PLAXTOL *Parish* PLAN

Introduction

The Parish Plan has three main aims:

- to present an overview of the Plaxtol of today, reflecting on its history and crucially looking to the future;

- to give both parishioner and visitor an insight into the breadth of activity that takes place in the Parish; and

- to examine issues and problems that need to be addressed in the future, with a timetable for the Parish Council and other parishioners to address those areas.

This document has been researched and written to reflect the input from residents during the whole of the consultation process (as described on pages 4-5), especially from the July 2004 "Have Your Say" Weekend and the main Questionnaire (which saw a remarkable response approaching 70% - a substantial achievement in itself).

The separate Youth questionnaire saw a return of 50 from 31 households, again an excellent response.

At the next available opportunity, the Parish would wish to see the key elements of this plan incorporated into the Tonbridge & Malling Borough Local Development Framework which sets out policies for development.

The plan is divided into nine sections:

Consultation Process	pages 4-5
History & Setting	pages 6-7
Housing	pages 8-11
Highways & Transport	pages 12-19
Local Businesses in Plaxtol	pages 20-21
Policing & Community Safety	pages 22-23
Social Facilities & Services	pages 24-27
Clubs & Societies	pages 28-29
Environment	pages 30-35

Each section describes its relevance to Plaxtol Parish with comments on parishioners' concerns; and each contains Recommendations with proposals for overcoming the issues to be addressed.

The whole process of consultation and compilation of the Plan has taken over 2 years with up to 100 meetings and many hours of research for those closely involved. This document is truly representative of the majority of parishioners living in this precious and beautiful part of Kent. It shows, above all else, that local people care very much about their Parish and its future.

Marius Carboni
Chairman, Plaxtol Parish Plan & Plaxtol Parish Council

The Consultation PROCESS

The Parish Council introduced the concept of both Parish Plans and Parish Design Statements to a public meeting held in January 2003, attended by many residents. The idea and ideology behind both were discussed, with the attendees voting for both projects to be undertaken, and several volunteering to become involved.

A Parish Plan Committee came together, with a formal Constitution, and began to consider how best to approach the project. In this, discussions and ongoing support from both Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council (TMBC) and the Kent Rural Communities Council (KRCC - now Action with Communities for Rural Kent) were invaluable. The Countryside Agency's publication "Parish Plans" continued to provide guidance at each stage.

The "Have Your Say" campaign was launched at Christmas 2003, when residents attending the Church Carol Service were passed a preliminary flyer of questions designed to help the Committee identify those areas of most interest/concern to the people of Plaxtol, and had an opportunity to find out more about the project from members of the Committee who were on hand. The answers were returned through suggestion boxes placed in shops, pubs, the church and the doctors' waiting room, where residents could reach them easily and conveniently and where more flyers were available. This short survey had a positive response and gave the Committee clear guidance for the future.

"Have Your Say" was continuously promoted through posters and regular updates in "The Plaxtol Herald" - our parish magazine.

We received a visit from a representative of the Neighbourhood Initiatives Foundation, who was very helpful in suggesting ways of polling residents on the issues that mattered to them, including how the Committee should draft the questionnaire and plan the open days that were to follow.

The "Have Your Say" Weekend took place in July 2004, and was very successful. Over the two days, we had 235 attendees who were able to look at a model of the Parish made by the children of Plaxtol School, information boards, photographic montages and maps. Everyone who visited the open days had an opportunity to post further comments, through both suggestion boxes and a "Post-It"® board, and to ask questions of all the Committee members, who monitored the event in shifts across the entire weekend.

We also took time to chart the opinions of local businesses, clubs and societies through "Understanding What Works"; a brief survey carried out on a one-to-one basis between members of the Committee and representatives of the various organizations involved.

'Have Your Say' Weekend - July 2004 (above)

Our questionnaire was tailored to meet the needs of our Parish and the parallel Parish Design Statement activity. In the autumn of 2004, the questionnaire was distributed to all 405 households in the Parish, accompanied by a separate Youth Questionnaire where appropriate. The main questionnaire received a 68% response, whilst that aimed at younger people returned 50 responses from 31 households. This was an excellent response rate.

As previously indicated, this document has been researched, written and edited to reflect the input from residents during the whole of the consultation process. It has also been discussed, in draft form, with TMBC's Head of Strategic Planning and other council officers, to ensure that it is consistent with current and future policies at Borough level. Plaxtol Parish Council voted in May 2005 to adopt the Parish Plan.

NOTE: *All illustrations of respondent data throughout this document are based on a sample of 259 responses. A detailed breakdown of this sample, indicating the number of responses received to each question, has been published on the Parish website:* www.plaxtol.com

1. History & SETTING

The Romans roamed and the Saxons sacked their way through the Bourne valley, but man was evidently in Plaxtol long before either of them. Some of the tracks and lanes that we use today date back to prehistoric times. The quiet and peaceful valley, with its plentiful supply of water from the river, its many springs and fertile land, was always a good place to live and work.

Two thousand years ago the valley would not have looked very different to the way it is today. There would have been meadows for grazing animals, small fields of crops and patches of woodland, kept for fuel, building and other construction purposes.

By the 17th Century Plaxtol as we know it was well established. There were a number of large and wealthy estates in this part of Kent and the yeomanry were rich, with many gentry among them. Its proximity to London meant that other wealthy merchants were starting to be attracted to the area. The lovely houses that they built are still drawing their modern day equivalents and form an important part of the Plaxtol that we enjoy today.

