



Thoughts of a new Parish Councillor

If you are one of the millions of people who watched the newly sainted Jackie Weaver lay down the law, you might be pleasantly surprised if you visit a meeting of Speen Parish Council. I encountered something very different to the infamous Handforth Planning and Environment Committee when I joined the Council about six months ago. Instead of tantrums, I found a group of local volunteers reaching sensible decisions after reasonable debate, with an experienced chair who listens and a hard-working clerk who knows the rules and gives good advice. A team. No drama – just the will to get things done for the residents of Speen Parish in Speen, Bagnor, Stockcross, Woodspeen and Marsh Benham. I hope that doesn't disappoint you!

I read that one consequence of the Handforth Horror Show is 'hugely increased interest' in Council meetings so it seems this is a good time to say that the public is welcome at Speen's monthly Council meetings. I took advantage of this open invitation when I popped along to the virtual 'Annual Meeting' last July. Shortly afterwards, I was asked if I would be prepared to be co-opted as a member. The role is immensely worthwhile and, when you care about where you spend your life, very rewarding. If you are reading this and thinking it might be for you, then do get in touch.

You might also be asking what does a Parish Council do? The main tasks of the Parish Council are to provide facilities and represent the people of the Parish.

In Speen, the '**provision of facilities**' means, for example, caring for the recreation grounds, known universally as the 'Recs', at Speen, Stockcross and Marsh Benham as well as the War Memorial, the Pound and the Ladywell – the pure waters of which are rumoured to cure eye weakness, surely worth a visit when so many of us spend our days on Zoom. For Speen Parish Council, 'caring' is an active business. In my short time, I've seen a wonderful partnership with parents at Stockcross School and West Berkshire Council provide a much-needed pathway between the car park and the village school. This means children aren't muddy by the time they get to their desks and pushchairs and wheelchairs don't get bogged down (yes, I've used both). And I'm about to join a group of Parish Councillors who are working on plans to upgrade the pavilion at Speen Rec. Small schemes, I suppose some might say, but ones that make a big difference to people's everyday lives – and might never happen without the Parish Council.

The '**representative**' role is exemplified by the Parish's right to be consulted on all planning applications within its borders. However, this Parish Council also takes other opportunities to represent its residents. In this it is aided by its good relationship with West Berkshire Council. We are fortunate that Cllr Lynne Doherty, the leader of West Berkshire Council and ward member for Speen frequently attends meetings of the Parish Council, where she informs, listens, answers questions and acts as a bridge between Parish and District. Another bridge is the twice-yearly District: Parish Conference which provides a forum to discuss what matters most to residents. I attended my first as a representative of Speen in October where the focus was on changes to the planning system. I can tell you views were put in a very direct way! Another good example of how the Parish Council fulfils its representative role was in discussing the District Local Plan, the long-term land-use strategy for West Berkshire. The view of this Parish Council is in favour of sustainable and suitable development that will benefit Parishioners today (and even those yet to be born) while preserving and enhancing what is best about Speen. Another example is our relationship with the North Wessex Downs AONB, which encompasses a good section of the Parish lands. As a Parish Councillor, I attended the recent AONB Forum to hear more about nature



recovery and landscape enhancement and how the Parish Council can play a role in this vital work.

Having talked about tasks and plans and meetings, I also want to talk about the romance of serving a 'place' – an area on a map that has a past, a present and a future. I'd go so far as to argue that the Parish Council has an unwritten role of nurturing the spirit of Speen – the site of battles, a place where Romans marched and Britons rebelled, where land was passed from king to noble to king, where corn was milled and fine woollens woven, where actors took their bows, and Michelin stars were earned and a snail the size of a grain of rice altered the route of a great trunk road. Such a wonderful place – and so extraordinarily varied. In the east of the Parish, we have a lively community of households of all shapes, sizes, and styles. Was it here that antiquarian Edward Gray had in mind when he wrote in his famous history of 1839 of Speen's 'elevated and commanding ground...well calculated to overlook and keep (the people of Newbury) in subjection'? I very much like the notion of Speen overseeing Newbury! In the more rural westerly areas we have lovely Berkshire villages – and at a time when we see the worth of trees, it's a pleasure to find a good portion wooded, in evocatively-named spots like Scotch Wood, Lamb's Plantation, Wick Wood, Sheppard's Copse and Magdalen Plantations.

Speen Parish repays exploring. One of the more positive aspects of lockdown has been the opportunity to walk and cycle the roads and paths of the Parish and being a Parish Councillor has given me a reason for calling such a pleasurable activity 'work'. I've imagined the faraway day when labourers in Bagnor found buried in the peat an ancient dug-out canoe. I've pictured Rack Marsh covered in frames erected to dry the cloth from a nearby mill, perhaps owned by Jack o' Newbury. I've thought about the poor souls punished in the stocks in the village of, of course, Stockcross. We've even played a lockdown game of devising a list of residents of the Parish who would be perfect companions for a much longed for night in a local pub, perhaps the Blackbird at Bagnor or the Red House at Marsh Benham.

Let's start with who hasn't made the cut. I've excluded anyone I know personally and haven't counted royal figures who owned manor land in what became the Parish – so that's Henry VIII, Edward III and Richard III all out of the running! I've also omitted the Reverend Joseph Standen, long serving vicar at St Mary's Speen who preached a famous sermon on the union of England and Scotland in 1707 – because that's a political stance, and, famously, our Parish Council is apolitical. I'd like to have heard it though.

So, who is on my list? Let's start with someone familiar. I will certainly invite the **Reverend Robert Sandilands** who was ahead of his time in establishing a school for the poor in 1713. His name lives on in the Digby Road school, where my own children were educated and I was chair of governors. Do you think he would strike up a friendship with the outrageous and rather wonderful **George Melly**, surrealist and jazz singer, said to have lived in Bagnor? This next one might be a little tenuous, but for those of us who have been glued to the hit Netflix Regency drama 'Bridgerton' rather intriguing. The **Reverend Henry William Majendie**, again of St Mary's, deserves a seat in the snug where I'd ask him for his impressions of his grandfather who was, it seems, English tutor to the German-speaking Queen Charlotte. A bit of an educational theme is establishing itself here, so let's leaven the mix by inviting my favourite Speen resident of all, the twice-married **Margravine of Brandenburg-Ansbach** (1750- 1828) who, snubbed by polite society, lived a life of opulence and theatrical experiment at Benham Park. She was an author, poet, travel writer, composer, feminist, friend of Boswell and Walpole, mother of seven children – and all-round inspiration. Her husband, the Margrave, died at Benham Valence in 1806 and is honoured in St Mary's



Church. Edward Gray suggests that the exceedingly beautiful weeping female in the memorial sculpted by the great Canova is based on none other than the Margravine, Elizabeth Craven, herself. Do take a look.

There we have it: a jazz singer, an instructor to a Queen, a pioneering educationalist, and a scandalous polymath with an aristocratic Teutonic title. Perfect ingredients for a meeting in the pub, I'd say. Imaginary of course. Unlike the meetings of the Parish Council, which are real, relevant, really rather respectable and open to all via Zoom.

Come along to one of them. Ask a question. Hold us to account. Show you love where you live.

We do.

Cllr Jeanette Clifford