



Skelsmergh and Scalthwaiterigg Parish Council

Chairman's Annual report 2019-2020

In normal circumstances the Chairman prepares a report to be presented to the Annual Parish Meeting but as this report is being composed in isolation it seems likely that its presentation will be deferred indefinitely pending the lifting of the national lockdown and the return to normality.

However there is no reason why an account of the council's year should not be given and made available to be read by any interested resident.

The election in May 2019 was uncontested but owing to the retirement of Mary Chapman a vacancy arose in the Skelsmergh Ward. Happily, this was promptly filled by Angela Brand-Barker from Mealbank whose appointment was confirmed at the July meeting.

The first task was agreed to be a review of the 2015 Plan but this made little progress during the year due to commitments on the part of councillors which made sub-group meetings impossible to arrange. This is a topic to which we will have to return.

There were, however, more pressing issues to address in the form of the continuing closure of the Mealbank Bridge due to weaknesses exposed in the aftermath of Storm Desmond. Mealbank residents and the Estate company were frustrated by the seemingly interminable delays imposed by the need to obtain consents from the Environment Agency for work in the river bed. This, in turn, entailed the diversion of traffic through the village and consequent damage to the recently repaired access track and disturbance to residents.

Feelings ran high and it was necessary to write on behalf of all concerned to the EA and Tim Farron MP. The consent procedure and setbacks due to heavy weather meant that it has taken almost a year to resolve the matter, although the bridge is still only open to light traffic.

Elsewhere, at Gurnal Bridge below Garth Row, the county highways Department consulted on the creation of a replacement for the part of the lane lost in a landslip in the aftermath of Storm Desmond. As a result of local input some valuable concessions were gained in terms of the width of the new lane and landscaping. Substantially complete just before Christmas, the contractors left an unfortunate legacy of damage in the existing lane which took a long time to resolve, causing a good deal of inconvenience to residents. However, the contractors eventually came back and made a passably good job of reinstatement though it will be some years before it is all absorbed into the landscape.

Allied to the works was an offer by the Stephenson Trustees to extend the licence currently enjoyed by the council to occupy the river banks as local access land. Negotiations are ongoing but may be affected by the unstable 'cliff' below the old road. It had been hoped that a way through on foot could be preserved but the Trustees and their agents are concerned about liability for public safety and may decide to fence-off that section. This is their prerogative since the land has ceased to be public highway and access is at the Trust's discretion. It is likely, therefore, that the access land will comprise two halves, one on either side of the 'cliff', but both accessible via the kissing gates now installed.

Other environmental issues which came before us were reports regarding the ongoing control of Himalayan Balsam on rivers Sprint and Mint, renewed complaints of uncontrolled ragwort on A6 (referred to county highways) and a consultation by United Utilities regarding replacement tree species in Old Road, Selside, leading to the treatment works.

At the September meeting a petition was received from residents of Kiln Croft highlighting the continuing problems arising from the lack of a satisfactory footway alongside A6, a cause which had previously to be abandoned because the county highways' recommendation was unaffordable. It was agreed that the council should support the petition at the County Council's Local Area Committee which I did, as Chairman, putting forward the proposition that a thrifty alternative solution could be found by laying a geo-textile to provide a walkable surface without disturbing the existing vegetation. Although the representations were received politely we have still to hear whether this idea is acceptable to the highway engineers, despite numerous reminders. Once the Covid crisis comes to an end we will resume the campaign.

The litter-pick in October was well-supported and it was noted that volumes were somewhat less than on previous occasions.

The council welcomes applications for grants from local organisations. At the November meeting a grant to the Parents and Toddlers Group for decorations and new equipment of £600 was given and £600 was given to the B4MS project to purchase a standby generator so that service can be maintained in the event of loss of grid power. In addition, A replacement notice-board was ordered for the Community Hall at a cost of £500.

Also in November we received a short presentation by the new owners of Holme House Farm who described their development proposals for low-impact, 'green' dwellings.

Our last meeting in full session was January 15th when the main item was a discussion about the annual precept and resulted in a 3.5% increase to yield an extra £163.15 in order to fund additional administrative charges and to provide a working balance to meet applications for grants.

Other topics included a tree-surgeon's report on boundary trees at the Woodland, obtained to satisfy the insurers, and updates on progress at Mealbank and Gurnal Bridge, previously referred to and to a site visit with highways representatives to point out flooding issues near Laverock Bridge and Scandale. In the latter case some work was commenced but did not prevent subsequent flooding and further representations will be required. Although a date for the litter-pick was agreed it had to be abandoned in the face of events.

The March meeting coincided with the introduction of self-isolation and social distancing. As an isolator I have to express my thanks to the councillors who agreed to attend on 18th March as a bare quorum to resolve simply to agree the expenditure (including a grant of £100 for the upkeep of the burial ground) and to delegate the functions of the council to Karen Little, as clerk, who will keep things ticking over in consultation with me and the vice-chairman until such time as it appears possible to meet formally again.

Using the website and the e-mail address list which we maintain we were able to put round contact numbers and an invitation to get in touch to anyone who felt the need of volunteers to help with such things as shopping, dog-walking, obtaining prescriptions etc. during the lock-down. I am grateful to my fellow-councillors for offering to make themselves available in whatever capacity may be appropriate for them individually and, indeed, for their support and commitment during the year.

John Chapman

Parish Council Chairman 2019 - 2020

Date: 21.04.2020