

## **SWANTON MORLEY PARISH COUNCIL – CHAIRMAN’S REPORT**

This year has been a very successful year for the Parish Council. We began the year on a very difficult note after we declared a sizeable increase in the Parish Precept\*. I hope however that you can now see the benefits around the village. The Parish Council have been the target of criticism in previous years for not spending Parishioners’ money – rather hoarding it for a ‘Rainy Day’. Although the Parish Council still prudently sets aside a small amount of money for contingencies, we have made every effort to stick rigidly to our budget and provide the village with all the amenities that we promised. The Parish Council has also taken some tough decisions this year regarding the future of the old village hall site and our full support for a proposed pedestrian crossing on Greengate (near the old post office). These issues have proved to be very controversial with some Parishioners and resulted in petitions being presented to the Council. Managing a village the size of Swanton Morley is never easy. We are blessed with a population of all ages and with differing opinions, so gaining agreement from everyone is nigh on an impossible task. Although we value the opinions of all Parishioners, I believe we have to make decisions that are in the best interest of the whole community.

### **OLD VILLAGE HALL & CAR PARK**

I think the most contentious issue that I am sure most of you are waiting for me to touch upon is the Old Village Hall, so I will waste no time in addressing this matter.

Although not unanimous, this decision was made democratically using information that came from many professional sources. We came to the decision to demolish the hall based on the following facts:

- a) Planning permission for a change of use to residential had previously been denied for the old hall because of objections from the Highways Department. This is because vehicles would be expected to either reverse into or out of the property into a road that is near a blind corner.
- b) The area behind the hall that was used as a car park is actually registered as ‘Village Green’. It is therefore illegal to park cars on this area. We were advised that to de-register this area could cost in excess of £20,000 with no guarantee of success. This is in addition to costs already incurred to date.
- c) The hall had already cost the tax payers of the village in excess of £25,000. This figure includes the cost to purchase the hall in the first place as well as legal fees, insurance and rates since purchase. If the building stood derelict there would still be associated costs with rates, insurance and maintenance of approximately £600.00 each year.
- d) Part of the £25,000 costs could be recovered by the amount of £7,350 that the Parish Council will receive for reclaim material. (The Parish Council did not pay anything to the contractor to demolish the old hall.)

At the time of writing the Parish Council is about to submit an outline planning application for two three bedroom semi-detached properties to be built on the site of the old hall. We are advised that if successful the site is worth a six figure sum. The money that the Parish Council receives from the sale of this land can only be used for capital projects in the village and not to reduce the Precept\*. Furthermore, the Parish Council has decided not to de-register the village green status of the old car park. This area will at a later date require landscaping.

We are also in negotiations with the four adjacent cottage owners to establish a legal vehicular right of way to the rear of their properties. These last eight years talking about developing the old hall site must have been very unsettling for them and I hope that we are close to finalising an agreement.

Although the decision to demolish the old village hall has not been popular with some Parishioners, I know that many are glad that a decision has been made and that the long period of procrastination has at last come to an end.

### **CHURCHYARD & BURIAL GROUND**

We began the year with work on the pathways at the Burial Ground. This work came as a result of the Disability Audit that we arranged for the village. We believe that everyone should have the right to access the graves of their loved ones with relative ease. The material chosen was Fibredec, a substance of the highest quality which not only allows for ease of access, but has also resulted in a tidy area that is easy to maintain. The cost of this project was £7785.00 + VAT.

As is clearly visible, the church wall is in need of repair. Such work has to be done in keeping with the area and as a result would cost a great deal of money to repair with traditional materials. The Parish Council has no objections to contributing to this cause and finding grant monies to make up the shortfall, providing the project is a sustainable one. We feel that since the B1147 has been made into a local HGV route, the vibrations from these vehicles would have a detrimental affect on any work done, so we have campaigned to Norfolk County Council to address the poor condition of the road prior to committing any funding for proper repairs.

### **HIGHWAYS**

The Parish Council has worked closely with the Highways Department at Norfolk County Council (NCC) during the year, building a very good relationship with the engineer responsible for our village. You will have seen many improvements to areas of the village, such as pathway and drainage repairs, new village signs and the improved Bus Stops. At the Parish Council’s request, NCC have instigated a feasibility study into the widening of Mill Street on the church bends as well as agreeing to investigate the possibility of extending the 30mph speed limit along Woodgate Lane. At our request they have also offered to draw up long term plans for the resurfacing of the footpaths in the area known as “Middle Camp”. In

particular the footpaths along Gray Drive need attention. Experience tells us that these issues can take some years to come to fruition; nevertheless we continue to press for action.