Like most rural villages, Plaxtol was built around agriculture. Most of its residents worked on the land and the settlements developed around farms and mills. Small groups of cottages were built for the farm workers, the mills along the Bourne expanded and the shops and businesses, church and school followed.

Plaxtol today is a vibrant and lively village, with its wealth of clubs and societies, its popular school and welcoming shops. The humble farm workers' cottages are now updated and smart and, although few people take their living from the land, the village houses are more popular (and more expensive) than ever. Many villages have been spoilt by main roads running through them, but fortunately Plaxtol has escaped that fate.

Plaxtol and the Bourne valley are still much the same as they were all those many hundreds of years ago, a delightfully quiet and peaceful place in which to live and work.

N

Roughway

Crouch

Dunk's Green

Claygate Cross

Basted

Plaxtol

Yopps Green

2. Housing

2.1 BACKGROUND

The excavation of a Roman Villa in Plaxtol in the 1980's and ongoing excavations demonstrate the fine heritage of Plaxtol. This heritage is reinforced by the presence of a number of historic buildings, many Listed, beginning with 13th century Old Soar Manor. Plaxtol's wealthy industrial history of papermaking and tanning, as well as farming, especially from the 17th and 18th centuries, is seen in an array of old, grand properties throughout the Parish.

Mature trees, ragstone walls and metal railings which abound in the Parish add a sense of the gradual and sustained development of a community.

2.2 HOUSING STOCK

Entering the village from the northwest, there is a terrace of old white weather boarded cottages followed by the church, one of the few remaining from Cromwell's era, and the War Memorial alongside, all combining in an attractive group at this end of the village.

The centre of the village focuses on The Street, and combines terraced and detached houses with no particular discernible pattern. This area has seen much development, notably at Hyder's Forge, Plaxtol Bakery and Wheelwrights (the site of the former village shop and garage) especially from the 1960's (virtually obscuring the view of the Bourne valley from the road). The post-War era has seen the construction of housing estates, including St. Hilda's and Bourne Vale. In fact the latter was built by Hyder's to house their building and wrought iron workers, and the properties became available to purchase when the original firm closed down.

Outside the village lie the separate hamlets of Dunk's Green, Yopps Green, Roughway, Claygate Cross and Basted. Dunk's Green is similar to Plaxtol village in having a mixture of terraced and detached houses, with those on the Bourne Valley side primarily of ragstone and those opposite examples of post-War building. The other hamlets are small, offering mainly detached properties with views.

Rat's Castle, Roughway (top right)
Hyder's Forge (right)

2. Housing

2.2.1 TO RENT AND LOW COST ACCOMMODATION

There were six semi-detached council houses at the Spoute before WW2 and another 22 built after. Most have changed hands under the Right-to-Buy Policy. The low-cost homes at Shrubshall Meadow, built in 2001 by Moat Housing, comprise four houses and four single flats to be let for rent in perpetuity. There are other dwellings for rent in the Parish including the apartments at Kingscote (the site of the former nursing home) and The Alms Houses, run by the Betenson Trust.

2.2.2 THREATS

Protests have been voiced over the density of new developments, and there is particular concern that several properties, especially bungalows suitable for older people, have been demolished so that two or more houses can be built on the site. A large percentage of respondents to our questionnaire felt that there had been too much development in the Parish in the last ten years. Some residents felt that too many expensive properties were being built. As the pie chart opposite shows there is a need for a range of dwellings that cater for all parts of the community. This should include single-story dwellings, small homes with two or three bedrooms, and low cost housing. The Parish Design Statement will go some way to addressing these immediate issues in a design context.

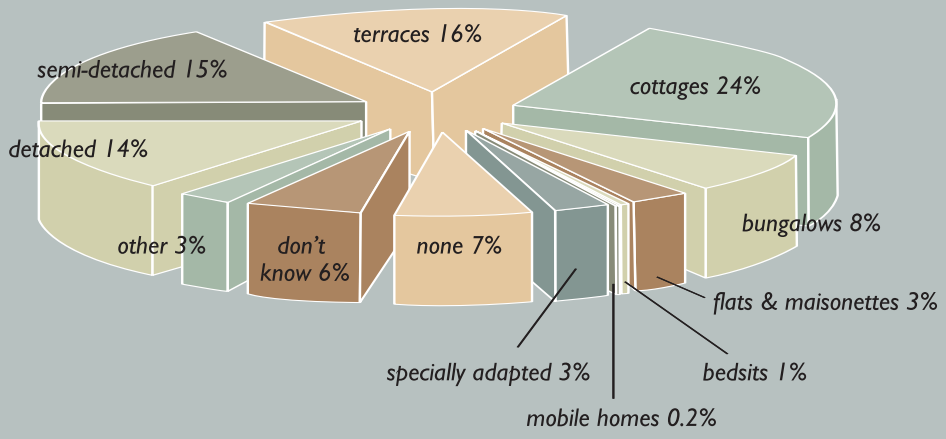
RECOMMENDATION

- *Parish Council to continue to be vigilant over future housing development.*
- *To continue to work closely with Borough Councillors and Planning Department.*
- *More consultation required from applicants, whether it be for housing or mobile phone masts or other constructions.*
- *Parishioners' views to be taken into consideration.*

Who: *Parish Council, parishioners & Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council.*
Time scale: *Continuous.*

Shrubshall Meadow low-cost homes (right)

What kind of homes are needed in the Parish?



