



The Otford Village Society

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Last Ever Newsletter?

SOCIETY IN CRISIS!

- **Membership in decline**
- **Committee members & volunteers retiring**
- **Future direction in question**
- **What next? See pages 2-4**
- **Attend the AGM & make a difference on **Wednesday 13 April at 7.30pm** in the Otford Village Memorial Hall**

A Review of 2015

The Society's committee began 2015 with a spring in its step, as a new Membership Secretary was finally found to fill the shoes previously filled so ably by Vincent Tilley. In this role, Gary Bennett brought new energy and ideas, and quickly began to overhaul, update and streamline the membership database.

Meanwhile the committee as a whole decided that its focus for 2015 should be to increase and broaden the Society's membership, with particular attention on engaging younger residents of the village, such as families with children. Informal discussions with people in this demographic had revealed a feeling that the Otford Society was principally a club used by long-standing residents to prevent change and block developments. It was clear to the committee that, while this falsely-stereotyped image remained, it would be hard to recruit new members - and without new members, the Society would atrophy.

A new name?

One early idea for making the Society more approachable was quickly shot down, though: feeling that the name "The Otford Society" conveyed no information about the charity's purpose to people unfamiliar with the Civic Society movement, and therefore was likely to be meaningless to prospective members such as new residents, the committee proposed at March's AGM a change of name to "The Friends of Otford Village". However this motion was soundly rejected by those attending the meeting, with members insisting that the existing name should be retained because of its long-standing and hard-won reputation with bodies such as local councils.

While checking the potential consequences of a name change, though, it was found that the Society's formal name registered with the UK Charity Commission is actually "Otford Village Society". To recognise this legal registration (see www.otfordsociety.org.uk/charity), the correct name is now being used on official documents like this newsletter, although it is acknowledged that "The Otford Society" remains the established common or shorthand name that most people will use.

Broader appeal

Other plans drawn up by the committee aimed to increase the Society's public exposure, starting at the village fete with a switch from the classic Wheel of Fortune with its prizes of wine, to family-friendly fairground games with prizes of toys for children. This new look was quite successful, and enjoyed by children and adults alike, but no new members joined the Society and less money was made than in previous years.

Similarly the annual Summer Garden Party was enjoyed by a good number of regulars, but was disappointing in terms of attracting new people.

Recruitment drive

The most successful initiative of 2015 was arguably the Summer Newsletter, which featured a number of articles intended to promote the work of the Society, and which was kindly delivered to every home in the village by the Parish Council alongside their monthly newsletter.

The Summer Newsletter took the opportunity to reiterate the Society's aims (*below*) and resulted in about twenty-five new households signing up as members.

- *To make the village of Otford even more attractive, enjoyable and distinctive.*
- *To promote civic pride by organising and funding a variety of events and projects that appeal to as many residents as possible.*
- *To raise money to improve and maintain the amenities of the village, and to support local good causes.*
- *To preserve the rural nature of Otford, and to work to protect buildings, and other local features, of historical interest.*

New events

The second half of 2015 brought not only the regular Autumn Meeting, with a well-attended talk by the local Air Ambulance service (which received a total donation of £536 at the end of the night), but also a couple of extra fund-raising events open to everyone, in the shape of a Race Night and a Magic Night.

The committee added new approaches to its publicity machine for these activities, including liaising with school PTAs, promotion on social media (thanks to James Grist), and selling tickets online.

While early ticket sales for the Race Night were good, as the catering deadline approached it unfortunately became clear that not enough people had committed to attend, so there was little option but to cancel the event. On the other hand, the Magic Night was a huge success with the Memorial Hall packed with families who marvelled at the show put on by Robert Pound.

Overall, this year's new events were certainly successful at raising funds (*see page 5*) and should also have raised awareness of the Society in the village, as per the committee's original plan. On this basis, it is hoped that any members who were concerned by what may have seemed an over-emphasis on social events this year will now appreciate them in context: not only does the Society need to try new fund-raising activities, but it is also essential to keep finding ways to attract new members and volunteers.

