



ALTON CHAMBER NEWS

The Voice of Alton Business

March 2011

TOWN COUNCIL PROPOSE A CONTINENTAL MARKET

Alton Town Council has agreed to a 4 month trial of a Continental "Food Lovers" Market on the 4th Saturday of every month.

The Chamber of Commerce committee has resolved to monitor the quality of the market and to survey local retail businesses to determine the effect on their trading.

Click on the link below for more on this item

EDITORIAL TEAM

and regular contributors

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ACE Ltd	Stephen Lewis
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THIS MONTH'S MEETING

This month the Chamber Committee has decided to give its support to the Town Mayor's Charity Quiz Night which is on Thursday 24th March (our normal meeting day).

The event is to be held at Alton Assembly Rooms at 7.15 pm for prompt 7.30 start.

The cost is £5 per head, which includes a Ploughman's Supper.

There will also be a cash bar.

The Chamber proposes to make up teams of 6 from members wishing to attend – or bring your own full team of 6.

Please advise the Chamber Secretary by Wednesday 23rd if you wish to attend.

CLICK ON ICON FOR MORE INFO



Financial Report



Secretary's Corner



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VIRTUAL FILING SYSTEM



MEET THE COUNCILLORS

A report on our February meeting



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A LONG AND WINDING ROAD

A Financial report from HSBC Bank

It is exactly two years since UK Bank Rate was cut to a 300-year low of 0.5% and there was little likelihood of a change at this month's MPC meeting. Concerns about above-target inflation were outweighed by the fact that the revised GDP figure for Q4 2010 was a slightly bigger negative than originally thought (-0.6%), and by the prevailing uncertainty about the current pace of activity. The Budget, meanwhile, is in two weeks time. Although little change is expected in fiscal policy, the only time interest rates have moved just prior to the Budget since 1997 was the emergency cut to 0.5% in 2009. Everything pointed to no change, although the 'hawks' and 'doves' probably again went through the motions of making their cases for the minutes.

The consensus view is for Bank Rate rise to rise earlier than previously thought. In the regular monthly poll conducted by Reuters, the median forecast of 63 economists predicted a 25 basis points rise in Q3 and for Bank Rate to end 2011 at 1%. The minutes of the February meeting showed the vote to hold had narrowed to 6-3 but the MPC will probably wait for confirmation that growth has picked up before increasing Bank Rate. The first estimate of Q1 2011 GDP will be published at the end of April. The HSBC view is still for rates to remain flat until the first quarter of 2012.

All the recent indicators of consumer activity point to weak spending and fragile confidence. The data for high street activity in February show that the surge in January after the poor, snow-affected December was not sustained. There was a dip in spending in the first full month of the 20% VAT rate. The figures at this time of the year are, however, always volatile and the three-month growth rate is usually a better guide to trends. By this measure, growth was positive but subdued, with an increase of just 0.2% on the previous three months.

In the housing market, mortgage approvals rose by 3,000 in January (to 45,723) but this failed to reverse the 10% fall in December. The figure in January was still below the average for the last six months of 2010. Data on prices were contradictory (the Nationwide a bit up, the Halifax a bit down) but suggest that the market was treading water. The three-month measure showed prices down a little.

Unsecured lending to households was much weaker than expected in January with the Bank of England reporting that net lending declined by £333 million, the biggest monthly fall for 15 months. Although there was a modest increase in credit card lending, this was offset by a much weaker picture in other personal lending, which was largely the pattern throughout 2010. Repayment remains households' priority.

So, not surprisingly, consumer confidence remains very subdued. The January GfK headline index number was -28, well down on the -14 of 12 months ago when the economy was only just out of recession. Underpinning consumer weakness is the continuing uncertainty in the labour market. For the first time in four months, claimant count unemployment rose in January, albeit modestly, while the number of people in employment fell by 68,000. Even worse was the 93,000 rise in the level of economic inactivity, people neither in work or looking for work.

The fact that annual earnings growth (2.3%, excluding bonuses) remains below the rate of consumer price inflation, highlights the pressure on spending power, which is no longer being supported by borrowing.

Not all bad news

For once there was some positive news from the public sector. January is a key month for tax receipts and the take this year was the second highest monthly figure on record and 17% up on January 2010. Current expenditure remains high but is moderating and so there was a surplus on the current budget (of £8.5 billion for the month), the first for 12 months and twice as large as last January. For the first time in two years, there was no monthly net borrowing and for the fiscal year to date the public sector deficit was almost £7 billion lower and net borrowing £14 billion lower than in the same period in 2009-10.

