

The Baldock Society

Summary notes from members' meeting held on
Thursday 21st August, 8pm at Baldock Community Centre.



THE BALDOCK SOCIETY

1. Committee members

Present: Chris Gomm (CG) (Chairman), Janet Hammond (JH), Lee Butler (LB), Arthur Thame (AT), Eileen Hailey (EH), Andrew Bamber (AB)

Apologies: John White, James Gomm,

2. Altered meeting

CG opened the meeting with an apology from both the Committee and Baldock's Councillors. The Councillors had been due to attend, to address issues from members. They were unfortunately forced to withdraw because they needed to attend a planning committee session. Some prominent planning applications were to be discussed, including the proposed adult gaming centre on the High Street, and it was important that they attended.

3. Website demonstration

LB demonstrated all sections of the Society's website - www.baldocksociety.org.uk - including the contact us, town monitoring form and planning responses features. He explained that the website was effectively a catalogue of all of the Society's activities and that members could find out more about what the Committee does – especially in terms of monitoring and commenting on planning and matters affecting Baldock.

Whilst only a quarter of those present confirmed they had internet access, none had looked at the website. In response, one member kindly asked why it had taken so long to demonstrate the website, because if he had known what was on offer, he would have looked far sooner!

LB and CG reminded that Baldock library offered free internet access and that members without their own computers could view it there.

LB stated that some information is delivered to members via periodic newsletters but these could obviously not contain the volume of information that can be posted online. LB conceded that time constraints meant that the Committee was not able to publish as many newsletters as they would like. At this point, CG asked if any members would consider joining the Committee, which would be able to do more if it had more assistance.

4. Committee activities

LB's demonstration of the website led onto a demonstration by CG of committee activities. In particular, CG displayed the kind of plans and documents that the committee look at during their meetings, to which they respond on behalf of members.

CG noted that The Baldock Society was held in high regard by the planning department at NHDC, which regularly refers to the Society's comments when considering planning applications. In other words, the role of the Society had an impact on planning decisions made for Baldock.

With regard to one planning matter, CG noted there had been an enquiry from NHDC about whether there was any history or value to the former bus shelter just outside Baldock Community Centre. It was due to be removed as part of the Baldock Town Centre Enhancement scheme. CG asked if members had any information about its history but none was known.

CG asked members if they thought it should be kept. The members present thought it should and CG stated that The Baldock Society would write to NHDC to this effect.

ACTION – Committee

5. Members' Questions and answers

The remainder of the meeting was taken up by questions and comments from the members, put to the Committee. Key points are presented here.

5.1 There was an impression that of Baldock was a big car park.

- *CG responded that he understood time limited parking will be brought in after the enhancement is complete.*

5.2 There were many concerns about the appearance of the enhancement so far, including the tarmac pavements.

- *CG stated that the tarmac was only a base onto which resin bound gravel will be applied all at once. CG asked members to be patient and realise that the enhancement has not finished.*

5.3 There were concerns that the public had not been listened to with regard to the enhancement.

- *In response, CG disagreed – he had attended several enhancement meetings etc and felt that comments had been taken on board. He noted that it was not possible to please everybody and that parking (a major concern for members) will always be an issue in Baldock.*

CG stated that The Baldock Society is going to try and get the developers and NHDC in to a meeting after the enhancement has finished.

5.4 What is the point of the traffic lights at Knights Templar? There were concerns about increased journey times.

- *CG stated that this had been put in to stop Baldock being used as a Letchworth to Royston 'rat run'. People wanting to go to Royston should be using the bypass. If people choose to still go through Baldock (extra distance on bypass noted), then that is their choice and they will have to wait at the lights.*

5.5 Following on from that, there was criticism of traffic issues at the Letchworth Gate roundabout.

- *CG understood the concern but thought it was not a direct problem for Baldock itself.*

5.6 Concerns were raised over shop front standards – especially in the conservation area. In addition, a member asked if anything could be done legally with regard to closed shops, to keep them in order?

- *CG agreed that pressure should be brought on the council about this. He noted that good towns have a limited colour palette. Fronts are controlled by NHDC and there is guidance. However, there are no mandatory rules – even it seems in the conservation area. CG stated that he was encouraging the new Baldock Town Partnership to raise this as an issue for new businesses entering the town. CG stated that The Baldock Society had commented on numerous occasions and would continue to do so.*

With regard to closed buildings upkeep, CG replied that this was not possible, unless the building is listed, in which case English Heritage rules must be followed. He explained that he is trying to establish with the council exactly what a conservation area means.

CG stated that The Baldock Society would write on subject of shop fronts and ask questions about the true meaning of a conservation area. CG strongly believed that we needed to work now to try and encourage better practices post-enhancement.

ACTION - Committee

5.7 Will rates be as high in new shops?

- *CG thought this was quite likely. He noted that this was a common problem on the agenda for the Baldock Town Partnership, which represents business interest as a large part of its activity.*

5.8 How do we attract more specialist shops?

- *CG noted that for a shop to open, it obviously has to be financially attractive and likely to do trade. CG noted that again, this is being looked at by the Baldock Town Partnership. However, CG stated that the simple fact is that shops do come and go.*

5.9 What is the story on Quenby's? A member had heard that Quenby's would be unable to have cars outside the front of the shop after the enhancement.

- *CG suspected that Quenby's would likely have to move their cars.*

There was subsequent conjecture from a member that the Council had compulsorily purchased the frontage (based on suspicion that the land was Quenby's because of the location of the petrol pumps, but that NHDC had purchased).

