

Present : Parish Councillors Beveridge, Cochrane, Lewis, Thomas; Borough Councillors Dawlings and Neville; 13 parishioners.

1. APOLOGIES Apologies were received from John Betts, Bev Beveridge, Simon Brown, John Clarke, David and Helen Commander, Martin Dickson, Peter Driver, Peta Grant, Bev Palmer.

## 2. PARISH COUNCIL CHAIRMAN'S REPORT – Nicola Thomas

Nicola thanked everyone for taking the time to come to the Annual Assembly and invited attendees to stay for refreshments after the meeting, with thanks to Julie Lewis and Deborah Hamm for organising refreshments.

BPC was sorry to lose Cathy Presgrave as a Parish Councillor at the beginning of the year, but this gives her more time to take on the mammoth task of organising the village fete alongside David Commander. Nicola thanked Cathy for her work with the Council over the last couple of years. BPC currently has a vacancy. Please get in touch if you would like to become a Parish Councillor or have any suggestions as to who you think would make a good councillor.

BPC's two recent major projects, the two well refurbishments and the improvements to the public toilets, have now been successfully completed, and BPC has enjoyed a relatively quiet time, with the replacement of the flagpole on the Green being a particular highlight. Nicola thanked Guy Hagan for taking on this task with his usual and enthusiasm and diligence.

BPC has made further progress on the wildflower meadow and had significant results on the planning front.

One of these being the approval of the development for the hospital sites in East End, with Esquire Developments cracking on with demolition and appropriately naming the site "Garland Park" with the crescent of 12 townhouses as replacement of the Garland Wing being the first part of the development to be built. The Almshouse site in Walkhurst Road is also underway, which Robin Dalton Holmes will report on.

BPC is very grateful to Rohan Barnett for looking after the website for many years. He has done a sterling job and BPC has been incredibly lucky to have had his input and help, all on a volunteer basis. The Clerk is now in the process of preparing a new website, which will hopefully go live in the next month or so. Details will be published in due course.

The unaudited accounts for 2024-25 show that BPC is in a reasonably stable financial position, but taking into account the capital expenditure incurred over the past couple of years, the finance committee considered it prudent to begin building up the Council reserves again with an increase to the precept figure of 3.8% from £49,750K to £52,000k per annum, equating to an annual increase of just £1.95 on residents current Band D equivalent Council Tax bills.

This increase will also help towards the agreement made by BPC to take on the grounds maintenance contracts on behalf of the Benenden Village Trust for the Benenden and Iden Green recreation grounds and village hall mowing and hedge cutting.

BPC is also grateful to Alex Durnell, who looks after and maintains the area around the war memorial so beautifully on a volunteer basis.

Nicola thanked Borough Councillors, Tom Dawlings, Ellen Neville and Bev Palmer for their help over the past year, and special thanks to Sean Holden, our County Councillor who retired from his position on 1<sup>st</sup> May. Sean has dealt with various issues for us over the years, not least his sterling work as part of the team that brought the building of our new primary school to fruition. BPC looks forward to working with our new County Councillor Claudine Russell.

Nicola thanked BPC's Clerk, Caroline Levett, for keeping the parish council in order and is especially grateful for the support from parish council colleagues. BPC is a great team who work well together.

## 3. PRESENTATION OF THE KALC COMMUNITY AWARD

Due to unforeseen circumstances the presentation of the award did not take place. The recipient of the award will now be announced and presented at a monthly Parish Council meeting.

## 4. PARISH COUNCILLOR REPORTS

### a. HIGHWAYS – Graham Beveridge for Peter Driver, Parish Councillor lead

Little progress has been made on the Highways Improvement Plan (first submitted in 2022). The plan was updated at the beginning of this year, resubmitted, and BPC is awaiting a meeting with its new Highways representative at KCC.

As well as the outstanding issues from the previous plan:

- i. North bound approach to Benenden Crossroads on Iden Green Road. BPC would like Highways to consider an additional advanced warning sign at 100m to match the existing one but on the verge to the east of Iden Green Road. If this is rejected then BPC would upgrade the existing Give Way sign to yellow-backed signage.
- ii. To extend the 30 mph Limit west along the B2086 to the entrance to Benenden School which is currently the start of the 40mph limit.
- iii. Proposal for a Vehicle Activated Sign in Mill Street in Iden Green to address the problem of speeding traffic approaching the crossroads.

