

ANNUAL ASSEMBLY OF BUCKLAND PARISH MEETING 2025

MINUTES of the Annual Assembly of Buckland Parish Meeting held in the Reading Room at 8pm on Monday 31ST March 2025.

1. CHAIR'S WELCOME

Nigel Husband (NH), as Chair to Buckland Parish Council, assumed the Chair for this Annual Assembly of Buckland Parish Meeting, introduced himself and formally welcomed everyone to the meeting.

NH introduced Buckland Parish Councillors Ianthe Cox (IC), Debbie Jones (DJ), Alan Pryor (AP) and Julian Steed (JS) and Sheena Boyce (SKB), our Clerk, to the meeting and extended a warm welcome to our Surrey County Council (SCC) Cllr Helyn Clack (HC) and Mole Valley District Council (MVDC) Cllr Simon Budd.

NH outlined the agenda; explaining that having dealt with the formalities, he would deliver the Chair's address, including the parish council financials, before introducing DJ to deliver a report from the village charity and IC to provide an update on potential development at both Gatwick and Heathrow Airports.

NH advised the topical item for the evening would be Devolution, with a particular focus on the UK Government wish to see a reorganisation of our local councils and expressed his appreciation to HC for her agreement to address this topic.

It was noted that there were thirty-one attendees.

2. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

MVDC Cllrs Paula Keay and Paul Potter, Buckland Parish Cllrs Michael Bourke (MB) and Rupert Gowrley (RG), Rachel Leyland, and John and Debra Fitzgerald.

3. MINUTES OF THE ANNUAL ASSEMBLY OF BUCKLAND PARISH MEETING 2024

The minutes had been displayed on the Parish Council Notice Board, published on the village website, and circulated to Councillors. The motion to adopt the Minutes as a true and correct record was proposed by DJ, seconded by Dominic Sanders, and carried by the meeting. NH, as Chair, signed and dated the minutes.

4. CHAIR'S REPORT

The following updates and messages have been extracted from the Chair's address:

"We have had another quite year regarding projects, as a result of the decision to limit expenditure in recognition of the 'Cost of living crisis' and focused on maintaining amenity improvements delivered when the need to minimise precept increases was not as key a priority.

Last year I stressed that the way for any "need" to be noticed by District and/or County council is for as many as possible of those of you who are affected to use the 'report it' tool on the relevant website. Thank you to those of you who have responded to last year's request as I am pleased to report it has had some success. e.g., because of lobbying, the section of A25 roadside footway between Buckland bends and Squires was cleaned earlier this month and a drainage issue between the village centre and the Shell garage is now on Surrey Highways radar.

We are grateful to Helyn Clack for helping to fund the work undertaken to address a long-running drainage issue, just to the west of The Pheasant. It is fair to say that the scheme has not yet been successful and understand that as SCC Highways engineers have accepted this, we remain hopeful that, with Helyn's continued "encouragement" SCC Highways will soon make such changes as are needed to deliver a successful scheme.

I am sure many of you will have noticed the rollout of safety improvements along the A25 that has introduced new kerbing and signage, most recently on Buckland bends. A pedestrian refuge, added into the scheme following a consultation meeting between the Road Safety Team and the parish council will provide a safer means for walkers to cross the carriageway and, upon completion of the work, a temporary suspension of the bus stop on the eastbound carriageway has been lifted.

Thanks to two local residents submitting reports to SCC Highways and liaising with our Clerk it has been possible to highlight to the road safety team that the Buckland bends section of the A25 is prone to flooding during periods of heavy rain, information that has led to road conditions being monitored in that location as the concern about drainage is reviewed.

We understand the implementation of average speed cameras on the section of the A25 between Flanchford Road and the start of a 30mph zone close to the Watermill Pub is due to be the next of the sixteen tasks to take effect.

We have been proactive regarding the issues that arise from highways work and when SCC established a task force to review the way traffic is managed during routine and emergency work, we provided input to the taskforce.

I feel sure many of you were impacted by some of the decisions taken that sent large vehicles via the narrow lanes to the south of the A25 rather than utilise the priority route up Pebblehill. We understand the task force has recognised that there needs to be more clarity and dare I say common sense, used when drawing up protocols but has stopped short, unfortunately, of recognising the value of local knowledge held by parish councils.

