

Present : Parish Councillors Beveridge, Cochrane, Driver, Hagan, Lewis, and Thomas. Borough Councillor Dawlings, County Councillor Seán Holden. Clerk, C Levett. 13 parishioners.

1. **APOLOGIES** were received from Peta Grant, Cathy Presgrave, Ellen Neville, Beverley Palmer, Martin Dickson, Nancy Tolhurst, Peter Trill

2. **PARISH COUNCIL CHAIR'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, and thanked Julie Lewis for organising.

There have been no new recruits to BPC since September 2022, and this has given the opportunity for individual Parish Councillors to work on their individual strengths on behalf of the Parish.

The main projects over the past year have been the continuing restoration of the Wells; the setting up and implementation of the allotments; the complete refurbishment of the public toilets; and the ongoing progression on the creation of the wildflower meadow.

There has been significant progress made on all 4 of the sites allocated for housing development in the Neighbourhood Plan. This has given BPC's Planning Committee a considerable amount of work. The schemes coming forward for these sites have been the subject of comprehensive consultations between BPC and developers, alongside the Planning Officers at TWBC. This collaborative approach has vindicated the tough decision to allocate sites, and BPC is optimistic that the developments coming forward will achieve the best possible outcomes for these sites.

The unaudited accounts for 2023-24 show BPC in a substantially better financial position than this time last year. From a deficit of £15,000 last year, there is now a surplus of around £19,500.

However, taking into account the expenditure incurred over the past year or so, the Finance Committee considered it prudent to increase the precept figure by 6.5% from £46,000 to £49,000 for the year. This equates to just £3.18 increase across the year on current Band D equivalent council tax bills.

Nicola thanked Benenden's Borough Councillors Nancy Warne and Seán Holden who have moved on following the recent local elections, and welcomed Benenden's two new Borough Councillors, Ellen Neville and Bev Palmer. Nicola gave special thanks to Tom Dawlings who was re-elected and is always ready and willing to take up issues and causes for the parish whenever required.

Nicola also thanked the various volunteers who support the Parish Council, particularly Alex Durnell, who maintains the War Memorial garden, and all those who take part in the Village Tidy.

3. **PRESENTATION OF KALC COMMUNITY AWARD**

Nicola Thomas presented the KALC Community Award to Grant Matthews in recognition of his many volunteering roles - as long-time leader of Benenden Scout troop, loyal volunteer in community shop, on the committee and behind the counter, and for many years the man who kept the village bonfire burning.

4. **PARISH COUNCILLOR REPORTS**

❖ **Highways** - Peter Driver

BPC has been trying to progress Benenden's Highways Improvement Plan with KCC for some time. Only 3 issues can be submitted to KCC at a time and BPC had made the following requests to improve road safety.

The first proposal was at Benenden crossroads : signage has been improved on the New Pond Road side but still needs to be improved on the Iden Green Road. BPC had requested that the 30mph speed limit be extended to the entrance to The Grange, and to change the Give Way sign to a Stop. This was rejected by KCC as the road does not meet the criteria for intervention.

The second proposal is to extend the 30mph limit along the B2086 to Benenden School. The speed of traffic is inappropriate for a village setting close to a school entrance. Many use the footpath to walk into the village. A traffic survey

was carried out and KCC see some merit in this but it is not a priority and KCC does not have the budget to carry out. BPC had asked if this could be brought forward if a local contribution could be made towards funding. BPC is waiting for a response from KCC. A parishioner pointed out that there would not even be a pavement had the parents of the school had not paid for it.

The third proposal is for a vehicle activated sign on Mill Street. Vehicles travel at excessive speed along this road, and is particularly dangerous for vehicles turning from Standen Street and on the approach towards the crossroads. No feedback has yet been received from KCC.

Cllr Holden volunteered to speak to Highways to see if he can progress.

More positive news includes new wooden fingerpost signs at Benenden Crossroads and at Babbs Lane, and a new footpath sign across Beacon Field.