BPC has added a further item:

- iv. To remove the now redundant signpost at Benenden Crossroads pointing towards Sissinghurst and Hemsted Golf Course (which hasn't existed for more than 6 years). This is an attempt to remove unnecessary signage at the critical entry point to the village within the Conservation area.

BPC has produced a policy on fly posting within the village in a further attempt at removing unwanted clutter from verges and road signs. Preference is given to local village organisations (which BPC continues to support) but posters should not be displayed on road signs. Purely commercial signs of no benefit to the village are unacceptable and will be removed. The crossroads looks so much better without them!

Anyone wishing to report a highways/footpath issue should do so using the KCC Highways Report A Problem – there is a link on the PC website.

#### b. WILDFLOWER MEADOW – Stephen Cochrane for Peter Driver, Parish Councillor lead

BPC has signed the agreement to lease Beacon Field from KCC for 5 years at a peppercorn rent and has received a grant from KCC towards expenses associated with managing the meadow.

A draft management plan has been produced.

Last summer, the invasive Creeping Thistle was much reduced but Bristly Ox Tongue continues to be a problem. BPC invested in a manual weed puller which proved useful in removing some of the larger rosettes when the ground was wet in January.

On a more positive note, the first Common Spotted Orchid was found in the meadow last year, diversity has increased with many more flowering plants present and there were also a number of glow-worms enjoying the facilities last summer.

The Benenden Nature Facebook Group has been a success (it now has 111 members) and has provided many interesting and knowledgeable posts whilst also contributing a number of articles for the Benenden Village Magazine.

It has been hard work getting the field to the stage it is now and BPC would welcome more volunteers to help. Please get in touch if you can help.

#### c. PLANNING – Nicola Thomas for Peta Grant, head of PC Planning Committee

In the past year BPC has experienced interesting and significant results in planning applications.

Aside from the more usual householder extensions and adaptations proposals, there have been some challenging cases.

The Benenden Neighbourhood Development Plan sets out the policies and conditions of the four allocated residential development sites which the developers must comply with to achieve planning consent from TWBC. There have been occasions where BPC has challenged both the developer and the TWBC planning officers.

BPC cannot stress strongly enough that without the BNDP and the allocated sites for development, the parish would have ended up with disastrous housing estates unbefitting our rural environment and landscape. The BNDP protects our rural location.

BPC was able to:

- Prevent the installation of 5m high street lighting lantern columns on the southern hospital site and replace them with low level motion sensor bollards to protect our dark skies, or certainly limit light pollution in the hospital area.
- At the Uphill site, the developer claimed that the site was not viable to include affordable housing having started out with a design including a building accommodating both affordable and private units. The developer was proposing to make an off-site contribution of £80,000 for AH. Despite the proposal being contrary to the provisions and policies of the BNDP, the planning officers recommended approval to the planning committee. BPC was, of course, appalled. Nicola spoke at the committee hearing expressing BPC's objection to the proposal and stating that it wasn't negotiable because of our AH needs. Fortunately, the committee went against the recommendation and refused the application. BPC waits to see whether a redesign will come forward or whether the developer will lodge an appeal.

- BPC objected to the proposed 20m high mast at the telephone exchange in Benenden which would have towered over the listed buildings in the Street and impacted on the conservation area. Even though there are many residents who would have benefitted from an improved mobile phone reception the mast was not something they wanted to see. TWBC refused the application which was then appealed. The planning inspectorate agreed and dismissed the appeal.
- BPC objected to the solar array proposed partially within Benenden and on the Hawkhurst / Cranbrook parish borders. Whilst BPC supports renewable energy in principle, the National Landscape of the High Weald should not be sacrificed to accommodate it. The planning committee decided unanimously agreed to refuse the application.

BPC will continue to protect our environment, and we are fortunate to have the BNDP to give us teeth!

