

Hunton Herald Report from Parish Council Meeting – 20th September 2016

HGVs and Road Safety

It was clear from the 40 or more local residents that attended the parish council meeting on 20th September where increased HGVs and road safety were on the agenda, that traffic on Hunton's roads continues to be a matter of great concern. This issue was brought sharply into focus when a concrete mixing lorry, one of many that had been travelling to Amsbury Farm in recent weeks, crashed into the entrance of Hunton school on 12th September. As Clive Baxter, the owner of Amsbury Farm, attended the meeting and spoke during the open session, much of the discussion surrounded the current activities at the farm and the recent expansion.

Mr Baxter explained that due to the minimum wage legislation, he had decided about a year ago that he needed a robotic grader, which only took three people to operate instead of the 23 required to grade by hand. A farmers' cooperative, Fruition PO Ltd, of which he is a director, had invested in the machinery and he had financed the extension to house it. Fruition had formed a new packing company and he had leased his packing and storage operation to them. They would be storing and packing his fruit as well as fruit from other local growers. There had been a temporary increase in traffic over the previous month, as the machine hadn't been working so they were sending fruit offsite to be packed. With regard to the large number of concrete deliveries, they had concreted over the yard and added some extensions, laying half an acre of concrete in total. This was needed to comply with their insurance, as packing materials were not allowed to be stored within six metres of a building. The crash at the school had been an unfortunate incident, which was caused by the driver of the lorry sneezing violently and losing control.

Cllr Tony Stanbridge expressed the concerns of local residents about the increasing number of HGVs around the village, using unsuitable routes, getting lost and blocking people's access, and that the largest amount of these were from Fruition at Amsbury Farm. He understood that they were not only servicing local farms and the surrounding area, but were also importing fruit. Amsbury Farm was no longer just a farm but had become a distribution centre. Residents had heard that the traffic could double, could be ten times the current amount, but didn't know the truth. This raised serious concerns about road safety and increased road damage. There needed to be a traffic management plan in place to protect the community.

Cllr Annette Trought asked Mr Baxter if he could quantify the number of HGV movements a day and over what timescale but Mr Baxter was unable to provide this information. He did say though that he farmed 106 hectares of fruit and over the last 25 years tonnage per hectare had increased from 13 to 40 tonnes. New varieties now crop at 100 tonnes per hectare and he will be planting some of these, so there will be an increase in traffic. When pressed further about current traffic volumes he said that he could give this information but not during harvest. He conceded that signage was a problem but said he had made a lot of effort to improve this, which was difficult when he didn't own the land on East Street leading up to his farm.

Concerns were also raised about a number of inconsistencies in planning applications in recent years and adjustments to buildings that were not in accordance with approved plans. Borough Cllr Brian Mortimer particularly mentioned the application recently submitted by Amsbury

Farm to the planning department at Maidstone Borough Council to determine whether prior approval was needed to build the extension to house the mechanical grader under the rules of permitted development. It stated that there would be “no impact on the existing vehicle movements” and that it would “enable J L Baxter & Son to more efficiently market their produce”. It did not mention that the packing and storage facilities were being leased to Fruition, something which might constitute a change of use, and did not include the newly laid adjacent areas of concrete hard-standing for which there didn’t appear to be consent. He felt that a proper planning application should be submitted so the council could make an informed decision and could look at whether a traffic management plan was needed.

Mr Baxter said that nothing had changed; he had been packing and storing other people’s fruit for a long time and that this had actually been a requirement in order to receive two lots of grant aid. Cllr Stanbridge responded that the nature of the business may not have changed, but the scale had and nothing had been done to manage the increasing traffic. Mr Baxter said that there had been no increase in operations and activity to date and offered to speak to Fruition to see if he could arrange for the parish council to visit.

A local resident commented that he found the large number of Clockhouse Farm vehicles to be more of a problem and more dangerous than the HGVs going to Amsbury Farm.

Wilsons Yard, George Street

A representative from Esquire Development Ltd attended the meeting to discuss their revised plans for the Wilsons Yard development in George Street. At the request of the parish council they had split one of the residences into two semi-detached houses to better meet the needs of the community. The plans submitted in September now comprise three four-bedroom detached properties and a pair of two-bedroom and three-bedroom semi-detached houses. Some parishioners at the voiced their objections as they felt that five dwellings were still too many and would have an adverse effect on traffic, but the parish council felt that the traffic could be much worse if the site was sold as a commercial site and the size and number of houses was better than before, so the decision was made of “no objection” to the planning application.

The Chances, Lughorse Lane

A parishioner queried the number of static caravans and touring caravans currently on site at The Chances in Lughorse Lane. Although it is believed that there are more caravans on site than have permission, Maidstone Borough Council planning enforcement will not take action as any action is stopped when a new planning application is submitted. Parish Council Chairman, Gary Thomas, suggested that concerned residents should write to the borough council.