These will be the last published public finances numbers before the Budget but, encouraging as they are, should not change the Chancellor's fiscal stance. The first year's targets were always going to be the easiest and the fact that he has achieved them comfortably suggests the bar may have been set a bit low. At this stage of his programme, and this early in the Parliament, he needs pounds in the bank for when the going gets rough rather than think in terms of relaxing his grip. A broad restatement of his fiscal objectives is on the cards for March 23rd.

The corporate sector also looks to be in reasonable shape, according to the latest PMI surveys. In February, manufacturing held on to the previous month's gains, keeping the headline reading at its highest since the survey began in 1992. Although the service sector report was a bit disappointing (still positive but a little weaker) construction again surprised on the upside (back close to the buoyant levels of last spring) and confirmed the bounce-back from December's weather-affected result.

Particularly encouraging has been the strong showing of exports which in January led to the sharpest monthly decline in the value of the UK's trade deficit since records began in 1980. The total value of exports of goods in January reached a record £25 billion while the value of imports fell. Manufacturing has been the star performer since the end of the recession with output rising by 3.6% in 2010, more than twice as fast as GDP. Much of this was on the back of strong export growth, and the PMI, CBI and BCC survey results suggest this is set to continue in the coming months. If the £4.1 billion surplus on trade in services is factored in, January's total trade deficit dipped under £3 billion for the first time for a year. This points to the rebalancing starting to take effect, with net trade likely to make a positive contribution to growth this year.

Conclusion

On the basis of these recent numbers, GDP growth in the first three months of 2011 has been estimated at a robust 0.7%. Although welcome, it will give ammunition to those favouring a rate rise, since inflation rather than growth will then be seen as the principal policy priority. At 4%, the CPI is well outside the target range and, given what is happening with oil prices, likely to go higher. The MPC has missed the target for all but one of the past 13 months and is likely to miss it for much of 2011. Yet, for reasons that have been well-rehearsed, putting up interest rates is unlikely to dampen inflation but will certainly damage confidence and activity. The case for higher interest rates, as with so much in economics, seems a great deal stronger in theory than in practice. The Bank Rate pressure on Mervyn King will nevertheless intensify and, if he is to resist it, he must be rather lighter on his feet than he has been lately in some other areas for which he is responsible.

Membership renewals

Although I don't have any new members to report, it is pleasing to see those renewal fees coming in. If you have yet to renew, can I encourage you to make your remittance soon. Our Treasurer will be sending out further reminder statements.

Some complaints have been received about the invoicing. Our Treasurer, Elliott Ross, set up our new accounting system which is a great help for our money-management. He is able to E-mail invoices and statements directly from the programme, but some of its output needs some tweaking. If you received a statement but have no invoice, this may be because the original E-mail was rejected. If you can't locate your original invoice, please let us know and we can send it again

Town Manager – the story so far

The Licensed Victuallers Association wrote a letter to Alton Town Council demanding a Town Manager. The reply stated that there was no money for this and also pointing out that events have happened in 2010 without such a person in charge. This is true, but we feel that such a person could take a more leading role in helping to develop our events and other activities to promote the town. The Article on the Continental Market gives some background on what happened when AIM employed the Town Manager. The Town Council says it has not got the funds, so if we want a new Town Manager, it is up to businesses to provide the answer.

At a recent Town Council Events Working Party, we asked if Alton Town Council would offer verbal support for a new Town Manager if we can find the funding. After quite a discussion, the answer was yes. The task now is to find those funds. There are several avenues to try – the most obvious and fairest is to set-up a Business Improvement District (BID).

This is something that the District Council would have to operate and collect a small percentage on top of everyone's business rates within a defined area of the town. It could be as low as 0.5% extra. The funds collected would then be ring-fenced for the use set out in the BID portfolio. It is the fairest way to raise money, but the hardest to achieve because the District Council (EHDC) have to fund the considerable set-up costs and 51% of the businesses have to vote for it.

The alternatives are to ask for a large contribution from the supermarket(s) that win the battle at the north end of town, be it Tesco, Waitrose or Morrisons. There are also Iceland, Sainsbury's and Marks & Spencer to approach. In these economically challenging times, I suspect that many will not offer anything, but it is one avenue to try.