#### d. VILLAGE TIDY – Stephen Cochrane, Parish Councillor lead

The litter pick which takes place twice a year, normally in March and November, and is a good village initiative which makes huge difference.

Thank you to the regular volunteers who turn out rain or shine to clear the parish of the rubbish mindlessly thrown out of thoughtless motorists. It really makes a difference and hopefully discourages at least a few potential litter bugs.

Thank you to TWBC who reliably provide the equipment and pick up the fruits of our labours a day or two later from the Village Hall and to Caroline Levett for liaising with TWBC.

Hopefully we continue to get new faces at our Saturday mornings and that you all enjoy the deserved coffee and cake as a token of our thanks.

### 5. COUNTY AND BOROUGH COUNCILLORS

#### ❖ Ellen Neville :

Ellen thanked everyone for their welcome when the ward became Hawkhurst, Sandhurst and Benenden in May 2024 and commented on the challenges faced and successes celebrated over the past year.

Ellen is on the TWBC Planning Committee and commented that the BNDP has attracted high acclaim and respect for its thorough body of work, especially in being so bold as to allocate sites and to deliver on those with uncompromising expectations. The TWBC Planning Committee has been committed to getting the best arrangements from arising developments in Benenden. The Planning Committee agreement to reject the two solar farm applications at Netters Farm and Water Lane was a good result for our National Landscape and protects our rich environment from inappropriate development.

The Local Plan's consultation has closed and can now begin the next stages towards procedures to adopt the new Local Plan. It will be a welcome closure as this plan has been overdue for some years, leaving the borough open to speculative development.

Local government has thrown a curveball at us, albeit not unanticipated - we have known that unitary authorities have been on the agenda for a few years - but the pace at which we are expected to move now is no small feat.

The Hawkhurst traffic light works are just about to complete phase one. Phase two (Highgate Hill closure) will get underway from 9<sup>th</sup> May and it is rumoured that these will be swifter with less disruption.

Negotiations on the new Hawkhurst medical centre are grinding at the S106 agreement, with no party taking accountability for frustrating the process. At some point, the doctors at the existing practices will retire, leaving many thousands of patients looking for surgeries in the surrounding areas if we cannot get the new centre built.

Ellen launched an online campaign to reinstate rural bus services. The proposals to introduce bus services covering rural parts of the Borough, which have funding and are supported by the local community, are not being enabled. There is much work to be done, and Ellen hopes to collaborate with the newly elected County Councillor.

The non-selective secondary school cold spot continues to raise concern as household numbers and the families within them increase. Recent conversations with KCC have confirmed that wider factors, such as increased home schooling, non-returners (after C-19), increased ASB and passenger overloads of the legal limits on school buses are not calculated by KCC into the need or justification for a replacement school.

Ellen will continue to push for solutions to address the concerns around affordable housing and traffic.

#### ❖ Tom Dawlings

Tom praised the Parish Council and its achievements.

The BNDP has proved to be very successful, and Tom congratulated Paul Tolhurst on his involvement with this.

BPC worked successfully with the developers at the hospital site, an example of how this sort of development can be achieved through discussion and negotiation.

The Benenden Almshouse Charities has been hugely successful with its development of almshouses.

## 6. BENENDEN VILLAGE TRUST - Tom Dawlings for Martin Dickson, BVT Chair

Benenden Village Trust plays a central role in the life of the village - but it's a role that is under serious threat.

The trust is a charity set up in 2018 to carry on the work of a predecessor set up 100 years ago, to provide recreational facilities for the parishioners of Benenden and Iden Green.

To fulfil that role it owns and runs Benenden Village Hall and the neighbouring recreation field and playground, as well as the Iden Green recreation field and playground. It owns the Iden Green Pavilion, though this is run by a separate trust. It's hard to imagine life in Benenden without these great community assets.

The problem for the trust, and the village as a whole, is BVT faces serious financial difficulties - and over the next two years these could threaten our ability to provide these facilities. To get through the crisis BVT needs the help and understanding of the village as a whole.