Projects supported

In addition to all of this year's publicity and recruitment activities, it should also be noted that the committee has not been idle in supporting projects that meet the Otford Society's aims and benefit the village:

- Discussions between local residents and Network Rail regarding the proposed new footbridge near Otford station were facilitated by Chairman Keith Gofton.
- Secretary Ted Scott worked with Brian Thomas to plan the replacement of damaged and dying trees around the village using Society funds (*see page 5*).

The Way Ahead

The start of 2016 finds the Society at a crossroads. Although the initiatives of 2015 were moderately successful, certain areas and demographics of Otford remain poorly represented in the membership, so their views cannot easily be considered when the Society plans future projects - which are supposed to benefit the whole village.

Conversely, some of the existing membership seem dissatisfied with the committee's attempts to broaden the Society's appeal, and the level of active support from members remains low, with requests for help or feedback often producing no results, and the recent survey sent to all thousand members attracting just seven responses.

Volunteers retiring

More worryingly, the Society has lost many volunteers:

- Elisabeth Lindsay and Andrea Kelly have retired from the committee after many years of sterling work.
- Diana Adams has had to resign from the committee for personal reasons.
- Eight of the Liaison Officers, on whom the Society relies to deliver newsletters and collect subscriptions, have decided to retire following many years of service.
- Sheila and John Bonnet, who have looked after the distribution of the Society's publications including the walks leaflet, are also retiring.
- Treasurer Derek Buck has announced his intention to leave the committee by the end of 2016 after twenty years of invaluable service.

With just five people (soon to be four) remaining on the committee (two of whom also have busy full-time jobs), and insufficient Liaison Officers remaining to look after every street in the village, it is now impossible to sustain normal day-to-day running of the Society, let alone undertake its core aims of supporting projects which will benefit the community.

- Ted also supported Irene Roy in her successful campaign to introduce parking restrictions on Sevenoaks Road and Warham Road.
- The final stages of Jeff Lee's project for traffic calming in Shoreham Road were implemented.
- Ted has engaged with councils and Kent Highways in response to members' concerns about traffic in Pilgrims Way East. Our discussions on the latter subject seemed hopeless in the Summer, then a tragic accident in the road took a local resident's life in October; this is one topic that will surely be revisited during 2016.

The proposals of membership secretary Gary Bennett which were presented at the Autumn Meeting, and included the adoption of Direct Debit to simplify the collection of subscriptions, received an indifferent response so have not been pursued; even if they were, this would only solve one small part of the problem being faced.

In short, an influx of volunteers is urgently required, or the Society cannot continue. While previous requests for help have always been successful in the end, no-one has yet stepped forward to fill any of the advertised vacant positions. With the Society keen to boast over a thousand members - more than similar Societies in many big towns and cities - this is clearly disappointing.

Constitutional requirements

According to its current registered constitution (see www.otfordsociety.org.uk/constitution), the Society should have five Officers - Chairman, Vice Chairman, Honorary Secretary, Honorary Treasurer and Honorary Assistant Secretary - plus four to eight additional Trustees serving as committee members. The absolute minimum number of Trustees that would be acceptable to the UK Charity Commission in a revised constitution would be three, including a Chairman and Treasurer.

Decision time

Having reviewed the current difficult situation and discussed potential solutions to the crisis being faced, the existing committee is putting forward three options for the future of the Society, detailed on the next page.

All members are invited to attend **the AGM from 7.30pm on Wednesday 13th April in the Memorial Hall**, to discuss these options then vote for their preferred solution. Note that, since this vote will fundamentally affect the future of the Society, it will be open strictly to members only. Anyone arriving who is not recorded as a paid-up subscriber will be able to re-join on the night.

Voting options at the AGM

Option 1: The Society converts to become a “supporter charity”. This is the committee’s recommended solution to ensure the survival of the Otford Village Society.

Annual membership subscriptions would be abolished and Society news would be distributed via the Parish Council’s monthly newsletter and a new website instead of the printed Society newsletter. This removes the need for Liaison Officers and means that committee members’ time can be spent working on projects instead of administration.

Initially in 2016, the committee would focus on establishing a Building Protection Forum and reviewing village signage, as well as continuing the tree project and monitoring the M26 junction review process.

All future Society events would charge every attendee an entrance fee which would help to maintain general Society funds (although current reserves would allow essential outgoings and existing commitments to be paid for at least a decade) and, if a particular project were to demand it, then dedicated extra fund-raising events would be organised.