Parishioners are reminded to report any Highways and Footpaths related problems through the KCC online reporting - Report a problem on a road or pavement - Kent County Council.

❖ **Beacon Field Wildflower meadow** – Peter Driver

BPC has agreed in principle to lease Beacon Field from KCC for 5 years at a peppercorn rent, and a grant of £7,000 has been agreed by KCC over 5 years to maintain the field.

BPC has worked closely with the Bumblebee Conservation Trust. There have been positive signs of progress and diversity has increased. A number of volunteer days have taken place and Benenden School hopes to become involved.

Bristly Ox-Tongue and Creeping Thistle continue to be problematic and volunteers are always welcome to help dig up.

A facebook group, Benenden Nature, has been set up for those interested in local wildlife and nature, and to promote the conservation of significant habitats and species in and around Benenden.

❖ **Planning**

Nicola Thomas reported on behalf of Peta Grant :

Since the Annual Assembly last year, BPC has been very involved in, and had considerable input into, the applications for the hospital sites and for Uphill in New Pond Road, together with design details for the almshouses site.

All four of the allocated sites in the NDP are moving forward with only the hospital sites and Uphill requiring planning approval. BPC has had a significant say during meetings with the developers and the TWBC planning officers – this would not have happened without the Benenden Neighbourhood Development Plan, and the BNDP has protected and safeguarded our environment as our Plan envisaged. Without a current Tunbridge Wells Local Plan, the BNDP carries great weight in the decision making. Both applications are expected to be placed before the TWBC planning committee in the next few months.

There have been compromises on all sides but BPC is satisfied that the essence of the BNDP is reflected within the applications put forward, and in the modifications following discussions.

The BNDP has been put to the test and has worked. It has also given BPC ideas about possible changes to be made when the BNDP is reviewed, which will take place after the TW Local Plan has been made.

Many parishioners were highly concerned about the proposed 20m mast at the telephone exchange and expressed their objections. It is encouraging that whilst there are residents who have virtually no mobile phone signal, they are not prepared to see the village ruined in order to obtain one! The application was rejected by TWBC.

BPC continues to consider all applications within the parish as a statutory consultee.

The Parish Council's Planning Team is Graham Beveridge, Nicola Thomas and Peta Grant, and Nicola gave special thanks to Peta for her input into considering planning applications and the very detailed reports which she produces.

❖ **Wells** - Graham Beveridge

Benenden Well structure

In the report at the Annual Assembly in 2023, the restoration of the Benenden Well structure was still on-going with the structure completely dismantled and new plinth stones being formed by the stone mason. The extensive repair works have all but been completed over the last year and the structure looks magnificent.

Whilst the restoration of the structure looks complete, the special roof tiles on the roof facing the crossroads are similar but not the same style as those which were installed originally. Anthony Hicks, the contractor who has restored the structure, has been trying to locate tiles which look the same as the original ones and has succeeded at last. These will be installed shortly.

The Parish Council is currently negotiating with Tunbridge Wells Borough Council and Kent County Council in order to obtain permission to install some protective bollards in front of the Well structure. In the last six months, the edifice was threatened once again when a car narrowly missed hitting it and shot across the crossroads, out of control, knocking over the rubbish bin which stands beside the Well.

Iden Green structure

The restoration of the Iden Green Well structure is nearing completion.

The existing roof tiles were stripped off and it was noted that a good proportion of them were in fact concrete tiles. The Parish Council has agreed to replace these with Kent Peg tiles and these are being currently being sourced.

The existing, large timber wall plates, on which the structure sits, were found to be in very poor condition and so the contractor, Anthony Hicks, once the roof tiles had been removed, decided to jack the whole structure up, cut out the rotten and infested timber parts where possible and renew the timbers where necessary. In the event, they replaced the wall plate on the south-eastern side of the well and spliced in new oak timber on the north-western side of the well. They kept the tenon tongues on the vertical timbers and created the mortice holes in the new timber members for the tongues to fit in to. They also shaped the new timbers to follow the same profiles as the existing ones that were replaced.

