to help regenerate play areas for children in the centre of the village and at Hale Lane, we can truly feel that this year of 2006 can be recorded as a year when improvements in the quality of community life have been made available for every section of the population.

What next? My own personal view is that the signs in the Conservation Area do nothing to enhance the centre of the village. Can we please have more uniform, dignified and appropriate signs?

K.L.G.

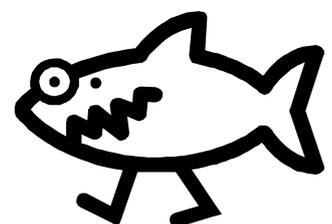
\* "Otford in Kent – A History" is published by the Otford & District Historical Society.

Any views on "home improvements"? – Letters to the Editor always welcome.

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## Tailpiece

The fish from the pond have gone to new homes. The larger ones, we understand, to a Japanese garden in Kensington. New environmentally safe stock will be introduced at some point. It is very important no other fish is put in the pond – discarded pet goldfish, for instance, as this would be dangerous to healthy river life.



# MESSAGE FROM THE CHAIRMAN

*“Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness” (John Keats)*

Autumn is a special season for me, having come into the world on September 4th 1939, an epoch making point in time. Apparently there are fewer people in this particular year group than any other since the end of the First World War. The reason for this is fairly obvious.

September always seems to have a touch of sadness. The nights are beginning to draw in, flowers are beginning to fade, the leaves on the trees are slowly turning brown, and there is a morning dampness after heavy dews. Our thoughts turn to the harvest, Remembrance time in November, and then at the end of another year, Christmas!

This Autumn we in Otford have much to be pleased about. The grant from DEFRA has come through for the new play areas, and remedial work is well on its way at the Pond, something we have waited for for such a long time. The new Methodist Hall is taking shape, and although it seems much larger than one expected it has a pleasing shape and is being built from attractive looking bricks. All these things will help to give Otford a new look, and will be welcome examples of an alive and attractive village.

We were sorry to hear of the death of Gerard Pearson. His major service to the Society was before my time, but we are all aware of his great efforts to prevent Otford having a motorway interchange on its doorstep.

Finally a word about hedges. In the Well Road area we have experienced on two occasions hedges being replaced by “suburban fencing”. We must all be vigilant. Once a hedge has been taken out little can be done to replace it, and the rural flavour of Otford could easily be undermined should too many hedges disappear. Where we know some sort of development is to take place an effort should be made to safeguard any vulnerable hedges.

Here’s to a slow end of Summer and a pleasant Autumn season!

A.V. Wiltshire  
Chairman

## **In Memoriam**

**Arthur Dipple**, in August. Arthur had lived in Otford for nearly 50 years. A popular and much liked man who gave his services freely to the village, especially the British Legion.

**Meg Woodfine** on 9th August. Meg was 96, who until recently could be seen walking from her home in Ryecroft to the village hall to join some of her many friends on coffee mornings. A real village personality.

**Gerard (“Gerry”) Pearson**. A great servant of the village and of the Otford Society, Gerry died on 17th August after a long illness.

A tribute to him and a record of the Society’s early days will appear in our next issue, written by Ruth Fleming.

# PROMOTING CHILDHOOD and THE PLAY AREA APPEAL

When the Otford Society was approached by the Parish Council to raise the sum of £13,850 to qualify for a large DEFRA grant to refurbish the play areas, all within a few months, it seemed a tall order. However, the Executive Committee was unanimous in the view that this was something that an established and respected village organisation such as ourselves should do. It was heartening to discover that Otford has so many kind, generous and community-spirited citizens. The response was wonderful, and the Otford Society gratefully thanks everyone who has supported the Appeal. Many were grandparents obviously remembering their own happy childhoods.

A report from Sue Isted, the Parish Councillor supervising the project, is printed on the next page.

It is interesting to note that at the very moment our own play areas are being upgraded a campaign has been launched in "The Daily Telegraph" called "Hold On To Childhood", after a call by academics, writers and medical experts for a close examination of children's lives, and the writer Michael Morpurgo has just made a 30 part radio series for the BBC on the history of childhood.

The Children's Society has set up a Good Childhood Inquiry, and has made a national call for evidence. While comments in letters should not be taken out of context, the fact is that many knowledgeable people express anxieties about increasing emotional and behavioural difficulties and depression amongst the young. It is said that many in our country view young people as a nuisance, not

as individuals to be encouraged and valued as the future of our nation.

The reasons so many seem to be deprived of a well balanced childhood are many and complex. Junk food, the Internet, TV are high on the list. One thing experts do seem to be agreed on is the need for children to have time to play – especially in the open air. This character-building experience, mixing with others, stands them in good stead in problems of adjusting to adult life.

Otford can be proud of the facilities offered for young people, and the use being made of them. We have two Recreation Grounds soon to have refurbished Play Areas, cricket, tennis, football, table-tennis clubs. And we must not forget the older folk who devote time to the organisation of all this.

