

## REVIEW OF PARISH BOUNDARIES --- WINCHELSEA

- 1 **The historical rationale for Icklesham Parish no longer holds true.** In 1886, when Icklesham Parish was formed, it was composed of the fairly similar sized villages of Winchelsea and Icklesham. Winchelsea Beach did not exist (and was part of Pett) and Rye Harbour was a tiny fishing hamlet, which was included in Icklesham Parish because it had been within the ancient liberty of the Ancient Town of Winchelsea and was separated by the River Rother from its closest neighbour, which is Rye. Since then, the character of the Parish has changed completely. Winchelsea Beach was transferred from Pett in 1952 and the wards of Icklesham, Rye Harbour and Winchelsea Beach have grown rapidly. There are now four sizeable settlements. All four settlements are large enough to be parishes in their own right. And each of them is home to a community with very different identities and interests. Icklesham Parish has become an administrative relict of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and is too unwieldy to provide effective and convenient local community leadership in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.
- 2 **The current Parish does not meet the criterion set out by the Local Government Commission that “a Parish should reflect a small, distinctive and recognisable community of interest with its own sense of identity”.** Icklesham Parish is unusually large and diverse. Geographically, it is among the largest parishes. Two of the wards, Icklesham and Rye Harbour, are at some considerable distance from the other wards and do not share a boundary with each other. All four wards are separated from each other by tracts of open countryside.
  - The Town of **Winchelsea** has evolved from a unique, planned historic settlement. It is a Conservation Area. Many buildings and large areas of land within the Town are Scheduled Ancient Monuments. It is part of the High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (which the wards of Winchelsea Beach and Rye Harbour are not) and is identified by the AONB Management Plan as being of international importance (p19). Winchelsea also has a demographic profile distinct from other wards: an older population (the Town Plan estimates that 43% are retired) and a larger percentage of second home-owners (estimated at 32%).
  - **Winchelsea Beach** is a relatively recent ribbon development that has become a dormitory for Rye and Hastings. A vital contribution to its sustainability as a community is made by the tourism generated by the beach and the large caravan sites at the edge of the village. Thus, holiday-makers staying in caravans or coming into the village to visit the beach help sustain facilities like the shop and post office, which would otherwise almost certainly have closed.
  - **Icklesham** is a large village still connected to local agriculture but (like Winchelsea Beach) is increasingly a dormitory for Rye and Hastings. Like Rye Harbour, it is at some distance from the other wards. The village is basically a linear settlement on one side of the A259(T). The lack of a physical ‘heart’ to the village has contributed to the social problems typical of rural communities: declining sense of community, loss of facilities like shops and post office, the threat to the few remaining community facilities like the village hall and the alienation of newcomers, particularly the young.
  - **Rye Harbour** is an officially-designated area of deprivation. It has been scarred by the decline of fishing and local heavy industries, and is targeted for regeneration. It is very remote from the other wards and increasingly looks towards Rye for leadership. Thus, the regeneration of Rye Harbour is being managed by the Rye Partnership. To reach Rye Harbour you have to travel through the outskirts of Rye and, if the proposed marina development goes ahead, Rye Harbour will be physically contiguous with Rye. Like Icklesham, it suffers from a serious youth problem.

It can be seen therefore that Icklesham Parish is an artificial conglomeration of four distinct communities.

3 **Winchelsea precisely matches the Local Government Commission criterion that “a Parish should reflect a small, distinctive and recognisable community of interest with its own sense of identity”.** Indeed, every ward individually matches this criterion. Winchelsea is:

- **Small** --- Winchelsea has some 270 houses, 600 residents and 410 voters. It is however not too small to qualify as a viable parish: there are many smaller parishes and Winchelsea has more than the minimum of 200 residents needed for a parish.
- **Distinctive and recognisable** ---
  - physically, Winchelsea is the remnant of a ‘bastide’ town standing alone on top of a hill surrounded by marsh and uniquely preserves the layout of the medieval town (features highlighted by the AONB Management Plan as being of international importance); it is famous for its cellars (matched only by Southampton) and contains eight of the 36 ancient monuments in Rother, some of which --- the Strand Gate and Church --- are nationally recognised heritage icons.
  - socially, Winchelsea looks to itself, being an Ancient Town within the Cinque Port Confederation, with its own Mayor and Corporation, and a history of over 700 years; it has a church with an active congregation and over 20 successful clubs and societies; more recently, the community has, by its own efforts, saved its shop and post office, opened a community office, and started a Town Plan.
- **Own sense of identity** --- no resident of Winchelsea --- nor any resident of Winchelsea Beach or Rye Harbour --- would ever say they lived in Icklesham. In Winchelsea, there is special pride in the history of the Town and a strong sense of awareness of the privilege of living in such a beautiful place.

