

THE PARISH ALLIANCE

In 2007 a Planning Inquiry into H+H Celcon's application to build the Borough Green & Platt Bypass in exchange for permission to build a new factory collapsed. During the previous four years the relationship between Borough Green and Platt, who supported the Bypass, and Wrotham and Ightham who opposed it, had become ever more toxic.

As we left Ightham Village Hall on that historic afternoon, we talked at length about how we could heal those deep divisions between our Parishes - we had more in common than a single planning application, and we would all depend on closer cooperation in the future. At the end we all shook hands, and that was the moment of birth of the Parish Alliance.

None of us could guess on that sunny afternoon how important that Alliance would become as the years rolled past.

Initially just Borough Green and Wrotham, then quickly Platt and Ightham, followed by Stansted, Plaxtol and Shipbourne, and occasionally Seal PC. Wrotham has always had the planning expertise, and the litigation experience, and became the Lead Council in this informal arrangement, which has always been based on mutual trust, not a formal written constitution.

The first order of business was to find an alternative to the BG&P Bypass, and the obvious solution was to use the M26 as our Bypass, benefitting many more communities, and a campaign started to promote Junction 5 Sliproads on the M25/M26 at Sevenoaks. This campaign has slowly built a consensus over the years, and now has strong support at TMBC, KCC and KALC and our MP Tom Tugendhat, and there are copies sitting on desks at Westminster, with our sights currently set on Transport for the Southeast latest round of Road Funding.

The first big test of the Parish Alliance was in 2009 when the BGGC Consortium launched their first attempt at concreting the Greenbelt, with a proposal for a gargantuan Rail Freight depot stretching from Wrotham Rd to the A20 at Nepicar. The Parish Alliance joined forces with the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE) and set up a local branch. The campaign was successful.

At the same time the Alliance was fighting Hanson and TMBC's plans for 280+ houses at Isles Quarry West, a historic contaminated landfill. Whilst ultimately unsuccessful, we managed to reduce housing numbers to 171, blocked direct access onto the residential Quarry Hill where a 7.5t limit was proposed, and got a new exit onto the Haul Rd which we got adopted by KCC to become Darkhill Rd, and preserved Hornet Estate as a valuable local employer.

It must be remembered that until 2011 the "old" BGPC supported TMBC's Local Development Framework and housing at Isles Quarry West, despite a Parish Poll demanding the opposite. In 2011 we forced an election and ran a team of 11, and took out 10 of the old Parish Council. On taking office one of our first decisions was to confirm full membership of the Parish Alliance.

In May 2011 MT was elected Chair of the new PC, Cllrs Shaw & Taylor were appointed to the Parish Alliance, and the below agenda item was agreed:

17. Parish Alliance Chairman proposed that he liaises with the Chairmen of neighbouring parishes with a view to the councils forming closer ties for mutual benefit. Seconded by Cllr Shaw. Voting was 8 in favour, 1 abstention.

RESOLVED

In the intervening years the Alliance successfully fought off the Spring Tavern Hotel proposal, and the KCC Highway Superdepot at Nepicar. Other smaller Parish campaigns used Parish Alliance consultants on many smaller Highway and Traffic Management campaigns.

It must be remembered that because Borough Green is so small in land area, many of the developments that will affect us are in other Parishes

It was decided at this time that the Alliance needed Independent Borough Councillors to represent us, rather than the existing Conservatives where Ruling Group Policies did not always align with the best results for Parishes. David Evans gave us our first chance, by retiring between elections and triggering a single seat by-election. We poured our meagre resources into the campaign, and got Mike elected in 2014, followed by Tim in 2015, and Wendy in 2019. This next election we are fielding an extra two candidates, Scott & Sue.

The Party name of Independent Alliance was chosen because of its synergy with the Parish Alliance, echoing that same spirit of cooperation across traditional boundaries.

The MOTO Truckstop application for Nepicar was an interesting demonstration of the occasional subtlety of the Alliance approach. Local Members were barred from comment because of association with the land owner, but Officers called it before a Planning Committee as a departure from policy, inappropriate use of Greenbelt, but then used the expert reports from the Alliance consultants as grounds for a refusal, avoiding the danger and cost of an appeal.

Costs are equitably apportioned on the basis of population, because some of our smaller Parishes have very limited resources, but are still able to supply that hugely important joint consensus

In 2016 TMBC bowed to developer pressure and included 3000 houses at Borough Green Garden City as the "Jewel in the Crown" of their new Draft Local Plan. Our Planning Team moved into high gear, and by the time TMBC put its plan in front of Planning Inspectors we were ready and able to prove that BGGC violated many Planning Policies. But before that could be tested, TMBC's Plan was thrown out by the Inspectors for the most basic failings. But - the body of evidence we need, and the strategies, are all ready and waiting for the next airing. TMBC are playing their cards very close to their chests, and whilst BGGC is in the Call for Sites, at this time we do not know if TMBC will be stupid enough to try and take it forward. (But even though they know they are risking making their whole Plan unsound, political pressure will make it almost impossible for them to locate the 3000 BGGC houses elsewhere in the rest of the Borough. Planning Inspectors are not under that pressure, they will allocate housing where it complies with Planning Rules).

When this Plan goes in front of the Planning Inspectors TMBC and the Developers will have their planning advisers and Barristers putting their case; but we will have an equal place at that top table, with our case represented by our own Planning Team and Barrister.

Quite often neighbouring Parishes may join together in a one-off venture, but our close and long standing Alliance is unique in Kent, perhaps even unique in the Country.

One fact bears repeating - a Parish on its own is weak and can be pushed around by the larger authorities. A group of Parishes in a close Alliance has a political and financial muscle to stand against those who would do us harm.