

ANNUAL PARISH MEETING – 8th April 2015

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

This has been my 4th year as Chairman since election in the autumn of 2011. Throughout the year I have been very grateful for the help and support of my fellow councillors and the Clerk. As ever, I am very conscious of the fact that Bigbury Parish Council should act as a focus for local opinion and provide a way to get things done in the best way for our community. Therefore, I'd like to thank all those parishioners who have helped to point the way forward either by attending and participating in meetings or by taking the trouble to contact individual councillors in person; I encourage others to do the same. Our Bigbury community website (<http://www.bigburycommunity.co.uk>) continues to offer an effective but under-used method of rapid two-way communication and for maintaining awareness about local affairs.

A sustainable community requires far more than just the efforts of the parish council. Therefore, my thanks are offered to all the people who produce and distribute Bigbury News on a regular, monthly basis; to the organisers of events such as the Fun Run and Carols on the Green (Bigbury Fayre); to everybody who helps in keeping our roads and beaches relatively free of litter; to all those running the Memorial Hall, its associated groups and events; to those supporting the Church; and, to the local businesses which provide employment and sustenance. Like me, many of you will recognise the importance of Holywell Stores as a focal point of our community and I'd like to specifically thank Dane, Hillary and all their staff for the many services they provide. John Simes, our Footpath Warden, continues to do an excellent job to ensure that our precious footpath network is adequately maintained and safe to use and I'm pleased to report that John has just taken over the position as SW Coastal Path representative for this area. Last, but by no means least, I am grateful to County Cllr Richard Hosking, District Cllr Bryan Carson and to the police for their work on the parish's behalf.

Looking ahead, we have increased our parish precept in anticipation of cut-backs at District and County levels e.g. in road maintenance. However, we recognise the general pressures on incomes and have aimed to acquire external funding wherever possible to meet the parish's needs e.g. for community skips and additional Lengthsman services. We have acquired some TAP funding from DCC to repair and improve our play area at StAnn's Chapel, and from SHDC's Sustainable Community Locality Fund to help with repairs to the graveyard gates and perimeter wall. The parish council has continued to support hoped-for improvements to communication technology within the parish as an essential component of a thriving community.

As always, the most time-consuming and controversial area of activity for your parish council is in assessing and commenting upon planning applications. SHDC has asked for our view on many applications of varying degrees of complexity over the last year and it has

even paid some regard to our comments in a few cases. Bigbury-on-Sea, in particular, continues to be a developers' paradise for investment in housing, with numerous planning applications to consider - some of them quite contentious. I had hoped that communication with the planners would have become better as a result of changes in their way of working following the amalgamation of SHDC with West Devon DC. Unfortunately, the reality has not lived up to the promise and it has proved extremely difficult to build effective working relationships with the planners despite our representation at several planning workshops. Staff cut-backs and the much vaunted, ITC transformation programme at district council level have not helped us to cope, as unpaid amateurs, in the wily world of professional planners, architects and planning agents. Furthermore, I'm sad to say that changes in planning law together with an unfinished but much anticipated Local Plan from SHDC have not worked in the parish's favour. I am beginning to think that it may have been a mistake not to proceed with a Neighbourhood Plan for Bigbury although at the time it seemed right under the circumstances. Recent changes in the planning system have meant that there is no longer a requirement for developers to provide for affordable housing by making a financial contribution in building projects of less than 6 units and no need to build on-site affordable properties in developments of more than 10 units. In small rural communities across the country this is having a devastating effect on plans for affordable housing - one local example is the recent revision of the planned development of the Royal Oak site in which the inducement of two so-called affordable properties has been removed from the plans which now include only 4 units. The South Western Housing Society would still be interested in development of the site adjacent to the Memorial Hall for around 14 houses but to date we have been unable to resolve the site's access difficulties and we need to look at the identified, alternative, VHI sites. The recent application for outline planning permission at StAnn's (which was not a potential VHI site) has, again, generated a lot of local resistance and I have no confidence, under the new planning regulations that the social or affordable housing components of that development would ever materialise. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the accumulation of private wealth by developers rather than enrichment of the community by meeting genuine, local housing or commercial needs remains the major force in planning.

Finally, the future for the parish's administration is uncertain. For a variety of reasons several councillors, including myself, will not be standing for re-election. However, I am sure that I speak for all councillors when I wish the community well. Several of us will be continuing to do 'our bit' in different ways and, I'm sure, will continue to help the new council whenever we are able.

Stuart Watts