This option does not remove the need for a new Treasurer, though: a new volunteer still needs to contact the current Chairman at least fourteen days before the AGM. Without at least one new volunteer, this option cannot be offered in the vote at the AGM.

By voting for this option, members will be considered to be re-electing everyone on the current committee.

Option 2: The current committee steps down, and makes way for a new group of people who feel confident about continuing the Society in its current “membership charity” form.

This group could of course go on to propose a different operating model, although this would need to be approved by a quorum of members at a subsequent Special General Meeting.

In order for this option to be offered in the vote at the AGM, a minimum of three new Trustees, including a Chairman and Treasurer designate, will need to nominate themselves to the current Chairman at least fourteen days before the AGM.

Option 3: Disband the Society.

This process would take place in accordance with constitution section 15, “Winding Up”. If insufficient new volunteers step forward to make option 1 or 2 viable, then this may become the only remaining option.

2016 could see the reinvigoration of the Otford Society, at a time when its purpose comes full circle due to the revived possibility of an M26 junction (see page 7), or it could mark the sad passing of an institution which has served the village well for over forty years.

At the AGM, you have the power to decide the way ahead - please use it.

Summer Garden Party

Assuming that Option 1 is approved at the AGM, the committee is intending to hold this year’s Summer Garden Party on Saturday 4th June, on the patio of the Otford Village Memorial Hall.

As usual, there will be drinks and nibbles, a charity raffle, and the chance to socialise with the committee and other Society members.

Watch out for posters around the village nearer the date for full details of ticket prices and outlets, as well as final confirmation of the date and time.

Village “Clear Up Day”

The committee is considering the organisation of a community litter pick, or “clear up day”, during Spring or early Summer. This would involve groups of volunteers collecting and removing rubbish from Otford’s streets, footpaths and public green spaces - hopefully with support from Sevenoaks District Council.

If you might be interested in helping at an event like this, then please send your details to secretary@otfordsociety.org.uk or hand them to a committee member at the AGM, in order to be kept up-to-date as we make plans and set a date for this very visible initiative.

Treasurer's Report for year ending 31st Dec 2015

2015 has been a difficult year for the Society due to the retirements of many stalwart Committee Members and Liaison Officers.

As a result, for the first time in many years and despite a recruitment campaign, our overall Membership Income fell by 16% - a net loss of 87 households.

Interest Received also dropped a little as low interest rates continued, and proceeds from the Garden Party were down due to fewer ticket sales. However our new Magic Night venture successfully raised £353 and turned a deficit of £6 into a final surplus of £347.

Outlook

As detailed earlier in the newsletter, 2016 will be a pivotal year for the Society as it attempts to survive the loss of so many Committee Members and Liaison Officers. Unless we are successful in finding new volunteers we will be unable to deliver our Newsletter, collect subscriptions, recruit new members or maintain our Walks Leaflet income stream.

The logical conclusion if the current situation continues is a further decline in membership income and a reducing asset base.

Derek Buck

Balance Sheet	2015	2014
<i>Net Worth Represented By:</i>	<i>£19,680.71</i>	<i>£19,333.69</i>
Cash	141.42	311.58
Lloyds 1 Year Fixed Rate	10,180.00	10,180.00
CAF Bank 2015 Lloyds Current 2014	2,100.85	1,794.25
NS&I Investment Account	7,075.53	7,022.86
Stock	182.91	25.00
<i>Annual Surplus Represented By:</i>	<i>£347.02</i>	<i>(£4,951.91)</i>
Total Income	£3,166.30	£3,188.41
Subscriptions/Donations/Gift Aid	2,130.46	2,534.42
Interest Received	184.65	209.83
Garden Party/Fete/Magic Night	685.99	602.16
Walks Leaflets	165.20	-158.00
Total Expenses	£1,886.75	£1,517.32
Administration/IT/Meetings/Insurance	721.95	793.24
Newsletters	920.00	724.08
Palace Field Tree Maintenance	244.80	
Total Donations	£932.53	£6,623.00
Memorial Hall Refurbishment	500.00	
Kent Air Ambulance (proceeds from Garden Party & Autumn Meeting)	145.00	
Other Donations	287.53	100.00
Christmas Lights, Defibrillator, Palace Field Information Boards, SID in Shoreham Road		6,523.00

Trees Update

As you may be aware, there is a growing threat to the UK's native ash trees from a disease called 'Ash Dieback'. The situation is similar to the Dutch Elm Disease which wiped out the vast majority of elm trees in the UK. Ash Dieback is having an accelerating impact in the UK and will almost certainly wipe out most of our ash population.