The Parish Council has worked closely with NCC since 2004 in an effort to have a pedestrian crossing built on Greengate. The need for this was highlighted in the village appraisal and the village school's travel plan. Although controversial with some residents, the Parish Council feels that this would be of great benefit to those people walking from the Dereham end of the village to visit the school and village hall, in particular school children and their parents/carers. We are currently awaiting a final decision on this from NCC.

With money raised from last year's Precept\*, we promised to address speeding in the village. As a result, two vehicle activated signs have been installed, one on Greengate and one on Gooseberry Hill, that alert drivers if their speed is exceeding 30mph. The cost of this project was £7,602.00. In the coming year we have plans to install two more of these signs, one on Rectory Road and one on Worthing Road.

### **STREETLIGHTING**

It is apparent that many of our streetlights are coming to the end of their useful life. The concrete columns give us great cause for concern as do the lights mounted on wooden telegraph poles. Many of the concrete columns are becoming unstable with some bits of concrete breaking off. These will obviously become more dangerous and cannot be left in this state. As for the wooden poles we are advised that when these lights need replacing they can no longer be fixed to the poles by order of EDF Energy due to health & safety considerations. As a result of this, the Parish Council is considering a scheme to completely replace these lights in the coming year as well as the possibility of installing an additional light on Mann's Lane where the footpaths end and people have to cross the road. I am also pleased to tell you that we are now very close to installing the additional streetlight at the end of Middleton Avenue where it joins Hoe Road East. This has been a very long drawn out affair due to protracted legal technicalities between Breckland Council and the Parish Council.

### **COMMON LAND**

Thanks to the expertise of Mr Carrick, the Parish Council have been granted Higher Level Stewardship over Mill Common. With a small financial investment from the Parish Council and the knowledge of some Parishioners, this area will generate a good income for the village just for keeping it well maintained. The Parish Council is also working with Natural England to carry out a project of improvement work at Burgh Common. If successful the project will deliver wheelchair/pushchair access to the river along with additional spots for fishing. For those of you who are wondering where these commons are located, they are both found along the road to Worthing. They are beautiful locations which can be better enjoyed by everyone thanks to the work of the Parish Council and a small group of volunteers.

### **PLAYING FIELDS**

Parents and children of the village now have the benefit of new, improved play equipment. The Village Appraisal identified a need for greater play facilities and the Parish Council, along with some volunteers, has acted upon this. You will already have seen extra equipment and fencing at the Gooseberry Hill play area, the cost of which was £24875.00 + VAT. This is only Phase 1 of an ongoing project but suffice to say that our equipment is already the envy of neighbouring villages. It is hoped that our remaining grant applications will be successful and that Phase 2 can be completed by the end of the year. The end result should be a play area that is safe and a lot of fun for children for many years to come. As part of our ongoing programme of maintenance and improvements we have again painted all the seats throughout the village and have plans to install picnic benches on the village green and Gooseberry Hill playing field along with additional litter bins. Thanks to our good relationship with NCC Highways Engineer we have also had dropped kerbs installed on the village green to assist with wheelchair and pushchair access.

### **FINANCE**

Looking to the future, you will be aware that the Parish element of your council tax bill has risen this year by 0.6%. This is well below the current rate of inflation, which in February stood at 4.6% (RPI). Despite the rise in precept a Band D house in Swanton Morley will pay only £1.12 a week for all the services that the Parish Council provides. However, 83% of homes in Swanton Morley are in Bands A, B or C. These homes will pay £1 or less per week for Parish Council services. We have compared our precept with that of other Parishes, and have found a direct correlation with population against Precept\*. Of the twelve largest parishes by population, nine of these are in the twelve highest by Precept\*. Swanton Morley is the eighth most populated Parish in the Breckland area and has the seventh greatest Precept\*. I believe that the Parish Council offers very good value for money and that it has achieved a great deal over the last twelve months. We still have a lot of work to do and with this in mind we have spent a considerable amount of time putting together a detailed budget for the year ahead.

*\* **PRECEPT** – The amount of money the Parish Council requests from Breckland Council to cover its expenditure in the year ahead. This determines the "Swanton Morley" element of your Council tax bills*

**In conclusion, there are many challenges facing the Parish Council in the future and I do hope that you will be able to attend our Annual Parish Meeting on the 16<sup>th</sup> April at 7.30pm in the village hall, where you can offer your own opinions or just find out more about the work that we do on your behalf.**

**ROGER ATTERWILL – CHAIRMAN OF THE PARISH COUNCIL**