

ENGLISH BICKNOR PARISH COUNCIL
Minutes of the Annual Parish Assembly held on Tuesday, 6th May 2025

Present:

Cllr Mrs P. Drinkall. (Chair)
Cllr Mr K. Braithwaite.
Cllr Mrs A. Bowen,
Cllr Mr P. Warden,
Cllr Mr D. Gunter.
Cllr Mr H Cole.
Clerk Jonathan Martin.

Members of the Public Present:

Mrs Sue Livingston
Ms Amy Lanster (Representing Matt Bishop MP as his Chief of Staff)
Mr Dan Furmage (Representing Matt Bishop MP as his Case Worker)
Mrs Sharon Shelbourn
Mrs Amanda Watkins
Mrs Sue Yemm
Mrs Carol Bluett
Mrs Gill Warry
Mrs Shirley James
Mrs Margaret Datta

Apologies and welcome:

Apologies were received from Cllr P Gwilliam. The chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting.

The reading and confirmation of the minutes of the 2024 Parish Assembly:

The Chair asked the assembly if the previous minutes had been read and were acceptable in their current form. There were no objections to the minutes.

Proposed: Cllr P. Warden.
Seconded: Cllr K Braithwaite.

Resolved and signed by the Chairman as correct.

MP for the Forest of Dean's Report.

This item was moved up for the convenience of the guest speakers and listeners.

The current Member of Parliament for the Forest of Dean is the Right Honourable Matt Bishop. Mr Bishop could not attend personally this evening, due to commitments in Parliament. However, two of his staff, as his representatives, were in attendance. Their names were Dan Furmage and Amy Lanster, the first was the MP's caseworker, and the second was his chief of staff.

They gave their report on the MP's activities of local interest.

Local Forest of Dean transport improvements that were currently being investigated would be the addition of a third crossing over the River Severn and another, possibly over the River Wye. The aim of this would be to decrease traffic and accidents. Negotiations were underway to increase the number of trains departing from Lydney train station. More money was also planned to be allocated to repair local potholes.

Mr Bishop was also working with local police to improve this service. This would include the increased use and deployment of AMPR cameras to detect speeding cars.

Other projects include increasing the availability of public defibrillators, reducing NHS waiting times, and increasing the services at Cinderford Hospital, particularly for vascular disease.

Mr Bishop has also been visiting local schools and is working on extensions and repairs needed at these sites.

In response to this, Cllr Gunter asked a series of questions on behalf of the Parish Council. The Coleford to Monmouth Road was a bigger problem for the region than the road to Gloucester.

Rural crime was also described as a significant issue, with no apparent communication or collaboration in the police forces of Gloucestershire and Herefordshire.

The Parish Council's long-term difficulty in trying to have local SatNav changed to prevent people getting lost or stuck in either mud or dead ends. As the only party which seemed interested, the Parish Council had been forced to install warning signs at its own cost.

In reply, these would be looked into. It was then stated that local farmers should be approached to provide information about the recent tax burden added to farmland inheritance.

Lastly, Mr Bishop's team said that a dedicated website would be available soon, which would improve the communication and actions of his office. He is also looking forward to working with the new unitary authority for the county when it arrives.

Cllr Gunter made a final suggestion for a national problem with which he had experience, namely that the online and telephone systems for booking driving tests are woefully unfit for purpose. The main problem is that private companies scalp the test slots and then sell them on second hand. The MP's staff would look into this.

The Chairman's report on the activities of the Parish Council during the last year.

Community Speed Watch Camera.

Sadly, the community speed watch camera located at Hillersland which was destroyed, presumably by a vehicle in May 2024 could not be claimed on insurance as it did not belong to the Parish Council. Throughout the year the Council has been liaising with the Police and County Highways and it is hoped that a replacement Camera may be installed in the not too

distant future.

Flagpole at Symonds Yat Rock.

The flagpole, destroyed by vandalism in August 2023 has been replaced by the Paish Council and is once again flying the flag. Councillors Braithwaite, Cole and Gwilliam and resident Mr J Britton are to be especially thanked regarding this issue.

Warning signs on the footpath at the Symonds Yat Rock.

This sign had fallen into disrepair and had to be removed. The Parish Council has spent much time this year trying to get funding from County Highways, the Police and Forestry England to help with replacement as Parishioners repeatedly reported an increase of vehicles getting stuck since the sign's removal. All three bodies declined to help so the Parish Council has organised and provided a pictorial sign to once again hang from the bridge. This should be in place shortly, and Councillor Braithwaite and resident Mr S. Jones are to be especially thanked for their work so far.