4 **The size of the Parish and the diversity of its four wards mean that Icklesham Parish Council finds it very difficult to focus on issues of special importance to individual wards.** Icklesham Parish Councillors naturally tend to focus on issues in their own ward, if only because they are in a better position to understand what is going on in their own community and are less familiar with other wards, given the geographic separation. This means that, when an issue particular to one ward comes to the Council, Councillors from other wards tend not to speak. The problem is evident in the fact that the Parish Council has failed to discuss any of the key issues affecting individual wards:

- In the case of Rye Harbour, Icklesham Parish Council has never discussed the key issue of regeneration or the proposed marina development. It was not involved in the re-opening of the village shop in Rye Harbour (this was done instead by the Rye Partnership). It has not discussed the problems of vandalism and criminal damage, even when these problems have threatened to close a vital amenity like the village shop.
- In the case of Icklesham, Icklesham Parish Council has not discussed or taken action on the loss of vital services such as shops and the post office, the threat to the village hall or the vandalism endemic in that village.
- In the case of Winchelsea Beach, Icklesham Parish Council has not discussed problems of vandalism and criminal damage. It has not got involved in Emergency Planning, despite the village being in a high-risk flood area.
- In the case of Winchelsea, Icklesham Parish Council did not wish to get involved in community efforts to re-open the shop, and more recently the sub-post office and Community Office. And then there is conservation, probably the key issue in Winchelsea: it has never been discussed. Nor has the Council been willing to tackle the issue of traffic, despite this being repeatedly identified as the main problem affecting the Town.

These points are not criticisms of the Council or Councillors, but of the unwieldy size and unduly diverse nature of the Parish, which makes the Parish Council ineffective. The problem is intrinsic.

- 5 **Winchelsea has unique historic and archaeological importance which Icklesham Parish Council is not helping to maintain, enhance or promote.** The unique character of Winchelsea has been highlighted already. Conservation and heritage are key issues in the Town --- but not in any of the other wards of Icklesham Parish. Icklesham Parish Council is too large to be able to focus on the special needs of any ward, let alone those of Winchelsea. It has completely ignored conservation and heritage issues. It has declined to get involved in the creation of a sustainable visitor management strategy to balance the need of the local economy for tourism against the need to conserve the historic character of the Town and the character of its landscape. Conservation issues, which so concern Winchelsea, are seen as something of a 'luxury' to other wards struggling with regeneration, youth problems and flood risk. Winchelsea needs its own Parish Council to preserve its heritage.
- 6 **The difficulty which Icklesham Parish Council has in focusing on issues of special importance to individual wards is evident in the frequent formation of associations or action groups in the wards to fill the leadership gap left by the Council.** Given the lack of focus in Icklesham Parish Council, issues of any importance to individual wards tend to be handled outside the Council by residents' groups, often formed especially for the purpose, and sometimes in partnership with external agencies which are contacted directly rather than through the Parish Council. The threat of the A259(T) bypass was tackled by residents' associations in Winchelsea and Icklesham. Youth provision in Icklesham is being addressed by parents and supported by Lottery funds. The shop and post office in Winchelsea were re-opened by residents forming industrial and provident societies in co-operation with the Countryside Agency. The village shop in Rye Harbour was re-opened by the Rye Partnership. A sustainable visitor strategy for the area is being developed by a forum of local businesses in co-operation with Tourism South East and Action in Rural Sussex. Traffic problems in Winchelsea and Winchelsea Beach are being tackled by residents' groups (an ad hoc action group in Winchelsea and the Community Association in Winchelsea Beach). The Community Office in Winchelsea was opened by residents. The threat of an Orange mobile phone mast in Winchelsea was fought by a residents' action group. Attempts to build a public tennis court in the parish (which currently lacks one despite its size) are being organized by a group of residents. Successful efforts to reduce the clutter of street furniture in Winchelsea (some 220 signs at the peak) have been led by a residents' action group. And so on. In effect, when issues arise of special importance, each community has produced local substitutes for the Parish Council. This demonstrates the political irrelevance of Icklesham Parish Council and the de facto separation of the four wards. It is of particular note that none of the ward associations and action groups link the different wards.
- 7 **The likely growth in the size of other wards means that Winchelsea will diminish in relative importance within Icklesham Parish and its representation will become nugatory.** There are tight planning constraints on development in and around Winchelsea, whereas government plans for increased housing in the South East will almost certainly fuel the continued expansion of Icklesham, Winchelsea Beach and Rye Harbour. Winchelsea will lose seats on the Parish Council (it has already lost one of its original four) or other wards will gain extra seats. At some point, Winchelsea's representation will become so small as to be meaningless. Interest in local democracy within the Town will dwindle away.
- 8 **The size and diversity of Icklesham Parish undermines local democracy by preventing identification with the Parish and making Parish Council meetings inconvenient.** Given that there are four wards in Icklesham Parish, each ward has only a minor voice and this contributes to the feeling that Icklesham Parish Council is not relevant to local issues. The conglomeration of four wards also means that residents do not therefore regard Icklesham Parish Council as 'their own'. This lack of identification with Icklesham Parish is compounded by the rotation of Council meetings between the four wards, which means that residents only have the opportunity to attend as few as one or two Council meetings a year in their own ward. It is inconvenient for residents to have to travel up to three or four miles on a regular basis to attend Parish Council meetings. In addition, because the Council prefers to employ a Clerk who does not live in the Parish (reflecting fear of potential jealousies between wards), residents do not know or have easy contact with the Clerk. The lack of a local presence also