There is a misunderstanding among some villagers that BVT is a wealthy charity. The Trust inherited significant investment reserves, but it's vital to understand that BVT is only permitted by the charity authorities to spend the income these investments produce, not the investments themselves. That income, together with rent from ownership of St George's Hall, and hiring fees at the Village Hall, nowhere near cover costs. BVT has been running an annual deficit of a £20-£25,000 recently - and this is simply unsustainable. Without radical change BVT will run through its financial buffer in little more than a year.

At the heart of the problem is a sharp rise in our costs. Inflation has played a large part, along with staffing needs. Another huge issue is the need for substantial and ongoing repairs to BVT's ageing properties, which have lacked sufficient maintenance over many decades. Over the past year the Village Hall, now 50 years old, has needed a new boiler and major electrical updating. The aged, listed St George's Hall, has required major roof repairs and windows replaced.

The hard fact is that BVT loses money on both of its major assets - the Village Hall and St George's Hall - and this won't change without radical action.

Trustees are taking steps to address.

It has sought help from other village institutions and they have responded very generously, in particular the Parish Council. It has undertaken to pay to maintain the recreation grounds over the next five years - saving BVT £5,000 to £6,000 annually - and has provided a £5,000 grant towards the Village Hall boiler. BVT is also very grateful to the Bonfire Society for a £500 grant to support maintenance of the playgrounds.

Trustees have also been raising funds, holding two very successful film nights in the Village Hall over the past six months, helped by many volunteers and members of the Benenden Players.

BVT has also been asking the community for volunteers to help with specific tasks, such as keeping an eye on the playgrounds.

BVT is embarking on a line-by-line review of spending to identify and cut any remaining fat.

But even all these initiatives, taken together, will not eliminate the red ink as long as heavy repair expenditure continues at St George's Hall, as is fully expected. It is also important for the village to realise that St George's Hall does not fulfil BVT's core purpose of providing recreational facilities open to all.

Trustees are having to look very hard at the options for St George's and have started discussions about the future with its tenants there. Nothing is yet decided - so please ignore rumours to the contrary. In the coming months and years please accept that the fate of the Village Halls, recreation grounds and playgrounds may depend on BVT making some hard choices.

Trustees encourage parishioners to become members of the Trust. Please contact Caroline Levett for details of how to become a member. BVT's AGM takes place on 28<sup>th</sup> July and members will be invited to attend.

## 7. BENENDEN MAGAZINE – Peter Thomas, magazine editor

The Magazine goes from strength to strength with the level of commitment from its core editorial team, its team of distributors, its financial team and all contributors and writers.

Last year saw the Magazine's best financial performance since it was set up.

The Magazine, delivered free to all households, is appreciated across the whole parish.

Parishioners and organisations are encouraged to contact the Magazine with articles for publication.

## 8. BENENDEN COMMUNITY SHOP – no report received

## 9. BENENDEN VILLAGE HALL - Julie Lewis, for John Betts Village Hall Manager

The main income for the village hall is from those that hire the venue on a regular basis. Regular hirers accounted for income of £28,129 which is an increase of £1,523 on the previous year (£26,606). Bookings by other hirers accounted for income of £10,246 which is an increase of £2,052 on the previous year (£8,194). There has also been some additional income from hiring the recreation field for parking and hiring tables and chairs to parish residents.

Regular hirers include Benenden Players, yoga & Pilates classes, badminton, Arts Society lectures, dance, exercise and fitness classes, Village Lunch Club, gong bath, tuition classes. The hall is also regularly used for a variety of events including fundraisers, meetings, parties, funeral wakes, quizzes, lectures, shows, film nights and furniture sales.

A new addition to activities at the hall includes football matches on the recreation field. Staplehurst Monarchs Football Club now use Benenden as the home ground for one of their teams with several of the other teams also using the pitch on an occasional basis. Funding was sought for the provision of new football goals.

Over the past 12 months, there have been many improvements to the venue and the way in which it has been managed. Feedback from hirers has been positive and supportive.

The website continues to be updated to provide all the necessary information, with photographs, that potential hirers might need. The website has contact forms for general enquiries, booking enquiries, online booking forms and feedback.

The regular classes and events at the hall are promoted through the website.

Hire charges include discounted rates for parish residents and regular hirers.

New 'blackout' blinds have been purchased for the main hall matching those already purchased for the community office and small hall / meeting room. This has been positively received by hirers.