Parish Council Website.

The Parish Council is grateful to Mr S. Andrewes for his work in updating the Parish Council's website. The website now includes the Village Hall Committee and Friends of St. Mary's Church, both of which contribute to the cost of its upkeep.

Children's play equipment at English Bicknor Playing Fields.

The Village Hall Committee and several members of the public continued to request that the Parish Council pay for additional play equipment on behalf of the village hall committee in order for the VAT to be reclaimed. The Parish Council resolved not to do this as it would potentially be unlawful, seen as tax evasion. The Parish Council suggested the County Council's Build Back Better scheme as a legal option.

English Bicknor Post Box.

Eventually and with no response from the Post Office to any of the Parish Council's communication or that of local residents, the Post Box was replaced in September 2024, on the opposite side of Ross Road.

Sinkhole in Redhouse Lane.

The sinkhole which appeared in Redhouse Lane has been cordoned off by County Highways. The Parish Council awaits their long term plan for this.

Redhouse Lane.

For several years now, silt has made the lane difficult for walkers and virtually impossible for vehicles at one place. The Parish Council does not want to encourage vehicles to use this lane and instigated the 'unsuitable for motor vehicles' signs to be erected some years ago. Unfortunately some drivers either do not see these or ignore them and follow their satnavs, so there have been incidents of vehicles getting stuck. The issue has been raised with County

Highways and other bodies and it seems impossible to get Satnav routes amended. The Parish Council may investigate the merit of further signage.

Pavement Weeds, English Bicknor.

Again, criticism of the untidy and in some places dangerous state of the pavement weeds through English Bicknor village has been raised on several occasions by members of the public. The Parish Council has continued to raise this matter with County Highways who now have a policy not to spray and there seems to be large delays in getting the weeds scrapped.

Lime Kilns.

The Parish Council is grateful to Mr P Hester for repairing the wooden sign, to Councillor H. Cole for the new lamented warning sign and to Councillor Mrs A. Bowen for keeping this area weed free.

The Robin bus service.

The Parish Council has arranged for the Robin bus to stop and collect from Smithy Close, English Bicknor. This is a bookable service run by the County Council to connect communities to locations not covered by the local bus service, eg the Community Hospital in Cinderford. There is a possibility that Hillersland/Symonds Yat Rock may be included in the future. Information is on the website and notice boards and there are some leaflets here.

Bus Shelter.

The Parish Council is grateful to the person who cleaned the Bus Shelter in November 2024.

Community Garden on the playing field.

The Parish Council has given its permission to a group of local people and the Village Hall Committee, regarding the proposal to set up a Community garden on the playing field. The provision was added that should the garden fall into disrepair, the land should be returned to its previous state at that time.

Highway Matters.

Issues such as potholes and blocked drains have been reported to County Highways throughout the year.

Planning Applications.

The Council has received and commented on all planning applications pertaining to the Parish.

Financial Statement.

The Financial Statement prepared by the Clerk is available here for perusal.

Councillors and Clerk.

The Council is grateful for the continued support of County Councillor Terry Hale who has attended our meetings except when illness prevented and was also glad to welcome District Councillor Tim Gwilliam on two occasions during the year.

Councillor P. Gwilliam has decided to stand down after two years so there is currently a vacancy. Finally, I would like to thank all Councillors, the Clerk and those local parishioners who have contributed to the work of the Council over the past year.

This concludes the Chairman's report.

Matters arising from the minutes of the last Annual Parish Assembly and Chairman's Report.

There were none.

County Councillor's Report

Not present.

District Councillor's Report

Not present.

Report on the work of the Lucy Machen Charity.

Cllr Braithwaite reported that the charity continued its support for projects in the English Bicknor and Staunton Parish areas, and over the last year, has made seven substantial donations to local projects.

Report on the work of the English Bicknor Parochial Charities.

Mr Jeff Carrick was regrettably unwell to attend this evening. However, he had forwarded a report to be read out. In summary, donations for the last year have been made to the Salvation Army, local food banks, and to purchase children's play equipment.

School Governors' Report.

Not present.

Report of the Village Hall and Bar.

The Clerk received a report from the English Bicknor Village Hall for inclusion. The Village Hall has had a successful 90th Anniversary Year and continues to host many user groups and hold charitable fundraisers and other social events. Currently the Village Hall is used either weekly or monthly for and by the following organisations': These are, English Bicknor Parish Council meetings, English Bicknor Branch of the Women's Institute (WI), English Bicknor and District Gardening Club, Friends of St Marys, Ti Chi Classes, English Bicknor History Club, Table Tennis Club, Tuesday Lunch Club, Thursday Church Communion.

