

Chairperson's Report

Introduction

We live in extraordinary and challenging times.

It is a great shame that we cannot meet together for our Shop AGM in the way that we normally do. I hope that you will feel however, that the information in the online reports that follow from myself, that of Mike Bird the Treasurer, and Maureen our Post Office Manager, provide you with all the relevant information that you would indeed have heard had there been a public meeting.

It has of course been an extraordinary time since our last AGM, with the social measures introduced to everyone in the country to try and stop the Coronavirus in its tracks. The government imposed health restrictions have made a big impact on the shop and the way we operate.

However, our AGM is to review trading and the accounts over the period of January to December 2019, so this is where I will begin before moving onto the Coronavirus challenge.

Overview of 2019

If you attended the last AGM you will know that the Association made a small but significant profit of just over £5000 for the period of 2018. The surplus was then added to what little reserves we had in the bank.

In the financial year of 2019 we nearly doubled this figure, making a more significant profit of about £9000. An excellent result!

During 2019 there were major changes to the staffing in the Shop as our manager Tim Abram left in July to start his own business in Andover. We were very grateful to Tim who had moved the shop forward on so many fronts in the time he had been with us. We were delighted that Julia then agreed to step up from her post of Assistant to run the shop as Manager.

It was also great to welcome Judeth Dashwood as our Assistant Manager. Judeth has been able to balance her responsibilities behind the Post Office counter with her new role in the shop. Her skills and experience fitting well with those of Julia. Judeth particularly enjoys working on the challenges of all things computer!

We started our 'Friends of the Shop' scheme in 2019 and 22 people signed up last year with the total annual contribution of £570. Anyone who would like to join and pay £15 or more annually by standing order to the Shop Association should contact our secretary, Lynne Lucas.

Throughout 2019 our profit margins were healthy and events such as our Christmas Bazaar were well supported giving us a significant boost to our income.

Grant applications were successfully submitted to both Hampshire County Council and Test Valley Borough Council. We also received a welcome contribution from the Fete Committee. So I am now pleased to be able to say that we have moved forward with the repainting of the shop exterior; and (when health restrictions permit) we will install a new floor throughout the shop, including the back office and kitchen. We will also purchase new tables and chairs for the cafeteria area.

We are still pursuing the installation of solar panel units which will, we hope, reduce the major and continuing expense of energy consumption associated with the demands of freezers and air conditioning. Because of the limitation on where we can site the solar panels we envisage these units will not be as efficient as they might be were we able to have a good south facing position to install them, but over a long period they should still be worthwhile.

We are grateful that we have good tenants, Graham and Jude, living in our flat over the shop who are also good customers!

Our committee has been slightly low on numbers this year but has remained effective throughout. I am grateful to Mike Bird, Lynne Lucas, Dee Howarth, Elizabeth Howard, Andrew Norman and Ann Hopwood.

I would particularly like to mention the work of our long serving Parish Magazine contributor, Elizabeth. She has been keeping the village up to speed with what is happening in the shop over many years and we are most grateful to her.

Through the hard work and skills of Andrew we also have a shop website at hugofox.com (click on 'Community' then 'Abbotts Ann'). This does give us a much needed online presence alongside information about the shop on the village website and our use of Facebook.

2020

Trading started well this year, but of course we were then faced with a total game changer as the virus pandemic approached this and every community in the country. Government advice and scientific information changed day by day as we moved through March.

We were increasingly aware of our duties as a responsible employer showing due diligence, but also as an organisation in the community for all to see, that we were making every effort to trade in the safest possible way. The gravity of the situation could of course, not be overstated.

So after discussion and consultation with community health professionals, and with a heavy heart we made the decision to ask all staff over 70 years old to temporarily step down from their duties. We knew that for many of our devoted volunteers this would be a tough decision to accept. After all, these volunteers had devoted their time and energy for many years to the shop and kept it going sometimes since its very inception at the turn of the century. They are hugely knowledgeable not only of shop procedures but of the customers with all their different needs and demands. They had put in many hours of work on a weekly basis. But the over-riding issue in every decision we have had to take was to do our utmost to keep everybody as safe as possible and thereby preserve life.