The metalwork on the structure has been refurbished and any missing parts replaced with replica parts. The beautiful finial at the apex of the roof has been turned round so that the ornate metal flowers can be seen more easily.

The craftsmanship that has been shown by Anthony Hicks, the contractor, on both Wells, is absolutely outstanding and we are fortunate that they have the skills to be able to restore the wells to their former glory with such expertise.

The Parish Council thanks those who have donated to assist with the cost of restoration of the Wells. BPC has covered the costs but any donations are still welcome.

5. COUNTY AND BOROUGH COUNCILLORS

❖ Tom Dawlings

In 2022 Tunbridge Wells Borough Council was reviewed by the Local Government Boundary Commission for England. From the 2nd May election the Council now comprises 39 Councillors and 14 wards. Benenden was previously in a ward with Cranbrook and now is in a larger ward with Hawkhurst and Sandhurst. It is not necessary to have such large 3-Member wards. These are a direct consequence of the Council's decision to elect Councillors by thirds.

Cllr Dawlings own preference would be to have all-out elections every 4 years and for the Borough to be divided into single and two member wards which would ensure Borough Councillors were closer to the electorate, and he pressed for this change which was supported by a majority of Councillors, but not the required two thirds majority of the Council.

Cllr Dawlings is concerned about the divide between the town of Tunbridge Wells and the rural areas in the east of the Borough where the ruling Lib Dems are not represented and show little understanding of how Parish Councils work.

Cllr Dawling's focus in Benenden is on support for the Parish Council and especially the Benenden Neighbourhood Development Plan, and has also helped on St George's Church 2020 plans, the Benenden Almshouse Trust, the Gibbon and Buckland Trust and securing KCC owned land for the wildflower meadow to be developed by the Parish Council.

❖ Seán Holden

Cllr Holden has served as a Borough Councillor for Benenden for 16 years but did not stand this year, but remains as County Councillor, and is Chair of the Environment and Transport Committee.

In 2019, 4,000 permits were granted for road closures. This had risen to 12,000 last year, with utility companies abusing their powers to close roads. An inspectorate has been created which will monitor, enforce and fine those not using the system correctly.

New exit and entry systems for Europe has the potential to create traffic issues if not sufficiently staffed.

Work continues to keep lorries off country roads. A 40 tonne lorry has the same impact as 9,600 cars.

Bus services are run by bus companies, not KCC. There remains some government subsidy but this has been reduced and there have been some bus pass increases. A young person's pass has increase from £450 to £550 a year, but remains £120 for low income families.

KCC had defaulted on its obligations regarding unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. This is a national problem but it is not compulsory for other counties to take children and Kent has too many children and not enough places.

Kent's Plan Bee, founded by Cllr Holden, is a pollinator action plan to encourage local communities to improve food sources and general habitat for pollinators. The plan is going strong and it is hoped that a summit will be held this year.

Kent Plan Tree has the ambition to plant a tree for every resident, extending Kent's tree cover with 1.5 million new trees and increasing Kent's average canopy cover to 19%.

6. BENENDEN VILLAGE TRUST – Tom Dawlings

The recreational facilities in Benenden – thriving village hall, well-maintained recreation ground, large and state-of-the-art playground - are provided by the Benenden Village Trust, a registered charity, which plays a central but somewhat unsung role in the life of the village.

The Trust also runs the recreation field and new playground in Iden Green where it owns (but does not run) this Pavilion. It owns St George's Hall, home of the pre-school and St George's Club; and the lands on which sit the Bowls Club and the Iden Green Tennis Club.

Providing this enrichment to village life costs a lot of money and inflation means it's getting ever more expensive. The ageing properties need significant repairs, energy costs have increased and the Trust is facing a very large bill for replacing the Village Hall's old heating system.

The result is that the Trust is facing a cash crunch, and trustees ask for the understanding and support of the village to work to put the Trust's finances back on an even keel.

Benenden owes its recreational assets to generous gifts from a previous resident, Lord Rothermere, in the 1920s. A ceremony to commemorate the 100th anniversary of his gifts will be held later in the year. He also gave funds to support the running of the facilities. For many years those funds were sufficient to balance the books – but no more.