3. *Highways &* TRANSPORT

3.1 BACKGROUND

Highways are fundamental to any village or town. They need to be kept in good order, have sufficient lighting where appropriate and be safe for pedestrians, cyclists and motorists. Plaxtol has many rural lanes that weave through its Parish, linking the village and surrounding hamlets.

Many of these lanes are very ancient, dating back, in some cases, to well before the Romans came to the valley. The Rural Lanes Study by Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council (TMBC) shows School Lane as a Roman road and a Drove road. Long Mill Lane and Plaxtol Lane are both Iron Ways as well as Drove roads. Many of the lanes have become sunken from centuries of use.

The hedges and verges alongside the lanes offer a wonderful habitat for wildlife and plants and are a distinctive part of the rural charm of the area.

It is the ancient nature of these lanes that causes so many of the problems in our modern high speed world. Lanes that were meant for two and four legs and the occasional cart are not well suited to huge lorries, tankers and large numbers of cars.

As most of our lanes are narrow, verges become damaged and eroded. The condition of our roads is generally felt to be reasonable, as is roadside care and street cleaning. However, there is concern about the standard of gritting and snow clearance during bad winters.

When asked about threats to the future of the Parish, a large proportion of respondents to the questionnaire listed lorries and heavy goods vehicles, traffic congestion and speeding as serious threats.

3.2 LORRIES AND HEAVY GOODS VEHICLES

This is a double-edged problem. Deliveries are essential to the local shops, pubs and houses. Therefore, oil and gas tankers and other large vehicles regularly enter the village. An absence of this service would impact on our domestic lives, with shops not surviving and homes themselves being affected by the non-availability of fuels. In addition, the local farmers and other businesses require deliveries and the tendency today is for larger and heavier lorries to be used.

Signs stating that lanes are “unsuitable for HGV’s” have recently been installed on various routes around the village. However companies still have to deliver to houses, shops and businesses.

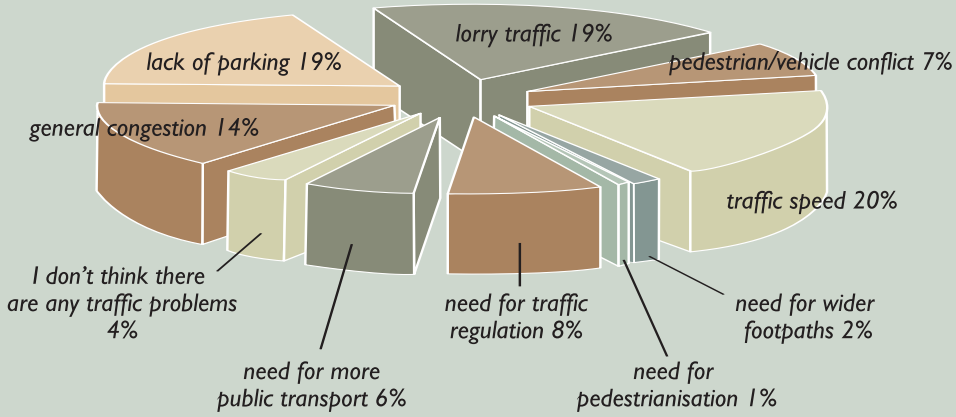
The pie chart opposite reflects local opinion on traffic problems.

RECOMMENDATION

- *Consult with TMBC as well as businesses and farms who have regular HGV deliveries to ensure that drivers are given directions as to the most appropriate routes.*

Who: *Parish Council & Borough Councils.*
Time scale: *Within 6 months.*

If you think there are traffic problems in the Parish, what do you think causes them?



3. *Highways &* TRANSPORT

3.3 SPEED

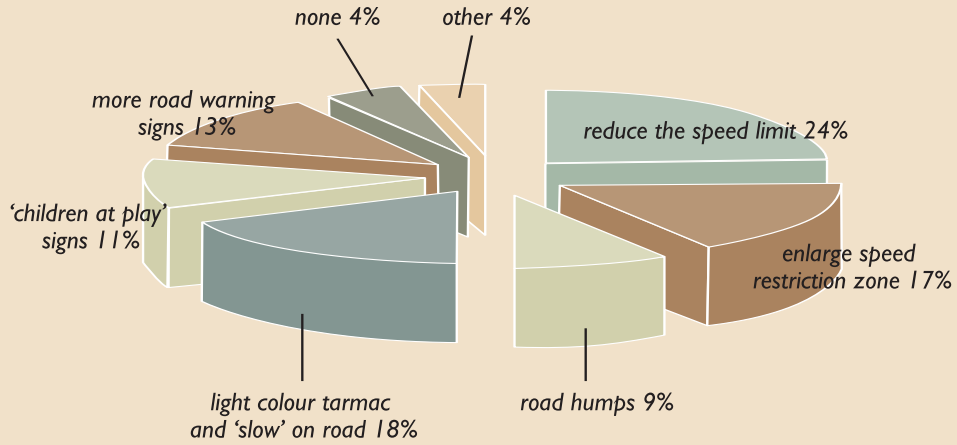
Speed is a problem in most residential areas and certain parts of Plaxtol Parish were identified as worse than others. Nearly 90% of respondents to the questionnaire supported speed control measures.

The north-west entrance to the village via Plaxtol Lane, the sharp bend into Church Hill and down to the junction with The Street were highlighted as areas of great danger, as was the bend in the Street by Periwick Cottage. Comments in the Parish Plan suggestion box and over the "Have Your Say" weekend, as well as from the questionnaire, suggest that many residents would be happy for a 20mph speed restriction to be installed. There was also much concern about speeding through Dunk's Green. The majority of respondents did not want more yellow lines, speed humps or chicanes.