Late last summer we commissioned Christian Hamilton to repoint the sandstone around the War Memorial and I am pleased to have this opportunity to record our thanks to Christian for a job well done.

Thanks to a generous donation from the Betchworth and Buckland Society, the other project we have been able to initiate this year is the replacement of the flagpole on the village green. The previous flagpole had certainly served us well, for over twenty years; however as it has become very difficult to buy public liability insurance for what is in essence a “scaffold pole” the time has come to replace the flagpole with a modern composite material and a custom base which will allow it to be more easily maintained.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Betchworth and Buckland Society for making a donation that has enabled the parish council to purchase a new flagpole to install on our village green, to Buckland Estate who have offered to assist with preparing the ground for its installation and to Alan Brindley for agreeing to continue as our Volunteer Flag Warden. It is hoped the flagpole will be installed in advance of the 80th Anniversary of VE Day.

Thank you to each and every resident who attended either or both pond clearance events led by the Reigate Area Conservation Volunteers (RACV) or came along to our recent village tidy. I know those of you who attended a pond clearance session found it quite hard going as the level of the water had dropped to such an extent removal of the vegetation was challenging.

Considering how much rain we had at the beginning of the year the level of the pond appears to have dropped already and, as you can imagine, there has been a lot of debate as to the possible reason for this. Whilst it is almost impossible to prove (without excavating the base of the pond) that the Willow tree is substantially to blame, the fact that weeping willows absorb a huge amount of water, and the pond level has dropped as the willow tree has come into leaf seems relevant. According to a quick internet search a willow tree’s daily need can exceed 150-200 gallons (570-760 litres) of water per day, depending on the size and age of the tree and the girth of our willow tree is sizeable.

We also noted last summer that the willow tree, once the water in the pond had been exhausted, did not look particularly happy. Having taken professional advice from several sources the consensus was we should continue to manage the size of the tree in accordance with the Pond and Green Management Plan which prescribes 3 yearly pruning.

An application to undertake pruning was prepared by a local arboriculturist who made a planning application to secure conservation area permission. Sadly this work has had to be deferred as MVDC, having considered the application decided the pruning, given the tree became distressed last summer, could be harmful to the tree. To avoid a Tree Preservation Order being applied to the willow tree the application to prune the tree was withdrawn. We are now advised to monitor the tree with a view to hopefully being advised the submission of a new application will be approved.

There is clearly a need to balance the impact of pruning on this individual willow tree and the impact the continued existence of the willow tree is having on the biodiversity of the pond; a fact recognised in the Pond and Green Management Plan which expresses a preference to safeguard the health and biodiversity of the pond which is a recognised breeding site for Great Crested Newts, an internationally protected species.

Which brings me neatly to a big thank you to Simon Elson and his RACV volunteers for all the work they have undertaken over the last twenty plus years; their leadership, guidance and support has been amazing for our village we feel very privileged they have been so willing to dedicate their time to help keep the village green and pond so vibrant. As and when we make a call for volunteers to work alongside RACV please do sign up so that we can show the RACV team how much we value their support.

Looking forward, as we continue to be faced with uncertainties with respect to future costs, we have set a budget that incorporates limited discretionary funding for new initiatives. One capital item we are considering is the replacement of the defibrillator located outside this building. Whilst the longevity of these machines may extend well beyond the length of the warranty; given the importance of it remaining fully operational we are proposing to apply to HC for matched funding to enable us to buy a new defibrillator and are currently waiting for the application window for the 2025/26 financial year to open.

One other matter we became involved in was the one-year project to consider how best to support enhancing the biodiversity across the 4 Bs communities of Betchworth, Brockham, Buckland and Boxhill. As a parish council we've kept a watching brief, as the project team started to look at how it might help, with the support of expertise from Surrey Wildlife Trust alongside other national organisations that are currently rolling out a strategic policy regarding Nature Recovery and Biodiversity. DJ has represented Buckland Parish Council at several forum meetings which concluded earlier this month, having decided to undertake future activity as an informal group of volunteers.

We are patiently waiting for the outcome of the boundary review related to the Surrey Hills National Landscape (formerly known as an AONB); we have yet to hear of any final proposal being submitted to Government and recognise that even then there may be competition to find time in the legislative programme.