Oxford has a large number of ash trees, and there is considerable evidence that Ash Dieback has already taken hold locally - and in many cases is at an advanced stage. When a tree is affected, its branches become weak and brittle so pose a risk to humans and property alike. Hence it is vital that every afflicted ash tree is removed and, ideally, another species planted in its place. This work has already started in our village, but there is still much more to be done.

The Oxford Society's committee and membership has agreed to help fund this project, which it views as integral to preserving the rural character of the village. Initially, new trees will be planted in Hale Lane recreation ground, the High Street recreation ground and Palace Field. The replacement species of tree to be planted include Hornbeam, Oak, Lime and Black Poplar. In due course, new trees will have to be planted in other sites including the chalk pit and cemetery, so this will be an on-going project lasting several years. As well as public places, there are also many trees in private ownership - so please be vigilant and if in doubt then you can contact us or the Parish Council for advice.

We are looking for volunteers to help plant the new trees, so if you would like to be involved then please contact us.

Ted Scott

Planning Update

The Darent Valley Landscape Partnership Scheme

Last year, the Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) concluded that the Darent Valley has reached a tipping point. London has expanded to the brink of the Valley, bringing multiple increasing pressures that risk diminishing the area's natural character. For example, housing developments to the north, changing agricultural practices, expanding transport networks and climate change all mean that our landscape is facing an unprecedented array of threats.

"Built heritage" in the Darent Valley is also in need of protection. This includes the flint-walled Eynsford Castle, Lullingstone Castle's Tudor gatehouse, and Otford's own Archbishop's Palace - which has only just been saved from further decay by a last-minute reprieve (*see report opposite*). Add to these twenty-eight Scheduled Monuments, five registered parks and gardens, sixteen conservation areas, thirteen Grade I listed buildings, plus several hundred others at lower grades, and it is clear that this is an area with a rich, complex and valuable architectural history.

New architecture must also be considered: while some developments are inevitable and even desirable, it is at the same time important to preserve local distinctiveness.

Meanwhile in the natural world, the River Darent is only slowly recovering from very low flows; management of veteran and notable trees at one of the most important wooded parkland sites in the county is all but absent; the connected hedgerow network in the central valley continues to degrade; publicly-owned countryside sites have restricted resources and can only undertake essential maintenance, with little forward planning. Fly-tipping is also a significant and increasing threat.

To try to protect the Darent Valley, described by influential Victorian landscape artist Samuel Palmer as an "earthly paradise", our AONB has been successful in setting up the Darent Valley Landscape Partnership Scheme. A Landscape Partnership Scheme is a funding stream available from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) that puts heritage conservation at the heart of rural regeneration. It does this by conserving habitats, promoting joined-up management, reviving long-lost skills, and much more.

By completing stage 1 of the HLF application, our AONB has so far earmarked a grant of £2.1m towards a Scheme for the Darent Valley budgeted at £3.65m. Stage 2 is now under way, during which the Scheme is planned in detail. Subject to HLF approval and matched funding, practical activity should begin in late 2016 or early 2017.

Whilst the Scheme is led by the AONB, it is guided by an informal partnership with local associations, communities and groups like The Otford Society. Schools can also play a major role. The Scheme is after all centred on engaging with all the people and communities that live within and around the Valley, so that they become actively involved not only in its conservation but also in its appreciation. It is hoped that, by uniting everyone with a common aim, a strong and enthusiastic partnership can be formed that can make a real difference to the future of the Darent Valley area.

As the Civic Society representing our community, the Otford Society hopes, with the Parish Council, to be able to play an active part in this exciting and worthwhile local project. Anyone wishing to find out more details is encouraged to visit www.kentdowns.org.uk, follow @Darent_Valley on Twitter, or contact Rod Shelton by emailing rodshelton@greenbee.net

Village Design Statement, Revisited

Unbelievably, seven years have passed since the Otford community prepared its first Village Design Statement (VDS). Preparation of the document was a two year task, but the result has provided a strong guide to developers and house builders about what we, as a community, consider to be important about our built environment and what is needed to maintain the 'soul' of the village and its surrounding landscape.