The pie chart opposite gives a clear indication of favoured speed control measures.

Plaxtol High Street

Which, if any, of the following speed control measures would you support in the Parish?



RECOMMENDATION

- *Investigate options which allow reduced speeds on entry points into the village with the aim of achieving lower speeds, especially in the heart of the village and Dunk's Green.*
- *Investigate and identify sites that would meet the criteria for a 20mph speed limit.*
- *Look at setting up a speed data project in order to establish whether motorists are complying with the 30mph limit.*
- *To look again at Speedwatch initiative and to encourage residents to participate.*
- *Any additional signage for speed restriction should be kept to a minimum.*

Who:	*A steering group of residents to be set up to work with the Parish Council and Borough Councils.*
Time scale:	*Within 12 months.*

3. *Highways &* TRANSPORT

3.4 TRAFFIC CONGESTION

The number of parked cars in the centre of the village aggravates congestion. Many of the houses in the village were, of course, built long before the advent of the car and therefore have little or no space for off-road parking. It took a long time for the Parish to obtain the small amount of land for the existing car park in School Lane. It is unlikely that other affordable land will be easily obtained for further parking provision.

The School Lane car park is not used to its full capacity, particularly during the daytime (possibly because the entrance is quite tight, especially when cars are parked opposite). With nearly 87% of parishioners wanting traffic reduced, and 55% commenting on lack of parking, a re-examination of how best to encourage people to use the car park is required.

RECOMMENDATION

- *Widen the car park entrance and highlight edges of walls with white "soft" bollards.*
- *Try to minimise parking on Church Hill and on bend in The Street by consultation with residents.*
- *Ensure that all new developments, additions or extensions have adequate on site parking, in accordance with the current TMBC planning requirements, particularly where those extensions take up space used currently for parking.*

Who: *Parish and Borough Councils.*
Time scale: *Within 12 months.*

'…nearly 87% of parishioners want traffic reduced, and 55% commented on lack of parking'

3.5 QUIET LANES

A number of our lanes are part of the Greensand Ridge Quiet Lanes project. The object of the Quiet Lanes National Demonstration Project, which began in 2000, was to identify a network of rural lanes with low recorded vehicle volumes and speeds where walkers, riders and cyclists were encouraged to use and enjoy the tranquil surroundings.

The rural nature of these lanes precludes the use of aggressive traffic calming methods and so the lanes are marked by a series of unobtrusive posts. Unfortunately, this means that drivers take little or no notice of the signs and do not reduce their speed. The majority of these drivers are almost certainly local residents!

Particular vulnerable points are where footpaths and bridleways join the surfaced lanes. It is probably only a matter of time before there is a serious incident involving a child or animal on these lanes.

RECOMMENDATION

- *Reinforce residents' awareness of the possible dangers, particularly to children and animals, by the use of publicity, posters and reminders.*
- *Review footpaths and highways crossing points and assess the need to increase drivers' awareness of them.*

Who: *Parish Council and Footpath Group.*
Time scale: *Within 9 months.*

3. *Highways &* TRANSPORT

3.6 FOOTPATHS, BRIDLEWAYS AND VERGES

The Parish is served by a large network of footpaths and bridleways, many of them very well used. The relationship between land owners and ramblers in the Parish is also good. Generally, the signing is clear but needs to be maintained, and the paths kept free of excess vegetation. There have been a number of comments about the difficulty of negotiating some stiles, particularly for older people and dogs.

Opinions varied on the best way to manage verges, which are seen as a valuable wildlife habitat. Most people recognise the need to keep them mown and tidy in some places for safety reasons but, where possible, preferred to let them grow naturally for wildlife and flowers. The majority of the respondents commented on removing litter to make the local lanes and paths more attractive.

RECOMMENDATION

- *Stiles that require repair or replacement should be made "dog friendly" as well as easy for the less mobile to negotiate. Kissing gates are often very good in this respect.*
- *Whilst maintaining safety and good visibility at junctions, the mowing of verges should be delayed, wherever possible, to allow wild flowers to set seed, so improving bio-diversity and habitat.*
- *A note in The Plaxtol Herald reminding people of their social responsibilities, asking anyone who walks the lanes and paths to help by picking up any litter, and putting it in the nearest bin.*

Who:	*Village Footpath Group to liaise with KCC Public Rights of Way officer.*
Time scale:	*Ongoing.*

3.7 PUBLIC TRANSPORT

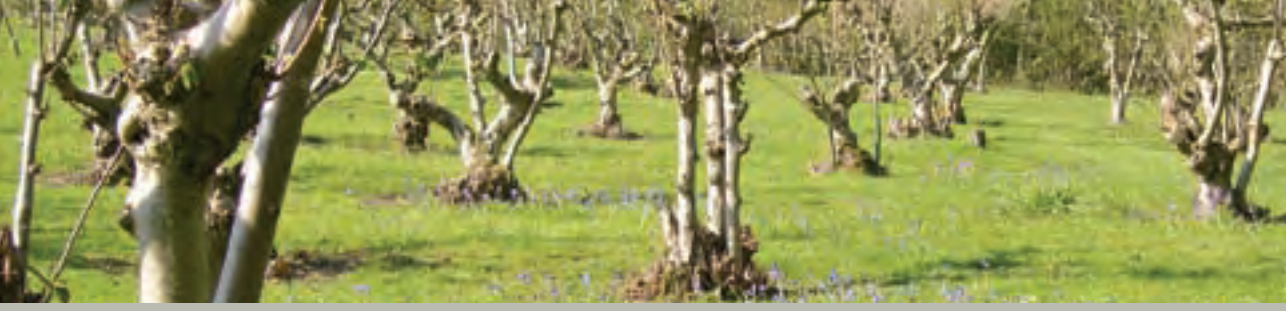
Although a relatively small number of parishioners use the bus service, for some it is a lifeline. It is unlikely ever to be a profitable service for a commercial company and so must rely on a subsidy from KCC. For people who do not drive, young as well as old, this is an essential service and should be treated as such.