K.L.G.



Parish Councillor Sue Isted writes:

## **OTFORD PLAY AND RECREATIONAL AREAS PROJECT APPEAL**

Perseverance and determination by the Parish Council has finally paid off, with DEFRA coming through with an 80% grant for our play and recreation areas. The response from the community has been fantastic with individuals such as PCSO Dave Birchall, Assistant Parish Clerk Sue Stephenson, and Mark Jackson conducting their own sponsored bike rides and walks.

Park Leisure, the playground equipment specialists, have gone the extra mile too. Not only have they promised to “throw in” two new seats for the swings, paint and refurbish our existing equipment free, but they have pulled out all the stops to meet the incredibly tight deadline that DEFRA set of 31st October 2006. The result will be a unique fully accessible play area for the Sevenoaks area. A playground that has been designed for all abilities of children and will enable full integration, encouraging a greater understanding and acceptance of each other. It will incorporate a special ground-level roundabout which parents can push buggies or wheelchairs straight onto. It will have new springy seats that have safety rails around the seats to prevent falling and the pièce de résistance will be a new Play Unit for our juniors with ramps and slides and cargo nets to climb on. The whole area will be laid in tarmac with soft wet-pour areas around each of the equipment, enabling easier access for pushchairs and wheelchairs alike. A new strong steel bright green fence will enclose the whole area, ensuring the safety of users and keeping out our four-legged friends.

Finally a sturdy steel teenage shelter will be erected outside of the play area, encouraging our older youths to congregate here rather than on the play equipment. This will finally give our teenagers somewhere to “hang-out” that is safe, lit and designed specifically for that purpose. These structures now have a proven beneficial influence on crime reduction and it is important that we cater for all age groups in our village.

Phase Two will see the introduction of a permanent steel basketball/goal unit and a teenage shelter sited at the far end of the Hale Lane Recreation Ground. Youths in this area badly need somewhere to congregate, off the streets and away from possible areas of conflict. The goal/basketball unit will ensure all year round access to these valuable sports.

None of this would have been possible without the fantastic support of Otford Society members and the community as a whole. The Council are very grateful and proud of how everyone has come together to provide something for the future generations of this village.

# VILLAGE DESIGN STATEMENT

## Back to the Drawing Board?

Some ten years ago it was suggested that Otford produce a Village Design Statement. At the time the Otford Society was not enthusiastic about the idea. Eventually a questionnaire was sent to every household to discover residents' views. Nothing came of this, or a later attempt to resuscitate a steering committee.

A VDS has to be compiled by residents independently of local government, so the Parish Council, although favourable to the idea, has been frustrated in the failure to form a steering group. It is not easy to find people to devote time to such a scheme, which could take two years to prepare. Help may be at hand.

Keith Stockman of the RADIO group wants to start discussions to find out if there is enough interest to get the project started. He will be speaking about this at the Autumn meeting of the Otford Society on 19th October, 8pm in the Village Hall. A VDS is intended as supplementary guidance for planners, could influence planning decisions and emphasises the importance of local design in new developments. Members of the Otford Society all have the best interests of Otford at heart – that is why they are members – and Keith will be seeking people prepared to give up time and set their thoughts down about our village.

**YOU DO NOT HAVE TO BE AN EXPERT.** Bear in mind that a VDS does not stop development, it is more about managing change.

### WHAT IS A VILLAGE DESIGN STATEMENT?

To help you form some views before the meeting, here is a summary of the most important characteristics of a VDS.

It is developed, researched and edited by local people, and is representative of the views of the village as a whole.

It involves a wide section of the community, from over-60s, allotment holders, women's groups, sports groups, residents' associations, youth groups, village hall committees, history groups, PTA, churches, businesses, doctors, schools & PTS, to rambles and environmental groups, etc.

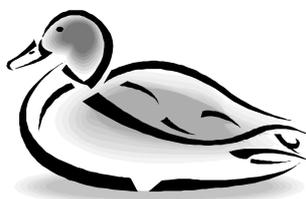
It shows how local character and distinctiveness can be protected and enhanced.

It gives the community a recognised voice in the planning processes that affect the visual quality of the village, and could strengthen the local planning authority's position when advising or negotiating.

**Please come along on 19th October to listen, learn and join in the debate.**

Everyone has views on the place in which they live. Here is a chance to express your opinions, perhaps for the benefit of the whole community.

K.L.G.