Much has changed in the world of planning regulations since that first VDS was prepared. Much has also happened in terms of piecemeal development within Otford. There are new lessons to be learnt and new ways of doing things. With this in mind, the revised VDS seeks to update our stated views in the light of modern requirements. Maintaining the long heritage of our village is important, but so too is maintaining the cohesion of all its homes. We are, after all, still an independent country village. Protecting that independence against urban sprawl and influence is very important.

That is why the new VDS has recently been accepted by Sevenoaks District Council as a Supplementary Planning Document. This means that it will now carry weight in all planning considerations in Otford and, we hope, play its role in continuing to protect the integrity of our built environment and its valued landscape.

Rod Shelton

Copies of the new Village Design Statement will be available from the Parish Council Office in due course.

Our Tower is back in good health

At last, all of the outside scaffolding has been removed and we can get a good look at the renovated Palace Tower.

Work began on 17th August and officially ceased on the 23rd December. Pierra, who specialise in conservation, restoration and stonework, carried out the work, led by architect, John Bailey of Thomas Ford & Partners (the same company who supervised the church tower restoration). Sevenoaks District Council (SDC), the owners of the Palace Field site, footed the bill; we believe that the Society's tenacity, and the support campaign from the Chronicle, have helped produce this happy result. So what exactly has been achieved in the last four months?

Most importantly, the tower's structure - weakened by many years of water ingress - has been stabilised through the replacement of much brickwork with carefully selected look-alike Tudor bricks. Secondly, the rotten roof structure has been removed, and the main tower plus the two ancillary towers have been covered with three layers of felt wrapped over the surrounding buttress to form a waterproof seal - the first for five hundred years!

In addition, well-meaning post-War re-pointing in non-porous concrete had prevented the Tower from "breathing", thereby worsening the build-up of damp; this has been replaced with a new lime and sand mortar mix, carefully chosen to match the consistency and colour of the original. Finally, many of the Kent ragstone door jambs and supports have been replaced, with Pierra's stonemasons creating astonishingly accurate replicas.

Despite this wonderful progress, we must remember that this was a 'save and stabilise' operation, not a restoration of all the original structure. So what comes next? We very much hope that an Options Appraisal will now be prepared, followed by a Conservation Management Plan. Although SDC has said that it has no further funds to expend on the tower, we understand that our AONB (*see earlier section*) may contribute to this phase. The Conservation Management Plan requires a great deal of time and effort as, in a nutshell, it is the key to an application to the Heritage Lottery Fund which could help us to achieve further restoration. There are also some other funding options to investigate and which may be able to help.

How the Otford community will next be involved in the process is currently uncertain; SDC is conspicuously mute on the subject so we can only wait and see. But we have waited five hundred years - what's one year more?

For further details about the work that has been completed, please see the newsletters which Rod wrote as it progressed, which have been made available with his kind permission at www.otfordsociety.org.uk/tower

Slip roads on and off the M26

You may have heard the gossip. A combination of the councils of Maidstone, and Tonbridge and Malling, have lobbied the Kent Association of Local Councils (KALC) to resurrect the saga of whether to build East-facing slip roads somewhere along the M26.

In order to build their case, before they put it to Highways England and thence to the Government, KALC have decided to establish whether or not there is a genuine business case for constructing these slip roads. So the first point to be made is that, before anything can actually happen, a convincing argument must be found to justify the investment that would be needed to undertake the not insignificant building project.

In the event that this argument is won, there appear to be three locations which could be considered for the slip roads: Otford, Chevening, and Westerham.

- Otford, with its junction to the A225 and handy Vestry Estate, appears to be the most vulnerable, and a past leader of Sevenoaks Town Council, Richard Parry, is very keen that the slip take place here.
- Chevening would arguably cause the least effect on the fewest people. However influence in high places may prevent it occurring there, due to the vested interests of the Chevening Estate (on whose ground it would stand) and our local MP, Mr. Fallon, who lives there.
- Westerham stands remote on the edge of the county.