Over the last few years the Trust has been running large deficits on its operations. This cannot carry on if the Trust is to ensure that it continues to provide great recreational facilities for future generations.

On paper, the financial position looks healthier than it is. Lord Rothermere's legacy means the Trust has substantial financial assets. Overwhelmingly these are what is known as "permanent endowment" – which simply means they can't be touched. Only the income they generate can be used and that is now insufficient.

To solve the problem Trustees urgently need to boost BVT's income, whether by new initiatives, donations, volunteering or more intensive use of our assets.

Membership of the Trust is open to all residents of the parish over the age of 18 and is free. Contact the Trust Manager for details on becoming a member. The Members' AGM is to be held on 29th July, 6pm. at the Memorial Hall.

Trustees also welcome anyone with skills that could help the Trust in any way.

The trustees have been spending many hours thrashing out a comprehensive strategy to sustain the charity for future generations.

The Village Hall has seen huge improvements in the running of the building, thanks to the efficiency and creativity of John Betts, the Hall Manager for the past year. The hall, recreation fields and playgrounds remain at the centre of BVT's charitable purpose.

7. **BENENDEN VILLAGE HALL** – Tom Dawlings

The main income for the village hall is from those that hire the venue on a regular basis. Regular hirers account for 76% with other hirers accounting for income of 24%.

Regular hirers include Benenden players, yoga and pilates classes, badminton, baby classes, arts society, dance, exercise and fitness classes, village lunch club, lego club, gong bath, mindfulness & meditation. The hall is also regularly used for a variety of events including fundraisers, meetings, parties, funeral wakes, quizzes and lectures.

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 has undergone a lot of development to provide all the necessary information that potential hirers might need and now 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 are shown on the website and have recently been reviewed to introduce a standard set of hire charges, with discounts available for parish residents and regular hirers.
 - The booking calendar has been developed to show the activities that are taking place at the hall with contact details for further information.
 - The facial recognition system that permits regular hirers access to the building has been greatly developed.
 - A new projector has been purchased for the main hall which can be hired for all bookings and events.
 - New 'blackout' blinds have been purchased for the small hall. This has been positively received by hirers.
 - Improvements have been made to the availability of the Internet / Wi-Fi at the hall.
 - CCTV Cameras situated throughout the building provide security when the hall is not in use and have been relocated to provide better coverage. Additional external cameras have also been purchased and added to the system.
- ❖ **Electrical Work** : A major expense this year has been complying with legal requirements for EICR electrical certification / testing and subsequent remedial work. The hall now has a satisfactory rating.
- ❖ **Parking** : 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 children or attend events at the primary school. Unfortunately parents continue to park inconsiderately or take up spaces that prevent hirers and staff from being able to park at the hall. The car park is prone to multiple potholes which should not be an issue for the amount of use the car park gets from persons attending the hall.
- ❖ **Football** : Discussions are currently ongoing for a local football team to have 1-2 football matches on the recreation field and pay to hire the field with the changing rooms at the hall.

8. **VILLAGE MAGAZINE** – Ruth Clark

The Magazine continues to thrive, with thanks to the whole team - Ruth Clark, Peter Thomas, Camilla Macdonald, Paul Leek and Charles Trollope. And the distributors, led by Dick and Marilyn Hill, who deliver throughout the village in all weathers.

While there were no Best Editor and 2nd Best Magazine nationwide awards this year, the Magazine was still rated 9th best from a field of around 450.

Finances are robust and healthy supported by a loyal core of some 60 or 70 advertisers throughout the year, supplemented by a number of occasional and one-off promotional entries.

A blend of local businesses, clubs and larger enterprises contributes much to the look and feel of the magazine, as well as providing the financial support.

The Magazine features many adverts to promote parish events and projects. The Benenden and Iden Green Directory (included in the March edition) lists local services, organisations, clubs etc, sponsored by Mr Noah's Nursery School.

