

Community, Continuity and Change

Three themes (community, continuity and change) and the balance to be maintained between them lie at the heart of this plan.

Change is a reality with which all communities, both rural and urban, have to live. The census of 1851 established that for the first time in our history more people lived in towns than in villages. Ever since then the countryside has been shaped by the urban influence; the village by the town. Although change was constant for much of the last hundred and fifty years, its speed has been leisurely. Rural areas developed to meet their own needs at their own pace. Where expansion took place it was small scale. Within the lifetime of the most elderly members of the community horse drawn transport was still commonplace. In the 1950s people still left their doors unlocked to allow groceries to be delivered from the local shops.

In the last thirty years and especially in the last decade, the pace of change has accelerated dramatically. More than ten years of growth in the economy, the impact of globalization and large scale movements of population, have imposed unprecedented pressures on land and housing. The demands of the national impose on the local as never before. The growth in the number of motor vehicles, the increase in their speed and the impact of their carbon footprint are all part of the rising concern about the impact of pollution and climate change and what can be done about it.

Net migration into Britain has increased 400% over the last ten years. The rural population has grown by more than 14% over the last twenty five years. According to the most recent estimates, the population of Britain is likely to grow by more than the population of Ireland over the next decade and by more than that of Belgium over the next 25 years. Over 100,000 people a year leave the cities in search of a rural environment; farm buildings are converted into businesses, and rural houses are often purchased as weekend retreats or holiday homes.

Country pubs have transformed the food and service they provide and attract a new clientele. Bed and breakfast accommodation has burgeoned to meet the demand for leisure breaks. Farming that once sustained a significant portion of the rural community has changed beyond recognition in terms of the number of people employed, the type of crops grown, and the

way they are planted and harvested, and in terms of land ownership. So-called “lifestyle purchasers” made up nearly 30% of rural land purchases in the first half of 2007 according to one leading estate agent. Grade 1 agricultural land is now being taken for urban expansion under pressure for new housing from an expanding population - all this at a time when demand for food has never been higher, and when an increasing acreage is being devoted to growing crops for bio-fuels.

Thurnham has itself felt the impact of these changes. More than 40% of the parish’s houses were built in the last thirty years. New housing development is under construction and the area has responded to the demand for more sport and recreation facilities and the accommodation that goes with them. All this has imposed unprecedented pressure on local resources and infrastructure.

The issue for rural communities – indeed all communities – is not whether there will be change, but the scale, nature and direction of that change, how it impacts on existing communities and the respect shown for the traditions and nature of the communities it affects. The faster the rate of change the more important it becomes that communities retain a sense of identity and do not become submerged in an anonymous urban sprawl.

Development at odds with the locality and community whether in type, scale or density, carried out without regard to its impact on local services, roads and the environment brutalises the landscape and changes the nature of communities for all time. When in addition this is done in a way which local people feel powerless to influence and which all too often ignores their heartfelt concerns, it breeds only anger, cynicism and alienation.

Sixty nine per cent of respondents to our questionnaire considered the parish was under threat from new development or in the course of being changed beyond recognition. Since then two further developments have only served to heighten that sense of concern. The Maidstone Borough Council’s ‘Preferred Option’ for the future development of the Borough – now the subject of review - contained proposals which, if adopted, could have seen sections of the parish, including part of Bearsted Golf Club course,

concreted over for new development. More recently, the proposals from 'Kent International Gateway' for a road and rail interchange stretching for nearly two miles from Thurnham Lane to Junction 8 of the M20, threaten to carve a corridor of destruction through the southern part of the parish and south western Hollingbourne, and to have a devastating impact on Bearsted as well.

Asked by the Kent Messenger if the depot would enhance life in Bearsted, KIG's own traffic consultant, Neil Brant, is reported as replying "I don't think we could say that. It's going to be limited in terms of benefit to the immediate community".

Indeed, such development, if permitted, would only bring in its wake yet more pressure for additional housing, increased traffic, congestion, and all forms of pollution, including noise and light pollution. It would, within a few short years, change the whole nature of this and surrounding parishes irrevocably and impact

adversely on the whole Maidstone/Ashford corridor. In the meanwhile a huge area is blighted, many house sales are stalled for fear of what the future holds and the community is deeply unsettled and angry.

"Future generations will judge us by the environment they inherit" states Kent County Council's publication "Towards 2010". We could not agree more. Accordingly, this Plan argues strongly against the brutalisation of Thurnham's landscape and in favour of change that is in keeping with the area, which respects its history, its countryside and environment, which is of genuine benefit to our immediate locality and which maintains those vital elements of community and continuity that are not only important in providing the people of Thurnham with their sense of place and identity, but also ensures that for generations to come surrounding communities may continue to enjoy a landscape to which they look for both leisure and inspiration.



These photographs illustrate some aspects of rural Thurnham. The one above is taken on the North Downs Way looking towards Friningham. The picture to the right shows part of the main pack of runners competing in the Maidstone half marathon in October 2007. The one below illustrates new hedge planting in Thurnham Lane on the boundary of Court Farm and traffic erosion of the verge.