



**Berkhamsted
Citizens
Association**

NEWSLETTER

February 1995

Editor's Musings

It would be nice to report that Spring had sprung. The only thing, however, which has sprung in my garden are little rivulets of water. It can only be a matter of time before we all develop flippers. No doubt one day the sun will return, we shall have hosepipe bans and we can worry about global warming again.

In the meantime, let us worry about Berkhamsted.

I would like to return, in this issue, to the question of how the Association should respond to the needs of its members, in modern jargon, how should it become more "user friendly". I did ask for views two issues of the Newsletter ago but we only received one. I have not been able to return to this topic, despite my promise to do so, by more pressing matters in recent issues.

Before I do so here I would like to refer back to the article I wrote last time setting out the Association's views on Kingsgate. It has considerable relevance.

It is very rare for us to receive any reactions at all to the various matters we deal with from time to time. When it comes it is usually critical, and I never remember an occasion when it was other than a single point of view and usually by telephone. Kingsgate produced a considerable response both by telephone and letter. We had expected that there would be criticisms, there have been a veritable barrage of letters in the Gazette (mostly, of course, from the same people), and we did receive some. What we did not expect was that an overwhelming number would take the trouble to contact us and say they agreed with the Association's line. More about this later.

We are grateful for the interested response, and this applies equally to the half dozen or so where views (in some respects) are at variance with the main line taken. I am also grateful that they took the trouble to address the issues involved and did not degenerate into the empty vituperation which has been such a characteristic of some of the letters I have seen in the press.

It would be impossible for us to deal with the various issues involved individually; we simply do not have the resources. One issue above all others was a feature of most of the comments, both adverse and favourable, and that was the adequacy of parking. Correspondents may be assured that the Association too has doubts on this issue and they have been expressed many times.

This leads naturally into the main issue I wish to discuss. How should the Association operate? How can it be improved? What are its aims, and are they the right aims?

First of all, what is it? All members will have, or have had, a copy of the constitution. If, like me, you have an efficient, precise and comprehensive filing system, you will have lost it. I do however have a copy dated 1988 in front of me.

The aims of the Association are "to undertake wherever possible any work for the benefit of the community that can most easily be done by a voluntary association and to develop the social and civic life of the town and district". It goes on to specify (in précis) that this should stimulate the interests of the inhabitants in local public affairs and provide opportunity for discussion of them, to work for preservation and to initiate and assist useful measures in the public service.

It is not actually a pressure group as some people would have it. However, its involvement in public affairs and preservation inevitably leads to the formation of views on certain issues and the expression of these must involve the Association in the appearance of doing so from time to time. The first question therefore is: are the aims right for this day and age; should the Association be more of a pressure group?

That is for members to decide. However, may I throw in a few comments. I will try to be as impartial as possible, but the members must realise that any comment will be as I see it.

Could the Association function as an all out pressure group? By their very nature pressure groups are usually in response to one burning issue - a motorway, a shopping centre, a major residential development, etc. Some people may be particularly affected by it and of course they have a right to oppose it as vigorously (within the law) as they wish, and it is only natural for them to seek help from whatever quarter they can. This may well involve the Association. Consider the case of a by-pass. Some individuals face having their environment destroyed by it. Others may have been campaigning for a by-pass to relieve intolerable congestion elsewhere. Which pressure group should the Association ally itself with?

My own view is that the Association can only form a view as to what is best for the town as a whole and follow that line. I do, however, believe it should take up the case of individual members who are particularly adversely affected where this is practicable. In some cases no reconciliation is possible. Not everything, however, is so black and white and whatever support could be given should be given. Whether the constitution actually envisages this situation, I will leave others to decide.

Now, the sixty four thousand dollar question: how does the Association form a view on what is best for the town as a whole (strictly speaking Association members)? The individual membership has now risen to very nearly eleven hundred, about 5% of the population as a whole. An AGM or a special meeting on a particular topic is likely to attract something like a hundred or so, about 10% of the membership. The remaining thousand have no contact other than the Newsletter once a quarter and the local representative delivering them. I am not of course suggesting that it is always the same hundred who attend meetings, the actual points of contact are probably somewhat higher than the bald statement of figures but I cannot quantify them. Assuming that most of the Newsletters are read, the membership is kept informed and has the opportunity of expressing a view. Is the committee justified in assuming that no, or very little criticism, is tacit acceptance of the line they are taking? Or should they change course when

every now and again a critical comment is received? Even the Kingsgate issue, which produced substantially more response than any previous topic, was still only two or three dozen replies. It would be a brave person who assumed that the ratio of responses in favour also represented the views of the silent majority.

So how does the committee really know what most of the membership wants? The answer is that they don't. They have to make assumptions. They try to do their best to arrive at a balanced view. They will always receive the views of the articulate few, they may get some "feel" from private discussion, they will always be under pressure from people as groups who have an axe to grind. The individual committee members will have views of their own. From this the committee will evolve an appropriate strategy. If this is presented to the membership and does not provoke a major uproar from the membership, they will assume agreement and proceed accordingly.

It is difficult to see any simple alternative which could be carried out by volunteers with very slender resources, bearing in mind the many different issues which arise. Multiple referenda are, in practical terms, non-starters.

The problem however is there for your consideration. It would certainly help us if there was a very high turnout for the AGM, the agenda for which is with this Newsletter. There is also to be a talk by Ann Nath of the Swan Project in the High Street.

Now to other matters. You may not know that because of VE celebrations, the May Bank Holiday has been changed. Because of this the walk which should have been on the 1st May and which has been so recorded in the diary of events has accordingly been changed to 8th May.

Town Amenities

Graffiti: The council enforcement officers have already taken some action and are on the lookout for offending sites.

Kingsgate: Action is in progress which at the moment is confidential. A meeting is also planned with Dacorum Council.

Extension to Manor Street surgery: Objections on the grounds of loss of parking and detrimental effects on the adjoining buildings.

Application for renewal of permission for three storey offices at Stag Lane/High Street: A letter has been sent saying that in view of the number of unlet or unsold offices already in the town, this permission should be re-assessed. It was also felt that the architectural style was inappropriate.

98 Kings Road: Erection of 4-bedroomed house in front of the garden: Objection on the grounds of over-development and poor access.

