

The Edge Association 2008 Annual General Meeting

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

1. This is my second annual report as Chairman which largely follows the report I made in the annual Newsletter distributed in September to most homes in the village. I repeat the tribute to the hard work done by Ian Standen, the Association's Administrative Secretary, and Martin Sinker, Plans Secretary: over the last twelve months there has been a considerable increase in planning applications, many of them wholly unsuitable, and Ian and Martin have carried a considerable burden of writing letters, organising meetings and even appearing on radio, television and in the national press.
2. I should also like to thank James Jennings for his services as Treasurer over the last three years; because of pressure of work James is unable to continue as Treasurer and, subject to the approval of the AGM, would like to resign in favour of Philip Forshaw, the Vice Chairman. James has done an excellent job in addressing the complex issues of bank mandates and standing orders and I am very grateful for his efforts.
3. Perhaps the most newsworthy event of the past twelve months was the public meeting held at Alderley Edge School for Girls on 11 April 2008 because the committee had become concerned at the increasing pace of "development" and its malign effect on the appearance and social fabric of the village. In particular, we were concerned at proposals for an extensive "gated community" on Macclesfield Road which we felt exemplified the increasing trend towards social divisions. We therefore exploited a section of the Local Government Act 1972 to call for a public meeting with a view to a written poll. This caused consternation in some quarters, not least because of the proximity of elections for the East Cheshire Shadow Authority. In the end we distributed 2,000 leaflets to all of the homes in the village (less those locked behind gates!) and well over two hundred attended including George Osborne MP. A show of hands revealed massive support for less development and no gated communities and almost all of the exit ballot papers were to the same effect.
4. There is no doubting the strong feeling of the great majority about the adverse effects of unbridled development on the village. We have produced draft planning policies to address many of these concerns and those interested will find them on our web-site at www.edgeassociation.com. We sent copies of the policies to all of the candidates in the May elections and we have received some positive commitments from those who became members of the Shadow Authority. We are seeking a meeting with the shadow councillors in order to attempt to shape the policies to be pursued and two of our committee recently attended a seminar at Congleton dealing with new arrangements. The real challenge will be to convert theoretical political support into practical decisions by the new East Cheshire Council and its officers. We intend to hold those elected to their promises and hope that things will be better with the new unitary authority which claims to promise more power on planning matters to local people.

5. The public meeting, as many of you will recall, was taken up extensively by the local and national media and for a time Martin Sinker became a TV star! There is continuing interest in our efforts and it has no doubt occurred to some that if several million people can vote by phone for who is ejected from “Strictly Come Dancing” there is no reason why political or planning referendums cannot be held by the same or similar democratic means!
6. The very large number of planning applications over the last twelve months has included some really awful schemes as well as others which in larger plots would be attractive and acceptable. There appears to be a distinct trend away from gardens and some schemes proposed have almost no gardens at all despite a multi-million pound price tag. Perhaps it is time that we recognised more effectively our gardening heritage as well as appreciating the wholesome atmospheric and drainage effects that trees and green open spaces bring.
7. Over the last three months there has been a dramatic downturn in the economy, particularly in the mortgage sector and it has become noticeable that the volume of applications for permission has reduced. Further, there seems to be a reduction in the number of speculative projects although, undoubtedly, there are still some wealthy purchasers in the market with cash in hand. Nevertheless, the continuing failure to sell such properties as “Thornfield” over which the Association fought so hard and where the local authority refused permission only for it to be allowed on appeal shows just how right we were.
8. Contrary to the views of some, we do not object as a matter of course to planning applications and a considered decision is always taken before objections are made. With many unobjectionable schemes we make no representations and in some cases we support the proposed development. We continue to employ the local representative network to encourage letters about unsuitable applications but it is recognised that multiple applications about the same site can result in “objector fatigue”. I would, however, encourage continued written objections if a renewed scheme remains offensive because weight is placed by the councillors on the volume of letters received and this may be a factor in any appeal against refusal.
9. Members of the Association held a “Spring Clean” litter pick round the village on Saturday 5 April followed by a pleasant lunch at the No 15 Wine Bar. This was an attempt to demonstrate the connection between development and litter and we eventually received some publicity in the local paper. We intend that this should be an annual event and we now have a stock of fluorescent vests with the web-site address.
10. It is good news indeed that the by-pass works have now started after many decades of delay and prevarication. Although there was a minority of strongly held views against in Nether Alderley, the committee believe that the new road will make a massive improvement to the environment of London Road although we should all be on our guard against “ribbon development” such as happened with the Wilmslow section of the new A34.

11. A further sign of progress welcome to most is the eventual re-development of the “Westbrook” site at the corner of London Road and Clifton Street although, so far, there has been very serious disruption for local residents and many are deeply unhappy at the prospect of a large Tesco store when a variety of shops was promised. Completion will tell whether the planners have ensured a building in harmony with its surroundings although the steelwork roof levels seem broadly in line with those of neighbouring buildings. It is to be hoped that despite competition from Tesco, Association members and their families will continue to be loyal to the smaller existing businesses, many of which go back before the last war and which are in themselves village institutions.
12. This year’s annual dinner on 10 October was an informal and inexpensive supper at Nether Alderley Parish Hall to respond to the wishes of some for less formality than at the Edge Hotel. We were fortunate to secure as a speaker Matthew Hyde, author of “The Villas of Alderley Edge” and he informed us that he was revising Nikolaus Pevsner’s “Buildings of Cheshire” and is happy to hear suggestions for inclusion. We have already sent him a copy of our list of “locally important buildings” sent to the local authority over a year ago but to little evident effect. Next year’s dinner will be back at the Edge Hotel, provisionally on Friday 16 October 2009.
13. Finally, may I appeal to members to remember the importance of new blood and to encourage them to persuade the forty-somethings in the village to consider joining the Association and helping with committee work; despite some glamorous exceptions, none of us is getting any younger!

Martin Steiger
Chairman

Festival Hall
Alderley Edge
28 November 2008