



TWENTY YEARS OF SERVICE

Donald Barber, Clerk to the Council reflects on some 'lighter' moments of 20 years of service at Stratton St Margaret Parish Council. Born in Yorkshire in 1931, Donald is married and lives in Farringdon.

In the early days of STRATTON OUTLOOK the Editor suggested I might contribute an account of a day in my life as Clerk of the Parish Council. I declined as gracefully as I could, explaining that to do so might convey to readers the image of a demented person. There are days when I feel like that!

The only way to avoid such a risk would be to generalise on the 7,400 or so days of my life, representing the number of days of my twenty year's service which started – originally as Assistant Clerk – in July 1973.

The day I started, the Council owned some 30 acres of recreation land – now almost doubled – sporting five play areas, four football pitches and one sports pavilion at Meadowcroft. Dorcan recreation land existed as a plain grassed area. Grange Drive sported a football pitch and a small selection of rather ancient play equipment that was notorious for the noise it produced much to the annoyance of neighbouring residents. The play equipment at Brooks Close and Stephens Road wasn't much better. Melford Walk and Sywell Road play areas didn't exist so far as I can recall. However, what equipment existed was safe and no doubt appreciated.

In 1973 total value of buildings was £39,000. Today's valuation is in excess of £2.7 million. The population was about 19,000. Now it exceeds 24,000. Council employees numbered altogether nine, now it is nearer twenty, plus around thirty 'casuals'.

“An idle useless bunch”

Elwyn Thomas was then Clerk, being the first full-time holder of that post. His proper name was John Elwyn Thomas, but he declined to use his first name. He was about 70 years old in 1973, and a very sick man, By then Elwyn had spent about 50 years in local government service, and he never let anyone forget that ... least of all any councillor who dared to question his knowledge or advice!

Elwyn's first lecture to me was to the effect that the five groundstaff – then the only manual employees apart from an office cleaner – were 'an idle and useless bunch', who were capable only of digging graves., his method of exercising control was to lambaste them almost every time he met one... sometimes for no apparent reason. 'Let them know who's boss' was his philosophy.

“Caught out skiving”

It came as no surprise to me that the ground staff didn't have a very high opinion of their boss either, and their capabilities were somewhat restricted by the fact that they possessed in the way of tools and equipment some three shovels, a garden fork, an ancient motorised grass scythe which was in pieces – awaiting spare parts that seemingly had never been ordered, three tiny motor mowers and one or two other bits and pieces.

Their only shelter was a leaking cold garage in the cemetery, where they brewed tea over a gas fire, using water from the tap on the cemetery wall, provided for watering flowers. It was tough during the winter.

The nearest toilet was in the pavilion at Meadowcroft, so the grounds staff had to practice controlling bodily disposal functions to times when they visited Upper Stratton. Or call into a nearby pub where they were 'caught out skiving' by a forever wary Clerk. They couldn't win!

These matters were fairly quickly rectified when the full picture of the employees' plight was brought to the attention of the Council.

Mr Thomas retired through ill health in May 1975, and died within months. In spite of his out-dated views on dealing with employees, he could be very kind and considerate to them in other respects. He was a jovial man by nature, liked and respected by many. One of the 'Old School'.

I took on the appointment of Clerk, and was promptly involved with the members in the task of planning and constructing Grange Drive Community Centre. There were numerous, long meetings in those days: with Architects, Quantity Surveyors, and Solicitors. Negotiations with Stratton Churchway Bowls club to acquire their tennis court land on which the licensed bar part of the community centre now stand. This was to overcome the problem of the covenant on the remainder of the land – forbidding the building of licensed premises.

The community centre was to be constructed in three phases, but no sooner was the contract for the first phase sealed it was decided to press on with the second phase and third phases to save higher costs later. The first signs of high inflation were then evident. That step no doubt saved money and delay might have resulted in Stratton still waiting completion of the building to this day.

At about the same time the Council constructed a workshop in St Margaret's Cemetery for the grounds staff – a much needed facility to provide decent accommodation for employees and the by then growing amount of maintenance equipment needed to take on work previously done by contractors. This workshop was subsequently replaced by the premises in Shenton Close. The cemetery workshop was followed by a pavilion in Dorcan Way recreation ground.

