

BREDGAR PARISH COUNCIL



CHAIRMAN'S REPORT 2023-2024

Global, national and wider local events provide the background that may influence the views and decisions of Parish Councillors. There have been many and varied events throughout this year and I start my report this year by setting some of that context.

The period began with the national Coronation celebrations for King Charles III. Globally, concerns about global warming continued to grow with 2023 confirmed as the world's hottest year on record. The war in Ukraine continued beyond its second year and war broke out in Israel following a Hamas terror attack and the taking of 224 hostages, leading to tens of thousands of Palestinian deaths. The National Highways two year project to provide M2 Junction 5 improvements had a major impact on the roads and residents in Bredgar during the year. With long term loss of the Bredgar/Ode Street A249 exit and a six week closure of the A249 southbound carriageway. The village experienced a significant increase in traffic volumes during this period, worsened by frequent closures of Swanton Street for numerous failures of the water main. The national economy started to recover following COVID and market turbulence in the years before, but local government warned of severe cuts to balance County and Borough budgets. A change of waste provider by the borough council got off to a difficult start, with Bredgar bins not being emptied for several weeks. In early 2024, the Royal Family announced the sad news that both King Charles and the Princess of Wales were receiving treatment for cancers.

With all the above in mind, I have pleasure in setting out some of the achievements and activities of the Parish Council over the past year.

Appointments

The following appointments were in place through the year:

Brian Clarke Chair: KALC, GDPR & IT.

Penny Twaites Vice Chair:
Responses to Residential and Local Planning.

David Priestley Councillor: Pond Warden. Pest Control. Heritage.

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Hilary Whitnell Councillor: Footpaths, Thatcher and Eleemosyary Charities Representative,
Liaison with Bredgar School.

Michael Day Councillor: KCC Highways. Parks & Gardens. Pest Control.

Stephen Parfitt Councillor: Parks & Gardens.

Nigel Osmer KCC Highways

Teresa Hudson Clerk and Responsible Financial Officer: Website

Village Matters

The village celebrations for the Coronation of King Charles III "The Big Bredgar Lunch" took place on Sunday 7th May from 12-4pm in the grounds of the school, church and village hall. Entry was free with everyone encouraged to bring along their own picnic and/or visit the stalls for more.

The event was organised by Bredgar School with the support of villagers, Friends of Bredgar School and the Parish Council. With the celebration following on so closely after the Queen Elizabeth II Platinum Jubilee, which in many ways looked back to the past, it was decided that the Coronation celebrations should be forward looking and built around the involvement of the school and village children. The following are some of the activities that took place, Picnic area, BBQ, cake stall, Pimms stall and bar, coronation trail with prizes for each participant, treasure hunt with prizes for each participant, bell ringing, Stockbury Dog Club Display Group, Bredgar Community Choir, crown making, face painting, maypole show, Djembe drum workshop, hair braiding, Friends of Bredgar School stall and raffle, games.

Bredgar Parish Council was pleased to support the event, arranging the closure of Bexon Lane, providing funding for gifts of wildflower seeds to the children attending and organising a video about the history of the church (presented by Allen Whitnell - Sittingbourne Museum).

To provide a permanent commemoration of the Coronation of of King Charles III in the village we named the walled flowerbed, that is located along the footpath between Gore Road and Bush Close, "The Coronation Garden". The Parish Council having recently taken over the responsibility for the maintenance of it from Swale Borough Council. The flowerbed was completely cleared and replanted this year in partnership with Blenwood Grounds Maintenance. A plaque was purchased and mounted on the wall of the flowerbed as part of our Big Bredgar Lunch village celebrations. "The Coronation Garden" is located close-by to the Queen's Platinum Jubilee Oak Tree. Which in February 2024, had its plaque mounted on a stone re-located from Gore Pond. The delay in mounting the plaque was due to the time taken in deciding on the best mounting for the plaque and then sourcing a suitable stone.

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In September, the Parish Council organised another village litter pick led by Councillor Stephen Parfitt that was once again well supported by many villagers.