A new heating system has been installed for the main hall. This includes a Nest controller that allows heating of the hall to be better managed with scheduled heating and remote control / access.

The stage lighting in the main hall has undergone a complete overhaul, which has been used by several hirers to enhance performances and shows with colourful lighting and special effects. LED lighting strips have also been added along the walls of the main hall and around the stage that can be used as ambient lighting for events or for added ambience for parties. This can be operated as part of the stage lighting system or independently for smaller events. Work is underway to update the hall's website to showcase the available lighting.

Parking continues to be an issue at the hall as the primary use appears to be by parents parking in the hall's car park to drop off / pick up their children or attend events at the neighbouring primary school. There has been regular liaison with the school, but parents continue to park inconsiderately or take up spaces that prevent both staff and hirers from being able to park at the hall. The car park is also prone to multiple potholes which should not be an issue for the amount of use the car park gets from persons attending the hall.

## 10. BENENDEN ALLOTMENT ASSOCIATION – Nancy Tolhurst

Benenden's Allotment Association is now just over 18 months old, and it's been a busy time. Since BAA first started letting plots in October 2023 there has been a small turnover of allotmenters.

There are 22 plots, ranging from full sized plots of 250m<sup>2</sup> to starter plots from 75m<sup>2</sup>. At present all plots are occupied. The allotments are sited on a small piece of ground off Walkhurst Road, gifted to the parish by the late Pat Thoburn. Allotmenters are growing flowers and shrubs as well as traditional vegetables.

In the past year the most notable success is securing mains water. With a grant from County Councillor Sean Holden, and one from the Kent Community Foundation mains water was installed on site. After a worryingly dry March and April, BAA extended the water so that access is easy from all the plots on site.

A social event was held on site, and will be repeated this year to showcase progress so far, and a quiz to help fundraise. BAA has spent some of the proceeds on communal compost bins. The grass and hedgerows on site need to be trimmed and a composting bin is a good way to use the clippings / trimmings.

BAA was also delighted to receive a grant from the Bonfire Association, which will be used to make a start the next big project; ensuring that there is a parking area that works just as well in winter as summer. The ground is clay and gets very muddy and sticky when wet.

Anyone interested in joining BAA or the waiting list for a plot should email [allotments@benendenparishcouncil.org](mailto:allotments@benendenparishcouncil.org).

#### 11. BENENDEN BONFIRE SOCIETY – no report received

#### 12. IDEN GREEN PAVILION – Bill Lewis

The Harmsworth recreation field at Iden Green and a wooden building known as the Pavilion in its SW corner were part of the property owned by Lord Harmsworth that he gave to the village in 1923, to be managed by Benenden Parish Council. The management later passed to The Harmsworth Trust until 2017 when the Benenden Village Trust took over.

By the early 1990s, the old Pavilion was falling apart and considered for demolition. The residents of Iden Green set about raising the funds for its replacement and a registered charity was created called The Iden Green Pavilion Trust and by 1994 the building was completed on the site of the original. The building is leased from Benenden Village Trust and that lease is for due renewal next year.

There are 8 Trustees of the Pavilion who also form the Management Committee, which meets generally 4 times a year. The Trustees represent: Young People, Senior Citizens, the Benenden Village Trust, the Iden Green Congregational church and the local residents. IGPT is currently looking for an additional trustee.

In keeping with Lord Harmsworth's bequest, the stated objectives of the charity are "to provide for the inhabitants of Iden Green and the neighbourhood thereof .....facilities for all forms of recreation and other leisure-time occupation..... with the objective of improving the conditions of life for the said inhabitants."

The intention has been and continues to be for the Pavilion to be a real "Community Centre" for Iden Green, by encouraging its use by local people wishing to set up societies, clubs and for social and family gatherings, deliberately setting rates of hire at affordable levels and supporting the operating costs through fund - raising activities such as a quiz night and the summer Jazz & Blues.

Bookings are healthy and the charm and tranquillity that is to be found in this corner of the Parish attracts art groups, pilates and yoga classes, craftworkers and meetings of local societies and committees. The ready access to the recreation field and its excellent children's playground make the Pavilion a popular venue for children's parties and family gatherings at weekends.