Recent threats to cut the service even more, were defeated by a campaign of letter writing and consultation between the Parish Council, the bus company and KCC.

RECOMMENDATION

- *A small working party should be set up to consult with, and be a point of contact for, the bus company and KCC on any potential changes to timetables and routes.*

Who:	*Working party to consist of regular bus users and a member of the Parish Council.*
Time scale:	*Within 9 months.*



4. Local Businesses IN PLAXTOL

Like any rural community, Plaxtol has seen a marked reduction in the number of shops in the last 50 years. Today there are two shops (butcher and general stores/post office) and three public houses: The Papermakers Arms, The Golding Hop and The Plough. Several small and flourishing businesses operate from home or premises within the Parish. Examples include academic tuition, bed & breakfast, business mailing and word processing, decorating, driving instruction, electricians, garden and landscape design, horticultural and forestry, IT, marketing, plant nursery, pottery, surveying and a wood yard. Just within the Parish boundary is a wrought iron works (originally based in the village itself) as well as a servicing centre for cars.

Although most businesses are still run by Plaxtol parishioners, some are managed by non-residents whose commitment is equally strong.

Farming is part of the heritage of this area, but the farming landscape has also altered. From many holdings growing a variety of crops and keeping animals, we now have larger farms managing much of the Plaxtol area. The surrounding orchards are planted with apples, pears, cherries and plums. There are traditional cobnuts and fields of soft fruit. Sheep are grazed and the larger farms (including Fairlawne Estate) harvest arable and vegetable crops. Hops, a traditional and recognizable feature of the Kent landscape, are no longer grown in the Parish.

Parishioners value local businesses and the range of services they provide. The questionnaire shows that nearly 50% of parishioners use the village shop and post office on a weekly basis and 20% use the Butcher. 93% of respondents commented that the shops and pubs were "very important" or "important" to village life. They are at the heart of village life. All kinds of Parish events and businesses are promoted through the village shops: they are a place where villagers meet and exchange news. If Plaxtol were to lose its shops, the fabric of the village would alter irreparably.

RECOMMENDATION

- *Over the next 12 months, businesses will be asked to continue to contribute information on their services for the Plaxtol Parish website.*
- *Smaller businesses to consider being part of a register of local services for parishioners.*

Who: *Parish Council and residents.*
Time scale: *Over next 6 months.*

Plaxtol Stores & Post Office (top right)
Ken Francis butchers (right)

A big help
0%

Ken Francis
(LICENSED TO DEAL IN GAME)

5. Policing & COMMUNITY SAFETY

5.1 POLICE COVERAGE

Plaxtol falls within the West Kent Police area. The Parish is supported by a Community Officer, a constable based at Borough Green, who has a detailed knowledge of the area. He is popular and knows many of the residents. His role encompasses a number of parishes, restricting his availability to this community. This means that most calls rely on other West Kent officers who, in an emergency, may have long journey times and are unfamiliar with the area and its maze of lanes. So, in general, policing of rural areas remains a matter of concern.

5.2 CRIME

Unlike some nearby rural and urban areas, the crime rate shows that Plaxtol is a comparatively safe place with occasional acts of minor vandalism. Other crimes, including burglary of houses, are infrequent. As many modern vehicles are fitted with more sophisticated security devices, immobilisers and better locks, there is a trend for thieves to break into a house for the keys to steal a high-value car. Thefts from sheds and outhouses are also an increasing problem.

5.3 NEIGHBOURHOOD WATCH

Plaxtol Neighbourhood Watch is run by a village co-ordinator and deputy and a large number of local co-ordinators who look after their "patch", typically about twenty of their neighbours. The Parish Council pays the cost of a bi-annual newsletter that is delivered to all houses within the scheme. The village and deputy co-ordinators receive the occasional e-mail alert from the police, warning of suspicious persons or vehicles, or requesting information on incidents that have taken place. These warnings are passed on by e-mail to any parishioner who asks to be included.

5.4 CONTINGENCY ARRANGEMENTS

Plaxtol Memorial Hall is the designated control centre and gathering point for any disaster or major emergency.

Historically, there has been a great community spirit, evidenced by the response to the hurricane and heavy snowfall in the 1980's and the major water supply failure in 1999. It is felt that steps could be taken to formalize the availability and coordination of similar relief in the future.

It would be useful to have a list of people and equipment that may be called upon to assist in an emergency. This list could be held by the Parish Council and also lodged at the Memorial Hall with names and contact numbers displayed.