“Urgently called to the area”

The fourteen years up to the present have seen rapid development and improvement of services....some of it not without its problems. Melford Walk recreation area springs to mind, indeed how could I ever forget the phase.... The council acquired the area on lease from the Borough Council, under the terms of which it had to provide play equipment.

The location was decided by the land owner; the entire centre of which was regarded by some children in that area as 'their football pitch'. This caused quite a rumpus, petitions, letters to the 'Adver', a ward meeting. As fast as holes were excavated for the foundations of the play equipment, they were mysteriously filled in overnight! I was urgently called to the area one day to 'rescue' three ground staff who had been locked themselves in their van to avoid the wrath of one very irate lady.

Another memorable incident concerned a special ward meeting of electors to consider a suspected controversial planning application by a local well known company which shall remain nameless. Ward meetings are public – the electors may speak and vote. Just as the meeting was about to start, in trooped what appeared to be the entire work force – decked out in their work smocks and head wear! They outnumbered the residents who had turned up. I can only speculate what was behind this move. However, the matter was clarified by separating electors from non-electors (whether residents or factory workers) so as to readily identify those who were entitled to a voice and a vote and the meeting continued quite amicably.

I have occupied three offices in twenty years. The first was a 'Portacabin' type building, on stilts, on the Meadowcroft recreation park car park. A sparse construction intended to be used for only three years. It was in fact used for some eleven years, and is still used by the St Margaret's church, some twenty four years later.

“I have never been able to whistle loudly”

It consisted mainly of one room, a tiny ante room and a tiny toilet compartment with two toilets separated by hardboard partitions. With two ladies and myself sharing this accommodation there was an unspoken agreement to avoid both toilets being in use at the same time. I have never been able to whistle loudly. One day, after about nine years occupation, one of the staff had a nasty shock – her foot went through the floor, a case of wet (or dry) rot. The entire length of one side of the building had to be cut away and renewed. For a whole week the staff soldiered on with a complete wall missing, offering a panoramic view of the recreation ground through a sheet of clear plastic! I know how a goldfish feels.

The large room doubled as our office and a committee meeting room. Council meetings were held at Kingsdown School, although I couldn't fathom why. A school class room was not all that roomier than my office. The problem was solved around 1987, when my office was moved to the Grange Drive Community Centre, until the purpose designed office, which is now in use was constructed.

This new office was completed just before the 1987 election, which resulted in a change of political control of the Council. Indeed, by Election Day the administration staff had packed up all the files and records for the move. However, politics being what they are, the move was delayed by seven months, during which time the new office remained unoccupied and 'TO LET' and I and my administrative colleagues didn't know whether we were coming or going.

"Overnight the political control changed"

I, and many of the staff and members I am sure, will never forget May 1987 election, and subsequent events. The Council for many years had maintained a high political profile, albeit members of all political parties conducted themselves at meetings in a calm atmosphere of general consensus and even co-operation to some extent. The election changed that.

Overnight the political control of the Council changed, with a majority of one. Moreover, of the 11 members of the controlling group, only 4 had previous experience of Parish Council membership, none of them in the office of chairmanship. Whereas on the 'opposition benches' (yes it was almost akin to parliament!) there ranged ten members of the other political group, most with some – and some with many years experience.

"Chaos reigned"

I recall saying to my office colleagues the day after the Election Day that we could be due for an 'interesting experience'. With hindsight that was without doubt the greatest understatement of my life so far!

Chaos reigned at the first council meeting, which was adjourned as the clock's hands approached midnight, with most of the business on the agenda not dealt with. The stage was set for many meetings – council and committees – over the following two years, although the warring factions did eventually agree to curtail business at 10pm, if only because by then many were possibly approaching a state of exhaustion. I know I was!

How do council officers – the clerk in particular – cope with a continuing situation such as this? With great difficulty. I hold the highest regard for my colleagues, particularly Mrs Shirley Thomas, my deputy, who coped in an exemplary manner under great pressure during my absence sick for almost six months in 1988.

Things did calm down by the time I returned to duty; although occasional skirmishes continued right up to early 1990, when the balance of political control changed hands as a result of mass resignations and a following by-election. Things are relatively calm now, although a local government employee, much the same as a councillor, is well aware of the vagaries of the democratic process, not to count one's chickens.....

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