IGPT's only employee is a part-time cleaner. All other duties including bookings, finance, administration and building management are shared amongst the trustees who do this on a voluntary basis. This helps to keep hire charges at a consistently modest level.

In broad terms, the Pavilion does a little better than break-even on income and expenditure. Reserves built up over the last 30 years, together with government grants paid during the pandemic, have put the charity in sound financial shape and the building in excellent condition.

Bill thanked his fellow trustees, parish councillors and BVT trustees for their continuing support, all of whom carry out their roles diligently, voluntarily and without any payment. Their reward is in the sense of well-being that flows from the contribution they make to community life. It can also be a lot of fun, as you will experience when you come to the 2025 Iden Green Jazz & Blues event on Saturday August 23rd bank holiday weekend.

#### 13. GIBBON AND BUCKLAND TRUST – Julie Lewis for Simon Brown, G&B Chair

The purpose of the trust in broad terms is to use its income for the education and training of Benenden residents under the age of 25, and in particular to support the Primary School.

In 2024, the Charity gave the following: 43 student grants totalling £24,675, nearly double the number from the previous year; and the customary bible to each Primary School leaver at a total cost of £317.

Applications for grants this year need to be submitted by the end of September. Application forms are available from Benenden's and from the Clerk to the Charity (gibbonandbuckland@gmail.com). Mrs Rowena Hagell is the Trust's employed Clerk.

The trustees currently are Simon Brown (Chairman), Mary Cruse, Julie Lewis, Tony Fullwood, David Harmsworth and Janet Beattie. David Barnes has stood down as a trustee after many years of committed service as the PCC's nominee.

Extensive repair work was done last summer to the outside of the Gibbon School House at KCC's expense, after years of neglect. The end result is a considerable improvement for this listed building and for the visual amenity of The Green.

The term of KCC's lease of the Gibbon School House expired on 30 September 2024. Mrs Dawne Bailey remains in occupation of the residential part of the building under the sub-tenancy granted by KCC to her late husband in 1974. It has always been thought that she has security of tenure throughout her life and KCC has previously accepted that is the case.

Since September, listed building consent has been given retrospectively to 4 skylights and also to the repair of an internal ceiling.

Tim Duncan of Lambert & Foster has been representing the trustees' interests in negotiations with KCC about the future arrangements. The trustees have taken legal advice from Thomson Snell & Passmore in Tunbridge Wells.

In view of the outstanding planning and some other issues, last autumn it was agreed with KCC that the Lease should continue to apply (ie. being held over). Accordingly, for now KCC currently continues to pay £7,125 per quarter and remains responsible for repairs and insurance of the whole building.

Because there has been no business use since the Primary School moved in September 2019, unlike previously KCC cannot be required to take a new business lease. It is understandably keen to terminate its obligations for the building.

Since January KCC has been suggesting that it can unilaterally give up its ongoing obligations arising from the occupation of the main part of the building by its sub-tenant. The trustees are taking further legal advice. It has been agreed for now that the lease will continue to be held over until the end of June.

The future is uncertain, as is whether KCC will remain responsible for some or all of the property. The outcome is likely to have an effect on the Charity's ability to make grants in the future.

While this uncertainty continues, it is not possible for the Trustees to consider any alternative use of the old School rooms and playground at the rear of the property.

#### 14. GARDENING CLUB – Ellie Cochrane, Secretary Benenden Gardening Club

A welcoming club with a varied membership ranging from keen amateurs to an award-winning garden designer.

The Club runs a programme of talks in the winter months and private guided visits to local gardens of note. Private tours are open to members only and often sell out.

The Club holds an annual plant sale in May and will be holding a summer show on the 12th July to which all are invited.

Whether you have a postage stamp or manicured acres you are welcome to join the Club.

Volunteers are also being sought to help with the maintenance of the churchyard.

The Churchyard is also looking for volunteers to help

#### 15. BENENDEN ALMSHOUSE CHARITIES – Robin Dalton-Holmes

Those involved in the protracted negotiations to replace the former village primary school which started in 1938, and more seriously in the 1990's and the modernisation of St George's Church will be familiar with the bureaucracy associated with any significant project even when there is general support for getting the project improvements underway.