PC Tony Wiles

RECOMMENDATION

- *Maintain the present very good relations and contacts between the Parish Council, Neighbourhood Watch and the Community Police Officer.*
- *Use The Plaxtol Herald and local publicity as well as newsletters to:*
  - *Promote the use of security devices and alarms on all buildings including outbuildings.*
  - *Remind residents of the need for key security.*
  - *Encourage more residents to receive alerts by e-mail.*
- *Create a register of parishioners and local businesses that have equipment, tools, or other facilities, and who would be available to assist in case of emergency or some kind of local disaster.*

Who: *Parish Council, Neighbourhood Watch and a working party for the Register.*

Time scale: *Over next 9 months.*

6. Social Facilities & SERVICES

6.1 BACKGROUND

Village life is expected to be quieter than in urban areas and this is supported by 79% of respondents who indicated that the peaceful and quiet aspects of village life are of the highest importance. The Youth questionnaire returned a 40% figure for those who thought access to the countryside and open spaces was the most important aspect of living in the Parish. This is similarly backed up in the main questionnaire, with 81% saying that open spaces were a very important local feature.

6.2 CURRENT FACILITIES

The businesses highlighted in section 4 (page 20) provide local services to the community and, as already stated, there is particular emphasis on the village retaining the existing shops and public houses.

The Parish Council maintains two well used recreation grounds (one at each end of the village) and contact with surrounding areas is established through a regular bus service to Borough Green, Maidstone, Sevenoaks, and Tonbridge (going onto Tunbridge Wells).

Many Plaxtol residents use the doctors' surgery-with-dispensary in Borough Green and the practice offers surgeries in Plaxtol. Prescriptions can be collected at the Plaxtol Post office and there is also a homeopathic practitioner in the village.

The W.R.V.S. continues to operate giving much needed help and assistance to the elderly and disabled.

6.3 PLAXTOL MEMORIAL HALL

The Plaxtol Memorial Hall in the heart of the village was constructed as a school in 1847 and has been used as a Village Hall since 1964. It became a Grade 2 Listed building in 1984 and continues to be the centre of village activity. It is the meeting place of many residents sharing a common interest. It provides facilities and services for organisations of a diverse nature, such as Plaxtol Nursery Group, Youth Club, Toddlers Group, Plaxtol Parish Council and Women's Institute. Additionally it is used for wedding receptions and other functions, plays and exhibitions, as well as being the appointed centre in the event of a village disaster. It is utilised as a local polling station for both general and local elections.

Plaxtol Memorial Hall

RECOMMENDATION

- *Parishioners should be encouraged even further to shop regularly at the Stores, Butcher and the other local businesses. Nearly a third of parishioners are using the Stores less frequently than once a week and therefore the aim is naturally to increase that figure.*
- *There should be discussions between the shop owners and the Parish Council to help increase awareness of the facilities, maybe a monthly item in The Plaxtol Herald with ideas of what is of special interest in the Stores, nursery, butcher's, pubs and so on. It needs to be borne in mind that the Stores handle posters and tickets for local events and a loss of that facility would be detrimental to the village.*

Who: *Parish Council.*
Time scale: *Over next 6 months.*

6. Social Facilities & SERVICES

6.4.1 PLAXTOL NURSERY SCHOOL

There is a highly regarded Nursery School formed in 1975 and offering pre-school activity for children between 2½ and 5 years old. It is open every morning and also on Friday afternoons. It is accredited by the pre-School Learning Alliance, a Quality Assurance Scheme which confirms its quality status. Its recent Ofsted report gave the school the highest possible grade.

6.4.2 PLAXTOL PRIMARY SCHOOL

There are about 100 pupils attracted from the Parish and the surrounding area. It has four classes, with two year groups per class. In 2004 a £200,000 extension, masterminded by the Head teacher and Governors, provided the school with new classrooms and space for a library and IT facilities. There is a strong rapport with the PSA, who help provide extra-curricular activities (such as swimming, tennis, chess, music, art, netball and rounders). The school's most recent Ofsted report was highly complimentary.

6.4.3 PLAXTOL PLAYTIME

This is a parent and toddler group for children aged 3 and under. They meet fortnightly in the Memorial Hall and are funded by the Parish Council, Parochial Church Council and Memorial Hall Committee and parents. Sessions include stories, singing, playing with toys and games. It enables youngsters in the village to make new friends as well as being a support group for parents.

6.4.4 PLAY CHURCH

A monthly service is held in the church by the Rector for under 3 year olds. This introduces the children to the Church and its pastoral role, and offers in particular, support and social interaction for young mothers and their children. In addition the Pastoral Assistant pays a monthly visit to the families involved.

6.4.5 CHILDREN'S CHURCH

This is a monthly meeting run by the church for children between 4 and 7 years old in the Memorial Hall. Activities, singing and refreshments are offered. The children join the tail end of the Family Communion in the church for a blessing by the Rector and a brief chat about what the children have been doing. Children from 7 upwards are encouraged to attend the Family Communion on the same Sunday each month. They actively participate in the service, by, for example, carrying the cross and accompanying the Rector when she is reading the gospel in the middle of the church.

Duck Race in aid of Plaxtol Church

6.4.6 YOUTH CLUB

Spearheaded by Plaxtol Church since April 2005, this is a recent addition to the range of activities on offer for young people within the Parish. Aimed at an age range of 11-15, a fortnightly meeting is held in the Memorial Hall assisted by parents and members of the Parochial Church and Parish Councils. There is a further idea of an occasional 'Talk and Take Away' discussion, with the Rector organising a guest speaker over a Take Away supper.

With nearly 30% of respondents in the Youth Questionnaire commenting about the lack of activities, this should go some way to addressing their concerns. The questionnaire also highlighted a 40% return on those keen to have a communal tennis court.