Advertising income covers production expenses and has allowed the Magazine to fund a modest social event to recognise the contribution of the many volunteers who ensure that the magazine lands promptly on doormats each month. January's annual social gathering for contributors and helpers was very well attended and showed both the commitment of those represented within the Magazine pages and, the high regard in which the magazine is now held.

Reserves comprise working capital, contingency for unexpected costs, and the funding of expenses, together with hardware and software required by the editorial team. The Magazine was once again able to return £1,000 to St George's PCC.

9. **BENENDEN BONFIRE SOCIETY** - Peter Thomas reported on behalf of Gary Bell :

The event on 4 November last year will be remembered for the weather. With multiple weather warnings in place for the week leading up to the event and storm Ciaran promising biblical rainfall and up to 80 mph winds, the Committee still decided to go ahead with the village bonfire and fireworks.

Having made the decision, the bonfire needed to be built, fencing, marquee and gazebos erected, and food prepared. Fortunately, storm Ciaran did not reek its havoc in Benenden, and on the Friday we had blue skies and sunshine enabling a fair amount of the set-up to be completed. It was just as well, because Saturday brought torrential rain and the once firm ground became like a swamp in places.

The Committee battled on in the rain, hearing that Sandhurst had cancelled and ticket sales at the shop were virtually non-existent, but on-line sales were holding up.

Throughout the day the spirit, dedication and willingness of volunteers made the event possible. When the gates opened at 5.30pm a queue had formed and the villagers of Benenden began to turnout in their 100's.

While the rain had continued unabated all day, at 6.15pm as the LED planes prepared to launch and the bonfire about to be lit, the rain finally stopped.

There were some issues with taking card payments. This was despite testing mobile data connectivity and signal strength. Unfortunately, once a large crowd gathers, mobile signal latency deteriorates significantly. The Committee has a new satellite Wi-Fi solution.

Special thanks was given to Grant Matthews for leading the event for the past 11 years. Thanks too was given to the committee and volunteers and to the event sponsors, Tate Fencing, Jubilee Hire, Wizard Fireworks, Benenden Hospital, Mark and Lucy at the Bull, to Benenden School for allowing us to use the field and Benenden Primary School for the Guy.

While costs were higher last year, as in previous years the Committee was able to distribute just over £2,000 of profits from the event to local groups. This year funds were distributed to Merry and Bright (£50), Benenden Cricket Club (£500), Benenden Pre School (£552) and we are in the process of providing funds to Sissinghurst Scout groups (£1,000).

The Benenden Fireworks and Bonfire will be on Saturday 2 November this year and once again we will be in the field at Benenden School.

10. **BENENDEN COMMUNITY SHOP** – Grant Matthews

Since the Shop was launched in 2015 it has been part of the community, giving to lots of local causes and remaining open throughout the pandemic. During the current economic climate the patronage of the village has been very important.

Mel was employed as the Shop Manager since it opened, and when she left the Committee decided that the position would be more effectively split into 2 roles. Unfortunately this has not yet worked out and Mel is currently employed on a temporary basis until this is resolved.

The process of training staff to operate the Post Office facility is lengthy, complicated and difficult to organise.

The period of change which has been unsettling and the Committee apologies for the recent disruption but is doing its utmost to rectify the situation and is confident that the Shop will soon be providing the best service which it can.

11. **BENENDEN ALLOTMENT ASSOCIATION** – Gill Stewart

Benenden's Allotment Association was formed in October 2023, following the donation of a small field off Walkhurst Road by the late Pat Thoburn. The land was gifted as an allotment site for residents of Benenden and Iden Green.

Starting a new allotment garden has involved considerable work. BAA has worked with BPC to secure access to the site, and enable BAA to start using the site for allotments. The site has been mown, hedges trimmed, plots marked out and advertised to interested residents. A proper Association has been formed and the National Allotment Association joined for help and advice.

There are 22 plots, ranging from full sized plots of 250m² to starter plots from 75m². At present all but 2 plots are occupied. Raised beds, bean-poles, compost, sheds, fruit cages, polytunnels flowers, shrubs and vegetables can be spotted in the field.

