

## Thurnham's Future



Britain's expanding economy, growing population and changing demographics have sparked a new national debate about how best to allocate land - and the best land to allocate - for development. The tensions that exist nationally between demand for additional employment opportunities and housing on the one hand and the protection of rural areas on the other are mirrored here in Thurnham.

**"The emphasis must be on protecting the rural, green countryside from all inappropriate built development – needs a robust attitude to planning applications that seek approval for such inappropriate built development."**

*Thurnham resident*

In seeking to resolve those issues choices have to be made between an ever increasing suburban sprawl and the retention of the urban rural divide. The latter is something on which the people of Thurnham place the greatest importance.

We referred earlier in this Plan to Kent County Council's statement that "Future generations will judge us by the environment they inherit". Above all this is true of the AONB embracing the North Downs and the land to the south designated as a Special Landscape Area.

In his recently published book "*The North Downs*" the writer Peter Brandon described the North Downs and the Kent and Surrey Hills as "one of the loveliest and most diversified of all English regions". But he also points out that "managing this enchanting heritage sustainably will be one of the greatest challenges for the next generation".

For Thurnham that challenge is with us now as areas of farm land and recreational space adjoining the AONB are under threat as never before, both from the proposals contained in the planning application submitted by KIG/AXA as well as the Borough Council's 'Preferred Option' now under review.

The residents of Thurnham recognize that some new housing, linked to local needs, that is affordable, available to rent and which caters for those with special needs is necessary. But any such development should

be strictly controlled so that it is in sympathy with the area and in scale with its neighbours.

**“Villages need to be kept as villages – not overspill for towns.”**

*Thurnham resident*

They also want to ensure that in the debate about where any development should take place, rural areas are accorded the same importance as urban. Cities list their treasured buildings and conservation areas and protect them in perpetuity. Key areas of landscape should be treated no less importantly. The countryside is a fragile organism and once built over is lost forever, not just to those who live there but to those who look to these areas for recreation and inspiration, and to ensure that our landscape retains its diversity.



Furthermore, the same factors that drive economic growth and the demand for a greener environment, allied to changes in climatic conditions, are transforming the economic case for the retention of farmland.

**“Agriculture needs to be encouraged and progressed.”**

*Thurnham resident*

Whilst sustainable farmland is under threat across the globe, expanding world population, soaring temperatures in traditional grain growing areas, the changing diet of millions of people in Asia and the increasing demand for bio-fuels are all raising the demand for, and cost of, basic foodstuffs. Food prices rose by 6% in 2007, their fastest annual rate of



increase since 1993. The biofuel industry is on course to consume about 30% of the US corn crop in 2010, while the International Grains Council predicts that the industrial use of grains will rise by 23%. As The Times put it its leader of 9 August 2007 “The age of cheap food is ending” providing opportunities for farmers unthinkable a few years ago.

For all these reasons it is essential not only that the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty should receive a high degree of protection but that land bordering it should do so as well and retain its designation as a Special Landscape Area. The latter forms an essential part of this precious landscape and if it is allowed to disappear then the AONB is greatly diminished in its impact.

The people of Thurnham are opposed to more industrial and commercial development within the parish. They recognize the need for some small increase in housing to meet particular local needs but are strongly opposed to large scale development that will impinge on land south of the M20 currently used for agricultural or recreational purposes.

Local people also want to see a more holistic approach taken towards the planning of any future development. In particular, they want any development that takes place linked to the provision of the necessary infrastructure to support and underpin it. Many fine words have been expressed by planners on the need for such an approach. But the experience is that, when it comes to the crunch, development is allowed to take place with extra doctors, dentists, schools, public transport, water and the supply of other utilities lagging far behind. No development should take place unless the supporting infrastructure is put in place at the same time. Similar views have been expressed in other local plans.





This desire for better infrastructure extends to all the other amenities that enhance life for those who live, work or visit the parish and its countryside. These include more seating, and more litter and poop scoop bins, additional recycling facilities, more effective action to deal with fly-tipping and graffiti, better street and pavement cleaning, improved maintenance of hedgerows and greater respect for the countryside and for neighbours: and the control of noise whether from inconsiderate neighbours, businesses, public events or leisure activities.

We welcome the proposals by the Parish Council to improve the play area adjacent to Peverel Drive and to seek ways to provide additional facilities in the open space by the ransom strip on Bearsted Park (photo right). For other facilities Thurnham residents have to look to groups or organizations based in neighbouring parishes or Maidstone. Demand for bookings at

village halls is high and, as a long term aim, people would like to see such a facility provided within the parish, though they recognize the difficulties of securing a suitable site and raising the necessary funds.

Critical to a sense of well being is feeling safe in one's own home and community. Thankfully crime rates in Thurnham are well below those found in some other parts of the county, let alone nationally. But the latter inevitably colour people's sense of security as do their most recent experience of crime, police response times and whether there is a visible police presence on the ground.

We therefore very much welcome the appointment of the new PCSO. We hope that, working together with the PC, they will ensure a more visible police presence in the parish than has been the case in the last two years.

A different, but as important, sense of security







comes from the need for people to have a meaningful say in how their communities are to change and develop. All political parties pay lip service to the need for more power to be devolved from the centre, but when in office the needs of the local are all too often subordinated to the national. And at local level the consultation that should take place between Borough and Parish Councils is often nominal and the views

of parish councils go unheeded. This needs to change so that people feel they have more control over their lives and are not being ridden roughshod over by large bureaucracies or corporations. The KIG/AXA proposal is a good illustration. Will the wishes of the people of Thurnham and the surrounding area be subordinated to the wishes of and financial muscle of a French owned company?

**“Any changes need to take into consideration the nature of a rural community to retain its identity.”**

***Thurnham resident***

All these things are consistent with and underpin the three themes on which this Plan is based: the strengthening of Thurnham’s sense of community and separate identity, the continuity and protection of its landscape and the acceptance of change that is consistent with and respects these aims.

Land, Mark Twain once observed, is not being made any more. All the more reason to protect it from rapacious development, to value the uniqueness of our countryside above quick profit, to celebrate Thurnham’s distinctiveness and to preserve all that is best in our community for generations to come.

These views reflect the opinion of the overwhelming majority of those who contributed to our questionnaire. We hope that those proposing changes in Thurnham and those considering the recommendations contained in this Plan will respect these views and frame their responses accordingly.

**Thurnham Parish Plan Group  
30 November 2007**