The concerns of Otford residents are of course numerous. Additional traffic through our village and along the A225 would inevitably be to our detriment. More traffic at the Bat & Ball junction will increase congestion and further decrease air quality in that area. Meanwhile any increase of heavy traffic through Sevenoaks goes against Sevenoaks District Council's own declared aims.

In terms of the area where building might occur, the landfill site on which the Vestry Estate stands can only support light-structured buildings and is already full to capacity. The surrounding land is Green Belt and the Government continue (so far) to declare their support for its protection against new building.

For now, it would seem that the system does not allow our Parish Council to prevent investigations going ahead. However, even if Highways England do believe that they have a sound enough argument to put to the Government, it is unlikely that they will be able to submit it until 2026.

So there you have the current status - and my thanks go to our Parish Council leader, John Edwards-Winsor, for all his advice given while preparing this update for you.

Rod Shelton

The Committee & Volunteers

Chairman:	Keith Gofton
Vice Chairman:	<i>VACANCY</i>
Honorary Treasurer:	<i>VACANCY</i>
Honorary Secretary:	Ted Scott
Honorary Assistant Secretary:	<i>VACANCY</i>
Membership Secretary:	Gary Bennett
Newsletter Editor:	Phil Chapman
Fête Coordinator	<i>VACANCY</i>
Social Event Coordinator	<i>VACANCY</i>
Social Media Coordinator	James Grist
Planning Advisor	Rod Shelton
Walks Leaflets Distribution	<i>VACANCY</i>
Marketing & Publicity Officer	<i>VACANCY</i>
Civic Voice Columnist	<i>VACANCY</i>

Carol Griffiths

Members may already know that Carol Griffiths died in November 2015 after a short illness. Carol served for many years on the Society's committee, and led on many issues - most recently project managing the Society-funded replacement of Palace Field's interpretation panels.

Carol made many other contributions to the village, including serving on the management committee of the Otford Heritage Centre, where she performed many roles including that of fund-raiser. Carol's popularity and the village's appreciation of her good works was evidenced by St Bartholomew's being packed for her funeral.

In recognition of Carol's contribution to Otford life, the Parish Council has agreed to erect a bench in her memory, on the Village Green close to the bus stop. The Society will be contributing towards the cost of this.

Otford Cubs' Reunion

Scouting began in 1907 and, although meant for older boys (11+), it was soon found that a lot of younger lads were attracted to the movement and were becoming involved (as were girls, so mixed Scouting is nothing new!).

After about a year of trials, "Wolf Cubs" was officially launched on the 16th of December 1916. Founder Robert Baden-Powell themed the new section around the text of "The Jungle Book" so the leaders were named after the major characters - Akela, Baloo, Bagheera - and the "wolf council" became the Grand Howl which marked the start and end of each meeting.

Just after Wolf Cubs celebrated their 50th year, the section changed its name to Cub Scouts and adopted a new training scheme.



Wolf Cubs line the High Street during a visit by the Duke of Kent in 1936



Otford Cubs at the 2015 Summer Camp in Downe

Since then, the training and the badges that Cubs can earn have changed several times. However the uniform stayed the same until 1989 when the cap was abolished. Today the uniform still comprises a bottle green top, but now with blue activity trousers/shorts. Yet the wording of the Cub Scout Law and Promise, the Grand Howl, the way Cubs are organised into sixes, the badges, the games and the patrol tents, would all be recognisable to an original Wolf Cub.

To mark the 100th year of Cub Scouts, the Otford group is holding a 'thank you' party on Friday 24th June 2016 at the hut - and we would like to invite ex-Cubs and Leaders from Otford to join us.

We are particularly keen to make contact with the 'oldest' Cub we can. Scouting started in the village in March 1930 with thirteen Wolf Cubs and three leaders who met in the Village Hall. The youngest Wolf Cub therefore, if still alive, would now be 94! We are also interested in any history of Scouts in Otford, plus copies of related photographs.

For further information, please contact Jonathan Booth via boothhq@booth21202.fsworld.co.uk or (01959) 524954.

Annual Subscriptions

Household £5

The Otford Village Society

www.otford.info/otfordsociety otfordsociety@otford.net

*Registered with the Civic Trust. Affiliated to the Campaign to Protect Rural England
Registered charity 272974*