The council worked closely with Kent County Council on our Highways Improvement Plan (HIP) to try and address issues in the parish. The HIP is a working document that is to be reviewed annually with KCC. Actions resulting include, new signs aimed at reducing the number of HGVs using the Bexon Lane/The Street junction being installed in The Street and Ruins Barn Road (opposite Broad Oak Lane). The village gates in Swanton Street being replaced by KCC but with the ongoing maintenance of all those gates now passed over to BPC.

For the 3rd year running the Christmas Tree on Gore Pond was kindly donated by Bredgar and Wormshill Light Railway and lit for parishioners to enjoy.

Finance

In order to maintain our income in line with rising prices the Parish Council levied a 4% increase in the parish precept for the following year. The Council has seen a general increase in the costs charged by suppliers and KCC and Swale Borough Council have begun to devolve more services down to parishes where they can be agreed.

In February 2024, due to the imminent expiry of the old lease, the Parish Council successfully negotiated a new 38 month lease to secure the ongoing viability of the Post Office in the Farm Shop.

There was an unprecedented demand for burials and other purchases in the cemetery this year. This generated significantly higher than normal income and enabled the Parish Council to establish reserved funds for emergency contingency and future replacement of the play ground equipment. The council implemented a new system of spoil disposal in the year, with unwanted spoil from graves being placed into Hippo Megabags for removal within a few days. The new system uses part of the income received from burials to fund the removal of grave spoil. This prevents a build up of spoil in the cemetery, keeping the cemetery much tidier, and avoiding the need to pay other contractors for dispose of the spoil at a later date.

Due to a number of poor service experiences with our bank the council decided to switch to the Unity Trust Bank. This change incurs a small monthly charge but delivers many benefits in service, modern payment authorisation capabilities and opportunities to manage our small reserves more efficiently.

Planning

Councillors have reviewed planning applications and submitted comments diligently during the year, working hard to give balanced and relevant views.

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We have continued to ask SBC Planning Enforcement for updates on the progress of the clearing of the sites in Blind Mary's Lane, and this recently resulted in a formal complaint being recorded with BPC as the complainant.

The council very carefully considered an application for a solar farm that is partial proposed to fall within our parish - north of the M2. In our response we stated that the application should be refused due to the loss of agricultural land and impact on the National Landscape (AONB), but due to strong concerns by Councillors about global warming we noted that there may be a case for an exception to be made, and put forward conditions and suggestions should that happen. The council are aware of a small financial contribution to the community if the application is successful, however, that offer played no part in the consideration of the application by the Parish Council.

Finally we have objected to the latest (January 2024) amendments to the Highsted Park planning applications and have engaged consultants Cerda jointly with Rodmersham, Milstead and Bapchild to submit a joint response on our behalf in due course. These applications have a significant impact on Bredgar, with 8400 houses (reduced from 9250) south and east of Sittingbourne, and a new junction on the M2 within our parish.

Projects / Maintenance

Grass cutting (soft landscaping) and maintenance of border areas continue to be one of our main costs and core services. A gardener provides regular weeding and maintenance in border areas and Jubilee Garden. The war memorial flower tubs have been looking splendid and well maintained for us voluntarily by one of our parishioners. Blenwood Maintenance Services have weeded our Coronation Garden several times during the year as agreed and there was a welcome display of blooms and colour throughout the year. The contractor for the recreation ground was engaged to provide additional clearance of the undergrowth up to the boundaries with Bush House. Following several years receiving very little support from parishioners for village pond tidy events the council have decided to engage a gardening contractor to maintain the pond next year.

Fly tipping continued to be a major issue in the parish over the last year. The Parish Council, led on this topic by Councillor Parfitt, continued to be very active with the support of many residents in reporting and having the fly tipping removed.

Finally, I would like to close this report by thanking everyone who has helped the Parish Council look after our village over the last year. I'd like to thank all of our Councillors for their commitment and time given to the Parish Council.

Brian Clarke
Chair
Bredgar Parish Council

15th May 2024