In the last few years BACS sought to defend the special status of almshouses exempting their charities from being susceptible to any property resident having any right to buy the residential almshouse they occupy.

The 9 Feoffee and Thorn cottages owned by the Charity are mainly very small single bedroom dwellings in some need of modernisation but the charity had no significant endowment to facilitate this.

BACS sought to play a part in the provision of more low-cost social housing for long term parishioners, who might not otherwise be able to afford to live in the village once their full-time employment ended. BACS devised a project to build a range of 12 dwellings ranging from single occupation to accommodation for couples and family sized space.

After achieving planning permission over 3 years ago BACS negotiated with TWBC to play a part in the development of 1 of 4 sites which were seen as a controlled limit to Parish housing development. To fund the building of 12 almshouses (low cost in perpetuity) the Trust negotiated the sale of just over 1 acre of land for building 12 commercial properties, like the new Feoffee Fields almshouses off Walkhurst Road within easy walking distance of village facilities – shops, pub, primary school, hairdresser, church, village bus stops etc.

Discussion with Canham Homes brought about a proposal for them to buy the land and for BACS to pay for the almshouse development. Initially it was thought that the exchange was in balance at £2,000,000 for land sale and a similar cost for the building but the change of government has adversely affected the statutory employment cost to Canham, which employs its in-house tradesmen and technical staff. BACS therefore has pressed on to seek a grant from Homes England which acts as a government agency and which has added £600,000 of which we have received two thirds and we are awaiting a final tender price from Canham in the next 2 weeks.

Meanwhile both parties have acted in good faith. The development began at the end of February and is expected to end 12 months later. The good weather conditions have helped a flying start so that BACS is optimistic that it could interview interested applicants for places at the end of 2025 and the chosen could take occupancy by May 2026.

#### 16. BENENDEN PLAYERS – Nancy Tolhurst

Following many many requests the Players are returning in January 2026 with a brand new, world exclusive Benenden Panto. Auditions will take place early in September, with rehearsals running through October into January. Performances will take place 29<sup>th</sup> January to 1<sup>st</sup> February 2026.

The January 2024 Winter Revue was smaller in scale than the usual panto, but it proved to be a good opportunity to showcase some of the talent in the village and to reprise some of the ‘hits’ from most recent shows. Feedback from attendees and cast was very positive.

The break has meant more time to plan further improvements on the technical side, with new kit for both lighting and sound. On the lighting side the Players have a new lighting supremo, who has been working very closely with the Village Hall team to make the most of the new LEDs, and the lighting board.

The Players are grateful to Benenden’s Bonfire Association for their kind grant that will enable them to swap out older, less energy efficient lights for LEDs that are more flexible and can be used to create some amazing lighting effects.

If you’re keen either to audition and showcase your dramatic / singing / dancing skills to your friends and family then keep an eye out for details of audition. If you’d like to help out backstage, there are loads of opportunities. If you’re interested in costume, front of house, make-up, running the bar, set-painting / prop-making, or helping to manage the junior cast the Players can find you a niche. In a typical panto there are around 20 adults and children in the show, with a further 25 helpers during rehearsals and over performance week itself. The Players are hugely grateful to all the friends and family members who provide support and help.

It costs around £6,000 to put on a full panto, so it’s critical to cover costs, and to make a little profit that can either be invested in new kit, or put aside for good causes. In the past the Players have funded defibrillators for the village, and summer drama workshops for local children. It’s been harder over the past few years, and the focus this year will be on fund-raising for its own core technical areas of sound and lighting.

Tickets are available for the revue to mark the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of VE Day, and part of the profits will be going towards the Army Benevolent Fund.

Anyone interested in getting involved should email [enquiry@benendenplayers.co.uk](mailto:enquiry@benendenplayers.co.uk)

#### 17. PARISHIONERS’ QUESTIONS

The question was asked about who is responsible for the upkeep of the footpath behind the primary school which has become overgrown.

This should be reported to KCC through its website – report a problem on a right of way [Report a problem on a right of way - Kent County Council](#)