We sincerely hope that it will not be long before all volunteers will be able to return to their posts. A big thank you to them all on behalf of the Committee, and indeed the village.

Our other big challenge was to introduce social distancing into our shop which has limited space, relatively narrow aisles and the twin features of a Post Office as well as the main shop counter. Cleaning and hygiene procedures also had to be stepped up to the highest level possible.

As the weeks moved on with more health and safety directions from the government, it became increasingly clear that the demands on the shop were such that we would have to reduce our opening hours. Some villagers were self isolating and deliveries were necessary. Again with considerable discussion and taking a deep breath, we decided that both the shop and Post Office should move to opening only in the mornings, thus allowing deliveries to be made up in the afternoons. We were able to reduce the number of volunteers (and therefore the risk of cross infection) to the bare minimum, and devote more time to cleaning.

Throughout all of these changes and the uncertainty about the future I must pay tribute to the commitment, ingenuity and good nature of Julia our Manager. She has worked incredibly hard to make things really come together, enabling the shop procedures and all the team to cope so well. We do not take our manager for granted! Julia has proved to be an exceptional person without whom we might well have gone under.

As the pandemic took hold in the country Julia and her husband Alan took on as much of the shop staffing in the mornings as they could, thus reducing the possibility of cross-infection. They also began to travel to our wholesalers in Eastleigh each week so that they had a better chance of

getting all the supplies we needed, and that we had been so short of in the early days of public panic buying. Consequently, and I'm sure you will agree our shop has been well stocked!

Contactless payment has been encouraged wherever possible, so again minimising the chance of infection being passed on by money changing hands.

Another key decision was to remove all the seating and tables both inside and outside the shop, thus making it clear that meeting together in groups was no longer possible, something later enforced by government edict as cafes and pubs were locked down. However this decision also helped us as it eased the pressure on space within the shop allowing a better chance of social distancing.

Initially it was inevitable that these drastic changes would be upsetting for a few customers who thought all the restrictions were unnecessary, unwarranted and even high handed. But as time moved on and all of us were able to take on board the terrible effects of the virus, the shop changes appear to have been well accepted by just about all. I should add that a Zoom meeting I undertook with many other rural shops throughout the UK proved that they had all taken very similar steps to that which we had.

Again through good planning and persistence from our management team our supplies, while initially dipping as the public went into panic mode, have bounced back up. New volunteers have stepped in to help with deliveries. Julia has maintained a good practical working link with the new Village Community Support Group initiated by John and Christina Benson.

There have been other challenges associated with the changes in the shop routine. You will have noticed that we keep the entrance door open (one thing less for people to touch). In turn this has meant we have had to turn off the air conditioning during opening hours in order to avoid a strain on the system. At the time of writing this has worked well, but when the temperatures both outside and inside get higher we will almost certainly have to have the air conditioning on.

We hope that very soon we will have a new Perspex screen in place to protect staff behind the till.

It is truly remarkable that our great community shop has shown it can weather the gravest of challenges by adapting and making changes that we would not have conceived of even a few months ago. Our weekly turnover has greatly increased in these dark days by as much as 50%. People are coming to the shop in greater numbers from outside our immediate community.

This wonderful achievement is of course entirely due to the dedication of all those who help in any way. But chiefly it is due to the strength of leadership shown by Julia, well supported by Judeth. In the Post Office Maureen has also shown outstanding commitment throughout this difficult period along with Gail her assistant. All these staff have amongst other things postponed their annual leave until times become easier.

I will repeat that it has also been a time of sadness for those who have lost their role as volunteers, serving the community with such devotion. We hope to welcome them back soon. We all owe them a huge vote of thanks.

Going forward we also need to look to younger generations to be able to help in the shop.

My own view is that this extraordinary year has demonstrated how our village shop remains at the heart of our community. It has proven to be strong and adaptable with our trading position better than ever, and that we are well placed to face the future post-Coronavirus, whenever that might be.

Let us hope a new normality will not be long in coming.

Chris Davis

Chairperson. Abbots Ann Village Shop Association