5.10 Wheelie bins look terrible in the town centre.

- *CG agreed with another member's view that there are too many of us!*

5.11 Where has the bus stop gone in the High Street?

- *CG was not sure – he thought it looked like it had been designed out. CG thought that the traffic flows might have been designed to be like Stevenage Old Town – traffic manoeuvring slow things down.*

5.12 Will there be room for the October fair?

- *CG confirmed that the fair operators were fully involved in the planning and that the Fair would continue.*

5.13 What about the market?

- *CG stated it will be kept.*

5.14 There were concerns by members about poor market attendance.

- *CG noted that the problem is that when the rights to run the market were put out to tender, a private company outbid NHDC. Unfortunately they haven't invested in the market. NHDC had also not enforced traffic restrictions adequately, so traders were arriving and had nowhere to put up their stalls.*

Another problem with the private company is that when NHDC ran the market, it cleaned up after it. NHDC now won't do this, having placed that responsibility on the private company. Unfortunately, the company has just told traders to take away their own rubbish. They don't and therefore the town looks a mess, whilst also possibly discouraging traders from attending.

5.15 How is the parking issue for the market resolved then?

- *CG stated that a market square has been allocated in the enhancement and traffic restrictions will be enforced. CG is trying to encourage the Baldock Town Partnership to focus on the market and perhaps try and get some specialist markets in (e.g. French). Unfortunately a problem with this is that the private company with the rights to the market insist on a cut of the takings, so this is a major barrier.*

AT considered that the council needs to enforce parking. He talked about Norton Bowls Club having experienced problems and then the council put in restrictions. However, his conclusion was that NBC is in Letchworth. Why does Letchworth get looked after and not Baldock?

5.16 Regarding general issues around the town, CG asked if anyone had ever used the "Report it" option on the NHDC website. Nobody had. He said it has some limited options (e.g. a fly tipping category but not litter) but he had used different options and matters had been dealt with.

Some members complained about lack of action by the Council. CG asked if they had reported their issues, to which the answer was no. CG reminded that if there was no complaint, nothing could be done, so it was important to do so.

5.17 Concerns were raised about the effectiveness of the local Councillors.

- *CG and some members of the Committee believed that they do a lot for the town. They had not attended tonight's meeting because of their duty to Baldock in needing to attend the planning committee. CG also noted that the Baldock Councillors are only a voice on a larger committee that covers the whole district. They do their best but are only part of a much bigger district. CG gave the example of Michael Muir fighting the destruction of the farm on Weston Way. There was an original 6:1 vote to demolish. Michael Muir fought and got it to an even, but sadly the chairman of the committee used his casting vote to approve demolition.*

5.18 There was much dismay from members about the loss of the buildings on the corner of South Road.

- *CG explained that it was not in a conservation area and the law states that outside conservation areas, demolition needs no permission. There was absolutely nothing that could be done. CG noted this was particularly sad because since no. 74 was on NHDC's register of important buildings. It was noted that Wheatley Homes have a sign up now stating development subject to planning permission.*

5.19 One member asked about the Rentokil building.

- *CG noted that this was at similar risk as South Road– anyone could demolish it. LB noted that The Baldock Society had already written to NHDC about this and were monitoring. He noted it was also on the NHDC register of important buildings.*

5.20 CG mentioned that the developers proposing housing at Limekiln Lane had lost their appeal to planning refusal. One member knew more about the appeal loss – the inspector had been very critical regarding height and density in particular. Restrictions were placed on what could be proposed in future. That said, the member noted that there were no inspector comments about the potential effects of traffic from such a development.

***ACTION – Committee
to obtain a copy of the appeal report,
which may yield arguments that can be used
in similar planning responses.***

5.21 CG also mentioned the Quaker House planning application had been withdrawn. One member noted that there is consecrated ground on the site, and wondered if this could be a barrier to certain development proposals

***ACTION – Committee
to note this information***

5.22 Members were concerned that the access road to Osbourne Court was in a poor state of repair.

- *CG noted that the owner is not known – it is not NHDC or Tesco. CG agreed that The Baldock Society would write to Land Registry.*

ACTION – Committee

5.23 Also regarding Tesco, CG noted the upcoming planning application from Tesco to add a mezzanine level and increase their trading area by another 20k square feet. They want to make food and non food a 50-50 split.

5.24 CG noted that Tesco are looking at the possibility of a path down from the store to the town – but this is early stage. As with a member's comment about the poor state of the memorial garden on Tesco's land, CG thought that if Tesco could afford to spend money on extra levels, that they could afford these things.

5.25 Is there any development on the public toilet provision in Baldock?

- *CG was unsure.*

5.26 On Mansfield Road, is there any chance of parking restrictions to reduce parking to one side only?

- *CG stated that many roads were like this and was not sure of any plans.*

5.27 CG asked members if there were any problems with vandalism, anti social behaviour, etc?

A few points were raised by members – for example gangs on Park Street, and cars speeding in the rear Tesco car park. On the latter, CG agreed that The Baldock Society would write to Tesco about the car park.

ACTION – Committee

5.28 CG explained that he is chairman of the Baldock Neighbourhood Panel, which meets every 6-8 weeks and identifies priorities to the police. This forms part of Hertfordshire Constabulary's neighbourhood policing approach. CG stated that he was to run a public meeting on 9th October. The meeting will not be for individual issues, but for matters affecting the town generally. He intended to include an exercise to identify problem areas on a map of Baldock.

Baldock Councillors are to fund the meeting from their discretionary budget – including writing to all Baldock residents.

5.29 On closing, CG thanked members for attending and asked if they would like to have another members' meeting in the future. The response was a unanimous "yes". He also again asked members to consider joining the committee, which would enable the Society to do more.

5.30 CG also stated that the Society would try and have a regular slot at the start of each general meeting too.

ACTION – Committee

The meeting ended at 9.50pm