means that Council minutes and other documents are not on public display in any ward (except Winchelsea, where copies are deposited in the Community Office) and residents must travel to St Leonards to the Clerk's home to inspect the annual accounts, further disconnecting the Council from residents. The gulf between residents and Icklesham Parish Council is evident in the low public attendance at Council meetings (other than people angry with the something that the Council has done) and the lack of interest in standing for election to the Parish Council (other than in the ward of Winchelsea). Winchelsea Parish Council would be a local institution with which residents could readily identify. All Councillors and the Clerk, as well as Council meetings, would be easily accessible and convenient. It is also highly likely that the act of creation of a Parish Council for Winchelsea would of itself strengthen interest in local democracy in Winchelsea (just look at the unprecedented response to the proposal for a separate Parish Council). On the other hand, if Winchelsea remains a diminishing limb of Icklesham Parish, frustration that our three elected representatives are continually being outvoted by unelected, co-opted representatives from the other wards is likely to lead to an unwelcome return to uncontested elections in Winchelsea.

- 9 **Winchelsea would be a vibrant and ambitious Parish.** Councillors from Winchelsea have been keen for Icklesham Parish Council to become a Quality Parish Council, but the Council has delayed consideration of becoming a QPC until 2007. Winchelsea Parish Council would seek to become a QPC as soon as possible. The ambition is there. Winchelsea has already taken the initiative of starting a Town Plan (the other wards of Icklesham Parish were not interested). Winchelsea has also demonstrated its drive by re-opening its shop and post office and opening the Community Office. Winchelsea Parish Council would also be more active as it would naturally be more transparent than Icklesham Parish Council as Councillors would no longer be able to hide behind the decisions of Councillors from other wards. In addition, the creation of a Parish would raise expectations that things would get done, providing a necessary spur to the new Parish Council.
- 10 **A separate Parish Council for Winchelsea is financially viable.** Doubts have been expressed about the financial viability of a separate Winchelsea Parish Council. However:
- This argument ignores the happy financial existence of many smaller Parish Councils around the country.
  - None of the critics of the proposal for a Winchelsea Parish Council has actually produced any financial analysis. In contrast, supporters of the proposal published a shadow budget for Winchelsea in 2000 and presented and answered questions on an updated shadow budget at the public meeting in Winchelsea on 29<sup>th</sup> November 2004 (based on the draft budget prepared by Icklesham Parish Council on 22<sup>nd</sup> November 2004 and using tax base data from Rother District Council). Both shadow budgets demonstrated, not only that a separate parish of Winchelsea would be viable, but that it would be quite comfortably so.
  - The shadow draft budget has been updated recently with the help of the former Chair of the Parish Council Finance Committee (Councillor Turner) and is attached. It shows that unavoidable current expenditures by a Winchelsea Parish Council in 2006/07 would amount to £7,825. If the level of total expenditure budgeted for 2005/06 by Icklesham Parish Council that can be attributed to Winchelsea --- estimated at £18,410 using Rother District Council's estimated population data for Winchelsea (20.7% of the total parish population) to share overheads --- was maintained by a Winchelsea Parish Council, this would leave £10,585 for capital expenditures. This is far more than Winchelsea would require: at least twice the normal level of capital expenditure. In other words, Winchelsea could afford to cut its precept drastically and still maintain the current of services. A Winchelsea Parish Council would therefore be financially viable.
  - It is often argued that, being larger, Icklesham Parish Council has more money to spend on **big projects** than would the smaller Winchelsea Parish Council. However, consider the facts. Each ward gets, on average, its per capita share of funds. To illustrate what this means, assume that the capital budget for Icklesham Parish Council is £20,000 a year and, for simplicity, assume that each ward is of equal size. As part of Icklesham Parish, Winchelsea would get on average one £20,000 project every four years. As a

separate parish, with a capital budget of only £5,000 a year, Winchelsea would have to save up for four years for the same project. So, the result is the same!