# VILLAGE OF THE YEAR COMPETITION

**Although Otford got no further than the first round, the judges, who look to see how communities are making the best of what is available to them and how they are meeting their challenges, sent in a glowing report. Here is what they said.**

## COMMUNITY LIFE

The judges got the sense that Otford is indeed a “hemmed-in” village. Presumably it’s something to do with the natural features, and the configuration of motorways. Once or twice the feeling came across that this had resulted in a determination to “fight for survival!” However, Otford’s open to visitors and there is clear evidence that visitors are welcomed. The attraction of the Heritage Centre, the brilliance of the mural, the large green area, the imaginative representation of the solar system, all of this is evidence not just of looking back and trying to capture the past, but also how to encapsulate the present and future. The partnership between the churches was noticeable. It was interesting to see the Men’s Breakfast Club, when usually the focus is on opportunities for women to meet. There are obviously a wide variety of all-village events, and seeing some of the “eggstravaganza” exhibits was special.

## BUSINESS

It’s the survival spirit again! Larger superstores on the Sevenoaks boundary, so specialist shops in Otford. What a brilliant response! The variety of niche commercial businesses while at the same time wanting to meet the general needs/desires of residents who do not wish to or cannot go to the supermarkets is highly commendable. There is a benefit of employment opportunities through the trading estate. The availability within Otford of a wide cross-section of health and social service provision – clinics, CAB, and a library. Three B and Bs exist in the village, underlining the commitment to those who come to Otford on foot as well as on wheels.

## RECREATION

There is a heavy focus on recreational activities which must be the envy of any number of surrounding villages, including many sporting opportunities. Specific reference is made to the involvement of young people in whole village events. Rainbows, Brownies and Guides and Beavers, Cubs and Scouts are all thriving within the village. There is also an intention to erect one or more Youth Shelters which will be of great benefit to the young.

However, there was no mention of a Youth Forum, in and through which young people can talk about not only what concerns them but can also formulate ideas and opinions about being members of the community of Otford as a whole; if this is the case perhaps the Parish Council could encourage this.

## OLDER PEOPLE

What an amazing number of organisations for members of the older generation! Where else would we find three WIs? Intellectual stimulation is offered through the WEA and U3A Groups, Quilters and the Art group. There is a fortnightly lunch club\*, perhaps local produce could be used if it is not already. The recording of oral history and the collection of videos of village events allows the older generation to give something back to the community. There is a desire to seriously address the lack of sheltered accommodation in the village although there may be difficulty in finding a suitable location. But Otford won’t be deterred by such obstacles, we are sure. Good luck with your research.

*[\*You got this wrong, judges. Lunch Club meets weekly, Over-60s fortnightly. Ed]*

## THE ENVIRONMENT

We could not fail to be impressed by the large green area behind the village hall, a space for so many uses. The duck pond and the fascinating provision of a woodland burial site is an attraction. The appointment of a Village Tree Warden, and the production of Tree Trail leaflets together with suggestions for nature walks was impressive. It was good to see the large allotment area, and the enthusiasm with which those of all ages dig, and hoe and harvest. Attention is given to proposing ways locally of addressing global phenomena associated with climate change. The interest not only in the natural environment but also in the built environment expressed historically through taking every opportunity modern development offers to discover the past beneath today’s surface cover was commendable.

A concerted effort to record natural fauna and flora as it presents itself across the whole of the parish would possibly provide greater awareness of the environment.

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## INFORMATION COMMUNICATIONS TECHNOLOGY (ICT)

There seems to be quite a dependence on the Sevenoaks IT Centre provision, and the computer links in the library. Do any of the schools offer adults the opportunity of accessing the internet, and learning about computing through using their facilities? Having two websites, one which is essentially about “within village life”, the other which is designed to inform/attract the potential visitor is very important and it was good to see that Otford has both.

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# OTFORD MATTERS

**Planning:** The Sevenoaks Development Control Committee hearing was well attended to hear the judgement on Wimpey’s application for 21 houses at Well Road. Keith Stockman, of the RADIO group, and District Cllr Leon Baker spoke robustly against the proposals, and Otford people were pleased to hear an almost unanimous decision in their favour. However, Wimpey’s have appealed to the Planning Inspectorate against the decision. There will be a site inspection.

Any written comments you have already made will be passed on, but if you wish to make further statements you must submit three copies to the Planning Inspectorate, Room 3/15 Eagle Wing, Temple Quay House, 2 The Square, Temple Quay, Bristol BS1 6PN to arrive by 19th OCTOBER 2006. Quote appeal reference APP/G2245/2024028.

An online appeals service is available. See [www.planningportal.gov.uk/pcs](http://www.planningportal.gov.uk/pcs).

### *Dates for your Diary*

- 19th October Otford Society Autumn meeting, 8pm, Memorial Hall.  
Speaker: Mr Keith Stockman will talk on a Village Design Statement, and will lead a discussion. **Anyone interested in the future of our village is invited to attend.**
- 21st October The Art Group will be holding an exhibition in the Club Room during the Saturday coffee morning, 10am-12.30pm.  
Allotments Association AGM, 9.30am, Hope Room.
- 12th November Remembrance Day Service, Parish Church, 10am.
- The Otford Players November production has been postponed until March 2007 due to casting problems.

*Next Otford Society Newsletter - Spring 2007*

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