Cheltenham Town Youth Football organisation is now a regular user of the playing field. They began using the playing field in September 2023 and continue to do so. They are expanding their youth football scheme, so the changing rooms and football pitch will be used more often in the future. The playing area for young children is now completed, and no further equipment will be added. The last piece of equipment installed was the swing. Members of the Gardening Club and other parishioners have commenced the creation of a Community Garden in an area to the edge of the playing field. This will incorporate the fruit trees already planted as the People's Orchard.

A new heating control system has been installed in the hall and bar, which will enable the temperature to be controlled remotely using a phone app. This will help to reduce heating costs.

A rain leak into the main hall has been fixed by replacing the soffit and installing new guttering and an additional rain water down pipe. A new dado rail has also been installed in the hall to prevent chair backs marking and damaging the walls. The fabric of the building has been maintained to a high standard, and all annual checks and inspections have been completed with repairs or replacements carried out as needed. This continual work gives us a Village Hall we can all be proud of.

The hall continues to receive bookings for social events such as weddings, christenings and wakes. The Friday night 'Pop Up Bar' is proving successful with various themed openings throughout the year. These include 'Fish and Chip Nights', 'Pizza Nights', 'Quiz Nights' and 'Games Nights'. The hall hosted a wedding fair on the 3rd March 24. The Sea Shanty Singers performed on the 8th March 24. Several fundraising events were held in 2024, all contributing to our annual income or income for other charities and good causes.

In May, make a scarecrow in a 1930s dress. On the 29th June, the Fete was held with 1930s-themed events. On the 21st July, the 24th Bicknor Music Festival and a visit by the Beefy Boys catering van on the 3rd August. Also, as part of the 90th Anniversary Celebrations, a 'Bicknor's Got Talent' Event was held on 2nd November, which was a great success. At the end of September 2024, the VH Account balance was £18,358. The bar account was healthy, and the bar was able to donate £8,000 to the village hall charity.

Our Thanks are extended to all who volunteer their time and skills to keep the premises running.

The Village Hall, with the support of the committee and other volunteers, is thriving. We are looking forward to continuing our charitable activities and look forward to hosting many more events in the coming year.

Report of the Friends of St Mary's.

The Clerk received a report from the Friends of Saint Mary for inclusion. There had been the usual two pop-in lunches, which were very successful. There was good support for a barn dance with a ploughman supper in August. In November, they tried something, a black tie event and mini auction.

Report of the English Bicknor & District Gardening Club.

A report from the Gardening Club was received and included here. The gardening club has had a successful year. The number of members has increased. Last summer, there were visits to beautiful gardens and a visit to a wildflower meadow near Monmouth, which was led by an expert who helped us identify the plants. At the English Bicknor fete, we ran the plant stall which raised money for the club. The Garden Club also organised and ran the flower and produce displays. During the autumn and winter, there was a range of informative talks. At our AGM and Christmas meeting, we were entertained by the duo "Lightly Tuned". The coming year promises to be equally interesting, with visits to lovely gardens and a varied programme of talks.

Report of English Bicknor Women's Institute.

It was reported that the local WI was celebrating its 77th year anniversary. Over the year, nine people had left, leaving a total membership of forty-five members. It had been decided that the membership would be capped at fifty. The subscription fee would remain at £48 a year.

The WI had numerous guest speakers and donated to support the children's trust as its charity for the year. The WI had undertaken a cake stall, craft sessions and card making. The WI has also decided to save money by running paperless meetings.

The WI remains committed to its core principles of fun, friendship and education.

Report of the Local History Group.

No report was presented.

Report of the PCSO.

There was no report present. Cllr Drinkall raised a complaint that the local PCSO had been outside of the Council's ability to reach, with the Clerk confirming that no emails had been returned to them.

Discussion of any other matters affecting the Parish.

Mrs Margaret Datta raised concerns over high road speeding along Bicknor Street. The speeding vehicles were described as killing a significant number of pheasants on the road. Councillor Mrs Drinkall reminded Mrs Datta that '20 is plenty' signs had been placed on lampposts and on several residents' wheelie bins in order to highlight the issue to motorists. Mrs Datta suggested a new speed limit to be imposed. However, Cllr Braithwaite explained that traffic orders are expensive, time-consuming, and impractical. However, the Council will give this matter further consideration.

End 7:53