- The need to administer four communities in Icklesham Parish, to monitor Council property in four wards, to co-ordinate four groups of Councillors and to communicate with four groups of residents means the quadruplication of administrative expenses. The size of Icklesham Parish also means that more meetings are necessary to deal with four wards. Most of the administrative overheads of Winchelsea Parish Council would be proportionately smaller. Winchelsea Parish Council would also not need to pay travel expenses as the preference in Winchelsea is for a local Clerk (for which there are several candidates).

- 11 **Would there be enough candidates for a Winchelsea Parish Council?** The minimum number of Councillors needed for Winchelsea Parish Council is just five, but it is likely that the requirement would be seven. This would present no problem for Winchelsea, particularly in the aftermath of the creation of a separate Parish. Winchelsea was able to field five candidates for just three seats in the 1999 Parish Council election (indeed, it was the only ward in Icklesham Parish to run a contested election) and would have produced four candidates in a contested election for three seats in 2003 if one of them had not been late with his papers. Three candidates stood for co-option last year when an elected Winchelsea Councillor resigned due to ill health. In addition, it is worth noting that, because of the overcrowded hustings in Winchelsea, two residents of the Town stood for seats in other wards (Icklesham and Rye Harbour). Moreover, nine residents have already indicated that they would stand for election to a separate Parish Council for Winchelsea and that number can be expected to increase if a separate Parish Council becomes a reality. Other wards of Icklesham Parish have not had contested elections for many years (the exception being Rye Harbour in 2004, when a Winchelsea resident stood against two Rye Harbour residents for two seats). On the other hand, if Winchelsea remains a minor and possibly diminishing limb of Icklesham Parish, resentment will grow when elected representatives from the Town are outvoted by unelected representatives from the other wards.
- 12 **Wouldn't a separate Parish Council undermine the Corporation of Winchelsea?** How could Winchelsea Parish Council pose any sort of threat to the Winchelsea Corporation? The latter is a charity under an Act of Parliament and would be completely independent of Winchelsea Parish Council, just as it is independent of Icklesham Parish Council. The Corporation would continue to have its ceremonial and social roles. There is no overlap. Indeed, in a recent publication, the Corporation was at pains to emphasise that it does not have a role in local government. It is simply wrongheaded to suggest that the two bodies would in any way conflict: in practice, many individuals who are members of Winchelsea Corporation, by virtue of being active citizens of the Town, would probably seek election to Winchelsea Parish Council. And Winchelsea is also small enough to allow problems of overlap --- if they were to occur --- to be resolved quickly and informally. However, it would anyway be wrong to allow concern about the status of the Winchelsea Corporation (described by its own Clerk as a 'club of 13 private gentlemen') to obstruct the more effective democratic representation of the people of the Town. The Corporation would not wish to be used as an obstacle to more democratic representation. Indeed, if such an excuse were used to block the creation of Winchelsea Parish, it could be harmful to the standing of the Corporation in the Town.
- 13 **Wouldn't a Winchelsea Parish Council confuse residents about the structure of local government?** Trevor Elliott put forward this argument in 2000. He underrates the awareness of the residents of Winchelsea about their own Town: no-one here is under any illusion that Winchelsea Corporation is part of local government. There is far more confusion about the relative roles of the District and County Council. Moreover, many outsiders are confused by the fact that Winchelsea is part of Icklesham Parish and not a parish in its own right. The problem, if it exists, can also be handled by education.

- 14     **Shouldn't the other wards have a say in the issue?** This is a dishonest proposal. It is simply aimed at stopping the residents of Winchelsea from controlling their own affairs.
- The idea would be a highly unusual way of handling an issue of devolution or self-determination (eg England did not have a say over Welsh or Scottish devolution). It would be interesting if someone could quote a precedent.
  - The Local Government Commission's guidelines state that, when considering an application for parishing, "the feeling of the local community and the wishes of local inhabitants are the primary considerations". The scope of 'local community' is implied in the previous sentence, which states that "a Parish should reflect a small, distinctive and recognisable community of interest with its own sense of identity". In other words, the wishes of those seeking recognition as a community of interest in its own right are paramount. It would be improper to seek to expand the definition of "community" and "local" to include other wards which together do not constitute a 'community of interest'.
- A referendum should be held to allow each ward in Icklesham Parish to decide its own future, but should not allow one ward to be held captive by the others.
- 15     **Elections would be too expensive.** This is a disgraceful argument to make in a democracy. However, if the District Council is that stretched financially, a number of Winchelsea residents would be quite prepared to contribute to the cost of a referendum in Winchelsea.