The current biggest challenge is securing mains water. A grant of £500 has been received from Sean Holden on behalf of KCC, and a further £1,900 from Kent Community Foundation secured. Mains water will cost around £1,400, plus around £400 to install standpipes across the site. Any remaining funds should cover repairs to the fencing at the bottom of the site.

BAA will also be looking forward to organising social events to fund-raise, to raise awareness of the allotments, and to share skills, knowledge and produce.

If anyone is interested in helping or taking over a plot email allotments@benendenparishcouncil.org

12. **BENENDEN GARDENING CLUB** – Ron Froud

The Club was formed early last year and has been very successful with a large number of members.

There has been a full programme of events including talks, visits, plant swaps and sales, competitions for best flowers and vegetables, with raffles and refreshments.

BGC will have a stall at the Village Summer Fete.

Events are open to Club members and non-members.

BGC is grateful to Benenden Hospital and use of the Quinlan Centre.

13. **IDEN GREEN PAVILION** – Bill Lewis

The Iden Green Pavilion Trust is a registered charity.

There are 8 Trustees who also form the Management Committee, which meets 4 times a year. The Trustees represent: Young People, Senior Citizens, the Benenden Village Trust, the Iden Green Congregational church and the local residents.

The trustees manage the building, the finances, the bookings and minor maintenance work voluntarily and without pay, which helps to keep booking charges at a low cost to hirers.

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 thereoffacilities for all forms of recreation and other leisure-time occupation..... with the objective of improving the conditions of life for the said inhabitants."

At last year's Assembly, bookings were reported as reasonably healthy though there was scope for greater use of the Pavilion. COVID lockdowns had had a notable impact on all village halls and many reported a drop in usage by clubs and societies following the crisis.

During the last year there has been increased use of the building for a wider variety of hirers.

In broad terms, the Pavilion does a little better than break-even on hirings and expenditure. Reserves built up over the last 30 years, together with government grants paid during the closures brought about by the pandemic, have enabled the Trust to keep the building in excellent condition. Fund-raising events such as the annual Pavilion Quiz night and the summer Jazz & Blues, designed to bring the villagers together for social interaction and fun provide useful additional revenue. Last summer's Jazz & Blues, jointly run with BPC, raised over £2000 for the Iden Green Well appeal.

The end of year accounts showed a balance of £44,491.70, a healthy financial position.

Trustees would welcome new blood to bring fresh ideas and continuity to the team.

14. **GIBBON AND BUCKLAND** – Simon Brown

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

In 2023, the Charity gave the following: - grants each of £700 to applicants, 20 in tertiary education and 3 towards training;- £2,000 towards the School's library project;- the customary bible to each of the 30 school leavers (total cost £248.40).

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).

Current trustees are Simon Brown, David Harmsworth, David Barnes, Mary Cruse, Tony Fullwood, Julie Lewis and Janet Beattie. Rowena Hagell has been employed as the Charity's Clerk, after years of committed work in the role by David Harmsworth.

The main asset is the Gibbon School House, at the bottom of Benenden Green. KCC has a full repairing and insuring lease of the whole building, and is currently paying a rent of £28,500 pa. Part of the ground floor is vacant, following the School's move in 2019, and the rest is occupied by Dawne Bailey, the widow of a former Headmaster, under a sub-tenancy granted by KCC in 1974.

Following sustained pressure by the Trust on KCC for a number of years, major repair and maintenance work to the listed building commenced in March. It is scheduled to continue until the summer. All the costs, including fees, are being met by KCC.

The Lease comes to an end on 30 September 2024. The Trust has instructed Lambert & Foster to establish KCC's intentions from that date and, if appropriate, to negotiate the terms of a further lease. The property can only be returned to the Trust with full vacant possession. The Trust has established a sinking fund intended to cover future expenses which, as owners, it will inevitably face at some point in the future.

15. **BENENDEN ALMSHOUSES CHARITIES** – Robin Dalton-Holmes

Because there was a merger of 2 village charities about 60 years ago the almshouse trust title is a bit misleading and there are not several charities.

