

Firebrand
High Street
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The Editor
Rye and Battle Observer
Woods House
Telford Road
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Sir,

Proposal for a separate Parish of Winchelsea

I was amused to read the letter in last week's Observer from Mr Chetwood. Having accused me of 'scraping the bottom of the barrel' in referring to the establishment of Icklesham Parish in 1886, Mr Chetwood proceeded to wind the clock back to 1288. Clearly, a deep barrel!

Unfortunately, while peering into the barrel, Mr Chetwood appears to have missed the point. When Icklesham Parish was set up, it was just two small villages and there may have been some logic in combining them into one parish. However, the parish now has four sizeable settlements and there is no longer any logic in the combination.

Mr Chetwood is not correct to say that the issue is about Winchelsea being somehow 'different'. That sort of attitude earned the Town a bad name for snobbery in the past. The proposal on the table is that each ward of Icklesham Parish is so different that Icklesham Parish Council cannot adequately tackle each ward's particular problems. Each ward is large enough to be a parish and each ward conforms to the Local Government Commission definition of a parish as "a small, distinctive and recognisable community of interest with its own sense of identity", but the current Icklesham Parish does not.

Mr Chetwood's suggestion that day-to-day links between the four wards would be severed by creating separate civil parishes is contradicted by the evidence. None of the communities in Icklesham Parish is isolated from Rye, Pett, Guestling or Udimore because they fall into different parishes. Indeed, one of the clubs cited by Mr Chetwood is a particularly good example. Winchelsea Cricket Club is effectively a Rye Sunday side. No cross-parish issues there then!

As for financial issues, Mr Chetwood is woefully uninformed. The contribution of Icklesham Parish Council to the Little Shop has been £10. The Council was eventually persuaded to buy one share some two years after the shop was re-opened (Mr Chetwood may be unclear on this given that he only became a shareholder in the Little Shop four years after it re-opened). In the meantime, residents --- with absolutely no help from the Council --- raised almost £40,000. It should also be noted that Icklesham Parish Council did not put a penny into Rye Harbour Stores and did nothing to try to rescue Icklesham's last shop and post office.

As for Winchelsea Post Office, residents have raised over £10,000, whereas Icklesham Parish Council made a grant of £2,220 only after much delay. For the Winchelsea Community Office, residents raised £30,000, whereas the Parish Council managed £1,000 after even more delay.

In fact, residents of Winchelsea have, in the last four years or so, raised more than £100,000 in support of projects in the Town, considerably more than the annual capital budget of Icklesham Parish for all four wards. In other words, virtually all major projects in Winchelsea have been overwhelmingly financed independently of the Parish Council.

Mr Chetwood needs to check the arithmetic. The latest shadow budget produced by the Parish of Winchelsea Action Group shows that from income of £16,000 (mainly, Winchelsea's share of the Icklesham precept), Winchelsea Parish Council would have regular current expenditures --- including the cost of a clerk, streetlighting and the hire of halls --- of about £9,000. This would leave some £7,000 a year for capital projects; more or less what has been spent on Winchelsea on average over the last three years and rather more than the longer-term average (but much, much less than has been raised by residents from external grants). Even the Parish Council's Working Group concluded that separate parishes would be financially viable.

If Mr Chetwood is really concerned about parish council costs, he should ask why the precept levied by Icklesham Parish Council has increased by 267% over the last two years. He would discover that this was largely to pay for the administrative costs of the unwieldy parish (including the cost of two parish clerks).

The one issue that has not been raised by Mr Chetwood is local democracy. Separate parishes are desperately needed to revive interest in local government at the level of the parish council so that people can identify with their parish.

However, I am pleased to note that Mr Chetwood and I agree on the happy separation of the roles of the Parish Council and Corporation. This red herring has in the past often confused discussions about a Winchelsea Parish Council.

I am flattered that Mr Chetwood should attribute the momentum behind the proposal for separate parishes to me alone. He may be interested to know that a petition in support of the proposal has already been signed by the majority of electors in Winchelsea.

Yours faithfully

Richard Comotto
Parish Councillor for Winchelsea