On planning, a new Mole Valley Local Plan was adopted last October which now means there are established policies for managing development across Mole Valley which should have ended the uncertainty that was allowing developers to secure permission via planning appeals because there was no up to date policy in place. Since then, the publication of a new National Planning Policy Framework alongside several Guidance Documents has reintroduced a degree of uncertainty.

We have, over the years, provided updates on activity at our local airports and at this point I would like to invite IC, who worked as an economic analyst for British Caledonian for nearly twenty years, based at Gatwick, to provide us with this year's update. IC recently made a presentation to the Planning Inspectorate which set out the concerns being expressed by Buckland residents."

A report summarising the information IC shared with the meeting is attached as an appendix to these minutes.

NH thanked IC for an informative update and for the time and commitment she has given during the year and congratulated her on the impact she is having on the ongoing debate.

NH then took the opportunity to thank all the members of the Parish Council, each of whom has voluntarily taken on the unpaid role of Parish Councillor; DJ, for doing most of the heavy lifting, for representing us at 4Bs meetings, DJ, MB, AP, RG and IC for their contributions on planning, JS for his work relating to highways, MB for his work on matters relating to environmental issues (including climate change and biodiversity), IC on Airports, AP for his diligence in completing the weekly asset check and willingness to represent council at daytime events and RG for his willingness to step in to help council fulfil its obligations.

NH thanked Dominic and the Buckland Estate team who provide wide range of help around the village, Martin Boyce, who as volunteer webmaster, works to ensure our village website remains up to date, topical and interesting and Alan Brindley for continuing as our volunteer flag warden. NH expressed the community's thanks to each and every resident who has been spotted volunteering to complete a task around our village and encouraged anyone willing to help by taking on a small task as a parish council volunteer to contact our Clerk.

NH concluded by expressing a special thank you to SKB, I suspect the most over qualified parish clerk in the Kingdom, who continues to go well beyond the basics of the role to make sure that we are, as a community, as good as we can be, and provides an essential effective conduit between our village and the organisations that have an impact on our day to lives.

5. BUCKLAND PARISH COUNCIL FINANCIALS

NH referred everyone to the summary of the forecast full year accounts for 2024/25 which included a comparison against prior year and the budget for the year commencing 1st April 2025, distributed to all those who attended the Meeting.

NH explained that having decided against launching any major projects, the parish council precept has been increased by 4.7%, equivalent to an additional £3 per annum for a Band D Household. Most of this increase will be used to fund a substantial increase in National Insurance as Government has excluded parish councils from the list of public bodies exempt from the impact of the higher levy.

NH suggested anyone with a query speak to the Clerk during the post meeting refreshments or contact her after the meeting.

6. BUCKLAND PAROCHIAL CHARITY

DJ, Clerk to the charity presented Financials for the year ending 31st December 2024, copies of which had been distributed together with a written update.

DJ asked those attending to be mindful of the needs of residents, shared that it can be challenging to identify those that are in need in the parish and emphasised the trustees will welcome any suggestions and consider all requests. DJ provided assurance that the names of the recipients are never divulged to any outside source.

7. DEVOLUTION – SCC HELYN CLACK

HC explained that whilst the longer-term Government objective is stated to be to devolve power and funding from central government control that current effort is focused upon the UK Government wish to first see our County Council and the eleven Borough and District Councils across Surrey restructured as Unitary Councils. HC provided us with a clear outline of the process that has been set out by the UK Government, explained what this has meant so far and gave us an idea, based upon what has emerged to date, as to likely next steps. A lively interactive session followed during which views were expressed, queries were raised, and concerns were noted.

NH, on behalf of everyone present thanked HC for addressing the meeting and facilitating the discussion.

8. CHAIR'S CLOSING REMARKS

NH repeated his enthusiastic invitation for anyone who has an issue they consider the Parish Council needs to be aware of to attend a meeting and for everyone to make sure they submit requests and highlight concerns by submitting reports to MVDC, SCC and/or Surrey Police and to engage in consultations that are launched over the coming year.

NH expressed thanks to all for attending tonight for what he hoped had been an interesting evening that would sponsor further discussions and debate about what Buckland's residents want Buckland to be notwithstanding everything else around us being subject to change and invited everyone to stay for refreshments and take the opportunity to continue discussion and debate.

Appendices

- Update provided by Ianthe Cox
- Buckland Parish Council Forecast Financials 2024/25 (unaudited)
- Buckland Village Charity 2024

End