The Trust realised several years ago that the time had come to modernise our existing facilities 3 dwellings in Thorne cottages in Coldharbour Lane, Iden Green and 6 small flats at Feoffee's in Walkhurst Road. The charities emerged from the workhouse system which was historically funded by the owner of the Hemsted Estate their purpose was never financially endowed.

The only way in which funds could be raised to modernise the existing properties was to vacate them and raise money by sale of some of the 8 acres which are let under a grazing agreement for a very small annual amount. But in the funding of low-cost housing trustees would have been obligated to borrow substantial sums beyond their means to temporarily house existing residents.

Instead after extended design and planning negotiations detailed planning consent was achieved with TWBC 3 years ago for 12 modern almshouse units for Benenden connected applicants, with 4 single flats, 4 double flats and 4 family houses funded by an outline project for the builder of the almshouses to purchase from the Trust sufficient land to develop additionally 13 properties for sale on the commercial market.

The delay, in part due to Covid and also the Charity Commission public benefit regulations, led to opening negotiations with Homes England towards a major governmental grant resulting in professional fees for architects, lawyers, advisers and relevant specialist officers for ecology, protection of wildlife, and satisfying Section 106 requirements and the very considerable costs of satisfying ecology, tree planting, etc has at this stage reduced the Trust's limited financial resources. The special demands of the TWBC in conforming with the development plans put forward by the village for 4 sites have all been challenging in the early days but the objectives are now agreed in principle.

The Trust noted that the original developer appointed became increasingly unwilling to progress positively and the Trust appointed a second firm which is local and unusual in employing a team of technical staff advisers and a comprehensive large group of building tradesmen in house who are reaching the end of a local project. They have been most co-operative and have successfully progressed a proper planning application for developing the land which they are buying from the Trust for commercial sale and have made sensible proposals to modify some of the design features for the new almshouses reducing the development costs. The understanding is that the almshouses take absolute priority for completion before the commercial development proceeds.

These fresh late involvements stretched the time prior to work on site but this helped to formalise a sound bid emphasising to Homes England who administer grant funding for the government that the existing long-term registration as cost housing managers is already in place and that the Trust is able to proceed without delay and make an early bid for financial assistance as the Trust satisfies their statutory conditions. The Trust's registration as low-cost housing developers is protected and enhanced by the fact that the almshouse sector is exempt from the right of residents to buy.

This should lead to having adequate liquidity to both build 12 properties from scratch and plan for temporary vacation of our existing property for modernisation and raising our capacity from 9 to 22 properties of varying sizes all of which will remain low cost in perpetuity with sufficient bedrooms for 30 occupants. It is hoped that the speed of development will be increased from September.

16. **BENENDEN PLAYERS** – Ruth Clark

The Players entertain the village, friends and families with regular winter shows, and occasional one-off reviews / talent shows. Last year's main event was "Oz: A Panto" running over 4 performances in January 2024. With raised seating in the Village Hall to maximise the capacity there were around 120 attendees at each show.

Each panto means weeks of designing and creating costumes and sets, arranging music and sound effects, planning the stage lighting, promotion, recruiting 'volunteers' to help with the bar, front of house etc. And, of course rehearsing the script, the songs, and the moves. Last year there were around 20 adults and children in the show, with a further 25 helpers during rehearsals and over performance week itself. The Players are grateful to all the friends and family members to provide support and help.

Participating with the Players also provides opportunities to learn new skills and work with other members of the community. For junior participants the show provides a chance to build confidence, and technical skills: a number of recent junior Players have gone on to study drama / stage lighting.

It costs around £6K 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 a new defibrillator 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 core technical areas of sound and lighting.

This year a Mid-Winter Review is planned in January, which will be smaller in scale from the usual panto. But it will be a chance to showcase some of the talent in the village and to reprise some of the 'hits' from recent shows. Anyone able to help, particularly the technically minded, or keen to join in should email enquiry@benendenplayers.co.uk.