'The church is regarded by a high percentage as a focal point for the community and its historic building is considered to be very important.'

7. Clubs & SOCIETIES

7.1 VARIETY ON OFFER

There are many clubs and societies in the Parish. Those meeting on a monthly basis include the Local History Group, Women's Institute, Men's Society, the Friends of Plaxtol Church, the Healing Prayer group and Bible Study group. Others are the Cricket Club (which also takes members from outside the Parish), the Tennis Club (which combines with Shipbourne, and has an annual tournament in the Parish), the Plaxtol Players (who perform an annual play either in a resident's garden or at the Memorial Hall) and PlaxArt. There is an active Church choir (many of whom have sung together for over 20 years) that sometimes combines with Shipbourne Choir to give joint services and concerts. There is also The Plaxtol Scholars, a choir which takes members from within and outside the Parish, gives occasional concerts in Plaxtol and sings the services in Cathedral churches and Abbeys around the country.

NOTE: Plaxtol Cricket Club has begun a process of upgrading its pavilion to offer not only better facilities for its 60 local children and senior team, but also equipment which would be available to the local community.

The questionnaire established that a Gardening Club was attractive to over 100 residents. This was also signalled as a popular choice in the "Have Your Say" Weekend (July 2004) suggestion boxes, where a further idea was for a Book Club.

With 73% of respondents to the questionnaire stating that Societies, Clubs and the School were very important or important, it is no surprise to see the diversity of activity.

7.2 COMMUNICATION WITHIN THE PARISH

The primary source of information on events in the Parish is the monthly magazine, The Plaxtol Herald. Organized and delivered by the Church, it is funded by both the Church and Parish Council and also by voluntary contributions. Anyone can offer an article for publication. It has advertisements from local businesses, a diary of events, information on up-and-coming special events, meeting notes for clubs, societies and the Parish Council, a gardening page and a letter written by the Rector.

As has already been seen, the Village Stores also provides a hub of information.

The Plaxtol community web site, **www.plaxtol.com** is now operational and can be used by all parishioners and local businesses.

The Plaxtol Players ('Wizard of Oz') (above)

Plaxtol History Group outing (right)

RECOMMENDATION

- *Ask Plaxtol Nursery and other volunteers to explore the possibility of a monthly gardening club.*
- *Ask for volunteers to start a book club.*
- *Develop the joint Shipbourne and Plaxtol Tennis Club with its two all-weather courts.*

Who: *Plaxtol Parish Council, Plaxtol Nursery and residents.*
Time scale: *Over next 12 months.*

8. Environment

8.1 BACKGROUND

Plaxtol is rich in environmental assets which are appreciated by residents. This is verified by quotes from the questionnaire and the "Have Your Say" weekend:

'A typically Kent village in an idyllic setting.'

'Orchards, meadows, fields and agricultural nature of area surrounding the village is of the utmost importance to most villagers.'

'The views of the surrounding countryside are some of the most superb in the South East.'

Features of the surrounding countryside are regarded as 'very important' or 'important' by over 90% of residents who completed the questionnaire.

8.2 WOODLAND & OPEN SPACES

Residents enjoy places of interest whether protected by legislation or areas designated purely for the benefit and enjoyment of the community. Thus, there is pride in the Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), known as Bourne Alder Carr, as well as the several Sites of Nature Conservation Interest (SNCI's), of which Boot Wood is a notable example. There is also a Roadside Nature Reserve beside Roughway Lane identified by Kent Wildlife Trust because of the diversity of its plants and wild flowers.

In contrast, the Garrett Memorial Land, as well as being an amenity space, is a haven for fauna, flora and insect life. Incidentally, the area also contains rare varieties of apples and pears, and rootstock of the original well known Golding Hop (developed for commercial growing by William Golding, a former Plaxtol resident).

The Basted Mill Public Open Space project provides a further example of involvement of the community in preserving local countryside, and there is much support for the appearance of the established greens at The Spoute and Yopps Green, both close to the centre of the village.

Garratt Memorial Land

8.3 THREAT

The proposed new South East Plan indicates that the designation of SSSI's should be abolished. Whilst many environmentally important areas in the Parish have protection currently, new housing demand creates more pressure on land resources, which increases risk to the environment and wildlife habitats. This is exacerbated by the limited commercial return and costly maintenance of woodland. There is also the danger that areas of meadows, if neglected, could become scrubland.

RECOMMENDATION

- *To protect the SSSI at all times and fight against any diminution of status, whether as part of the South East Plan or otherwise.*
- *To continue a flexible and balanced policy in relation to planning issues.*
- *To further encourage parishioners to visit the Garrett Memorial Land.*
- *To encourage owners of woodlands and meadows to maintain these areas, and to evolve a monitoring process to detect any serious deterioration of the situation.*

Who: *Plaxtol Parish Council and Borough Council.*
Time scale: *Ongoing.*

8. Environment

8.3 RIVERS

The River Bourne rises in the chalk of the North Downs and flows into the Medway. Historically, by providing a good flow of water, the river brought a great deal of industry to the area including tanning, milling and papermaking. With the decline of industry, the Bourne is a much quieter place and the footpaths along its banks provide residents and visitors with pleasant walks. The river and its banks create a wonderful thoroughfare for many forms and species of wildlife and the questionnaire shows 95% of respondents as having a high regard for our rivers and streams.

