

NEWSLETTER EXTRA

Lively AGM in new venue

The 2014 Annual General Meeting on 1 May featured two important changes, both of which contributed to a good turnout of some 40 members and a lively evening. Firstly, the rising cost of hiring our longstanding venue at the Castle dictated a move. We were very fortunate in being offered favourable terms to hire Slade School's hall which proved a friendly and cheerful environment as well as being that much easier to get to.

Secondly, we had decided that more time should be freed for discussion and the social side of the occasion by cutting out the delivery of the officers' reports, which instead were circulated to members beforehand. As a result there was time to discuss a good number of local issues and we were very pleased that both our local councillors, Owen Baldock and Vivian Branson were at hand to participate.

For example, two members from Lansdowne Road gave a graphic account of the regular problem of large delivery vans venturing down Lansdowne and then having no option but to struggle on, often damaging parked cars and sometimes getting stuck at the hairpin bend. It was pointed out that the sign saying that the road is unsuitable for heavy vehicles was too small and wrongly oriented so it was easily missed. Cllr Branson offered to pave the way for this to be raised with KCC via TMBC's representatives on KCC, and following her introductory e-mail we contacted Cllrs Richard Long and Chris Smith asking them to take the matter up with Kent Highways. They have not yet come back to us on it.

Another Lansdowne problem is the litter that accumulates on the car-parking area off the High Street end of the road, which is now scheduled for property development (see below). A resident complained that she regularly cleared up the mess herself. Cllr Branson

again offered to take the matter in hand and was subsequently in communication with Matthew Broome, the planning officer in charge of the development scheme. He visited the site and asked the developers' agent to improve the situation.

An interesting talk by our Police Community Support Officer, Laura Bournazian prompted further discussion. She said that the Slade continued to be a low crime area, which she ascribed partly to good neighbourly communications, though there were some opportunistic thefts, particularly from sheds and involving bicycles. She urged residents to take advantage of a new cycle security registration scheme the police were about to introduce in local venues. (The first session in our vicinity took place on 25 July at Cycles UK in the High Street). Asked if the recently introduced midnight street-lighting cut-off was affecting crime rates, PCSO Bournazian said there was no evidence so far but it was being monitored. Several present felt that the Slade's being surrounded by playing fields made it a special case and there should, for example, be lighting at street corners. SARA will take this up with KCC.

During the formal business, our Treasurer, Marco Castellan, reported on the healthy state of the association's finances, with a positive bank balance of £1,147 due to careful cost control and successful sales of the Slade history: *A Little Knot of Narrow Streets*. In light of this the committee were planning a party on 1 June. (See page 1) and had invested in the additional noticeboard near the junction of Annison Street and The Slade to serve those who don't often pass the one in Stafford Road. Committee member Jackie Davies has taken over responsibility for the noticeboards from the longstanding manager Hugh Munro. He was warmly thanked for all his work over the years and presented with a bottle of wine and a B&Q voucher.

New twist in Fosse Area tale

The long saga of the development on the wasteland off Lansdowne Road has taken a new twist. CML, which has planning permission to build a terrace of nine houses, a small block of flats and a large commercial car park on this constricted area, may now sell the housing component on to another developer. This emerged in correspondence associated with CML's recent request, granted by the Council, to change details of the planning permission it won last summer. CML asked to be able to carry out the development in two self-contained phases, starting with the car park, and for some changes to the conditions that must be satisfied before the two elements of the scheme can be brought into use.

The changes – and the potential sale – are likely to be related to the discovery of Japanese knotweed on the site (see October Newsletter). This means that the housing development will have to be postponed until this pernicious weed is completely eradicated, which could take several years.

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Meanwhile, the developer wants to get on with the car park as quickly as possible because it believes it is essential to attracting new tenants to 182 High Street, the 1970s office building backing onto the development site, which it also owns and whose head lease comes up for renewal soon.

As things stood, a number of planning conditions unconnected with the car park had to be fulfilled before either element of the scheme could be brought into use. These have now largely been changed to relate solely to the housing. The important exception is the Lansdowne-Slade Link Road that is to run through the site and join up with Annison Street in the neighbouring Market Quarter. The Council has insisted that this facility, which will considerably improve access to the area and has been on TMBC's wish list for years, must be completed to the appropriate standard before the car park is occupied.

Unfortunately this does not apply to the requirement for CML to restore and provide for the long term maintenance of the Fosse (the section of the old town defensive bank and Grade II listed monument that lies in the undergrowth behind the site earmarked for housing). This now relates solely to the housing element of the scheme whose future must now be in some doubt.

The site – small, awkward, surrounded by car parking and infested with knotweed is not particularly attractive and the value of the houses will be eroded by the plan for prospective house owners to pay for maintaining the Fosse. CML may not find an eager buyer and, having got the car park it wanted (despite stiff opposition from SARA) may well give up on the housing while the Fosse continues in its present unkempt state.

Slade School traffic issues noted

Plans to expand Slade School got the final go-ahead from Kent County Council earlier this month with its approval of the plans for new classrooms to accommodate the increase from 315 to 420 pupils over the next few years. The proposals were open to public consultation during May and SARA took the opportunity to tell the authority, yet again, of our concerns about the traffic problems outside the school, which can only worsen when there are more pupils.

KCC has acquired Deacon House (behind Hildenbrook House at the bottom of The Slade) and will convert it into four classrooms, a small new hall and additional staff room. They will also replace the early-years portakabin beside Stafford Road with a new and better one. Obviously, continued use of a portakabin is far from ideal, but since the expansion will begin this September with 15 more early-years pupils than before, it is hard to suggest an alternative. Plans for the Deacon House conversion, which will happen over the next year, appear unchanged from what was shown at the public presentation back in February (see March Newsletter) and on the whole unexceptionable.

SARA therefore confined its comments on the planning application to the traffic problem, which the KCC's Transport Statement blithely dismissed on the basis of observations on a single afternoon and whose authors believed the school's main entrance was on The Slade.

We emphasised yet again that serious problems did exist, particularly in the morning, and queried whether the updated School Travel Plan, on which the Transport Statement placed considerable reliance, was likely to deal with them. That appears to rely, in turn, largely on encouraging more walking to school and co-operative behaviour by parents.

We represented that this hadn't worked in the past and was unlikely to do so in future. We suggested that there would be fewer problems if there was extra policing by traffic wardens and the parents' free-parking concession were in Upper Castlefields car park rather than the more distant swimming pool car park.

KCC has responded by including the following guidance in its Planning Decision document:

- “The School Travel Plan Co-ordinator should engage with the community through the Slade Area Residents Association in order to minimise the impact the school has on the surrounds with regard to traffic generation and parking problems at peak times.
- The School Travel Plan Co-ordinator is encouraged to investigate the possibility of implementing a permit scheme for using the Upper Castle Fields car park for parents during school peak times with Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council.”