8.3.1 THREAT

House building in low lying areas can create rapid water movement, affecting river flow which can lead to flooding and thus threaten existing housing, farmland and footpaths. (An inch of rainfall over one square mile adds up to 15 million gallons of water and runs off hard surfaces two to six times faster than off grassland).

RECOMMENDATION

- *Ensure that the Parish Council has adequate records relating to areas where there is a propensity or history of flooding.*
- *Acquire data from insurers in postal districts affected by flooding.*
- *Planning applications for new housing in areas of perceived danger should be subject to detailed survey and all residents should monitor any building proposals, especially near the River Bourne, and keep the Parish Council informed of any potential threats.*

Who: *Borough and County Councils.*
Time scale: *Over next 12 months.*

'…95% of respondents…have a high regard for our rivers and streams.'

8.4 ORCHARDS AND HEDGEROWS

Orchards are synonymous with Plaxtol rural life. Most farmland in the Parish is classed as Grade 3 and is adequate to sustain crops such as apples (mainly Bramley, Cox and Gala) which account for much of the acreage, Conference pears, and cobnuts.

Local landowners play an important role in the management and restoration of boundaries and the mixed deciduous hedgerows that benefit and sustain bird, mammal and insect life.

8.4.1 THREAT

In addition to the high price of land, there is continuous and sustained competition from abroad to the commercial aspects of fruit-growing in the area. The consequences could be severe if current trends in agriculture continue, as this could result in the grubbing-out of all orchards. Another threat is to local employment. Increased use of machinery means a decline in the number of personnel involved.

The replies in the questionnaire confirm the importance of a policy for the survival and proper upkeep of boundaries and hedgerows. The continuing commercial pressures on farmers and land owners may give rise to a diminution in good husbandry, affecting all aspects of land maintenance.

RECOMMENDATION

- *The availability and subsequent purchase of locally-grown produce should be encouraged and supported.*
- *Monitoring of boundary hedges should be a continuous process, as should the upkeep of roadside verges highlighted in Section 3.*

Who: *Parish Council and residents.*
Time scale: *Ongoing.*

8. Environment

8.5 FARM BUILDINGS

There are only a few older farm buildings now in commercial use within the Parish. Purpose-built storage units provide adequate facilities and therefore traditional farm buildings become available for approved conversions. 90% of respondents to the questionnaire thought that traditional farm buildings were an important feature of the countryside.

8.5.1 THREAT

Lack of funds may see properties falling into disrepair or, with the current emphasis on additional homes, a reduction in the standard of conversions may arise.

RECOMMENDATION

- *It is fundamental that such conversions for domestic purposes should utilize local materials and have a high design specification, whether grade Listed or otherwise,*
- *The Plaxtol Parish Design Statement is an additional point of reference.*

Who: *Parish Council and Borough Council.*
Time scale: *Ongoing.*

8.6 WILDLIFE, FLORA AND FAUNA

There is a wide range of flora and fauna in the Parish. The diverse habitats support a good range of insect and bird life, varying from the tiny wren to pheasants. The kingfisher hunts by the Bourne whilst woodpeckers make their mark in the woods. Tawny owls and little owls are regular visitors. Animals including badgers, deer and foxes use the habitat to advantage. Voles, field mice, weasels, stoats and hedgehogs rummage and hunt in the undergrowth.

Several types of rare fungi have been found in woods at Basted as well as in nearby Hurst Woods. The only recorded sighting in Kent of a very rare moss was in Boot Wood in Plaxtol, whilst Plaxtol churchyard can boast Kent's only site of rare lichen.

Country sports have played a large part in making and maintaining the look of the countryside.

8.6.1 THREAT

The increased housing development and smaller gardens are causing a loss of habitat and food resource.

A further area of concern is the large number of species at risk and listed in the Kent Red Data Book. Plaxtol and its surrounding countryside is a home for many of these endangered species, which include skylarks, song thrush, linnet, house and tree sparrow, bullfinch and goldcrest.

RECOMMENDATION

- *Promote an observation scheme, run by the school and/or youth club that registers local species of birds and animals, to enhance some existing schemes currently in operation on local farmland. Analyse and print an annual report in The Plaxtol Herald so that these issues are in constant focus.*

Who: *Plaxtol Primary School and Youth Club, spearheaded by Parish Council and Church.*
Time scale: *Within the next year.*

8.7 WASTE AND NUISANCE

Whilst removal of litter is regarded as a priority, there are the additional problems of fly-tipping and abandonment of old cars. The advent of higher landfill taxes and the fall in the value of scrap metal is liable to make this anti-social habit an increasing problem. People seen dumping rubbish should be reported to the local authority.

Light pollution is an increasing problem. Only 1% of the South East has truly dark skies at night. Plaxtol is an area suffering from a high degree of light pollution. The increased use of security lights and street lighting in surrounding areas are contributing factors.

Areas of concern for the future may include the proliferation of telecommunications masts to add to the current unsightliness of overhead wires and telephone lines.

RECOMMENDATION

- *All residents can play a part in helping the landfill problem by recycling whatever they can and composting garden rubbish.*
- *Village street lighting is at an acceptable level at the moment and it should be monitored to ensure it is not increased.*
- *There should be a concerted and continuous campaign to rid our village of as many overhead power and telephone lines as possible. All parishioners gaining knowledge of any potential plans for mobile phone masts should notify and support the Parish Council (as they did recently) in ensuring that if they are built, they are placed in a suitable and least harmful area.*

Who: *Parish Council and residents.*
Time scale: *Continuous.*

Bibliography & ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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