We can of course ask all retailers and publicans to contribute, but we are not sure how many of the small businesses will be willing and able to contribute. I would be lying if I said it would be easy. Never the less, it is still worth trying and we will keep you posted as things progress.

Pitfalls of moving away from BT

It is likely that some members will have been called by a company trying to get you to change from BT to their much cheaper wholesale service. It would seem that the regulations mean that companies can offer half-price line rentals and very cheap call prices. I have a story to tell that might help you if you get stung by the desire to reduce your phone bills...

I was phoned by a company offering half-price line rental fees and very low call charges - on the spot decided to take up their services. Within a day or two I got their paperwork, but it wasn't until a week and a bit later that I got a letter from BT. At the bottom of the page it quoted an estimate of 'Charges and Adjustments' of a whopping £905.95!!! It turns out that my change of broadband service to BT at the end of December has meant that the contracts had been altered and clearly breaking this has serious consequences. I rang Advantage Telecom and they were very understanding and cancelled the change-over. I also rang BT to check their end and found out that they have the power to stop the change-over if required.

I am not writing this to do-down the company offering the discounted services. However, I would point out that their sales talk starts off sounding like they are from BT and by the time you realise that they are from another company, the promise of savings has got you hooked. I urge you to think before you leap. As far as I remember, they did not point out the likelihood of BT charging cancellation fees. They did ask if I had been in the same contract with BT for more than 12 months, and this is where the £905 problem came in - £796.77 of this was for the cancellation of a 'Commitment Package'.

To sum up, I am not discouraging people from moving away from BT, but there are salient facts worth knowing before you make the decision. Firstly, it only applies to business lines, so don't get your hopes up for your home phone line. Secondly, BT has a standard line cancellation fee of £112.18 +VAT, so you must expect this come what may. If your line has 'Featureline' facilities, BT will charge you £30 to cancel this. If you are like me and get flustered by all the complexities of utility contracts and charging structures, this story should help you to make a better-informed decision about changing your phone company.

Next ACCI events

March Thursday 24th – Mayor's Charity Quiz at Alton Assembly Rooms 7 for 7.30pm £5 each inc meal
April Thursday 28th – Details to be confirmed
May Thursday 26th – Wine Tasting at Grange Hotel



TOWN COUNCIL PROPOSE A CONTINENTAL MARKET



Alton Town Council has decided to trial a Continental “Food Lovers Market” for one Saturday a month commencing 23rd April for 4 months. The Market will be in the part of the High Street which currently holds the Tuesday Market. The Market will be organised by Brunomart, a business which has run French Markets in Alton previously.

The Chamber committee discussed this proposal at a recent meeting and it was agreed that, although local retailers had previously expressed concerns over the effectiveness of the markets, the performance of the markets should be monitored and then an informed opinion taken.

When the Chamber consulted about the ProdGrow Saturday markets, retailers did say that they would welcome other high-quality Saturday markets. The question is whether this new market falls into this category

Sanya Ward of Crystals Jewellers is leading the Chamber’s efforts to ensure that retailers’ opinions are heard.

Retail members on the committee will put out a questionnaire to all retail businesses in the town centre, prior to the first market, to ask that they give an opinion on the 4 events, based on the appearance and organisation of the stalls and what effect the market had on their business compared with a “non-market” Saturday.

The general opinion of the committee is that if the Continental “Food Lovers” market is of equivalent standard to the Farmers Market which comes on the 2nd Saturday of each month then businesses will generally benefit overall from this addition.

At the end of the 4 month trial period the committee will analyse the results of the survey. If the results are clear cut – ie either overwhelmingly in favour of the Market becoming a permanent feature, or overwhelmingly opposed to its continuation – then the Chamber will present the findings to the Town Council.

If there is some diversity of opinion, or other relevant matters are highlighted, then the Chamber will arrange an open meeting to discuss the findings.

If other members of the Chamber would like to give their views then please e-mail or write to the Chamber Secretary.

During the committee’s discussions regarding the introductions of more markets it was pointed out that 3 years ago Wendy Bailey, the then AIM Town Manager and members of the Alton Initiatives Management (AIM) board had attended a meeting with Town Councillors. At that meeting the councillors severely criticised AIM for “organising too many markets and not enough events”.

Since the Town Council took back the licence for the Tuesday Market from AIM (and the income that was being generated) it is now licensing more markets but organising less events - and Alton does not have a Town Manager !

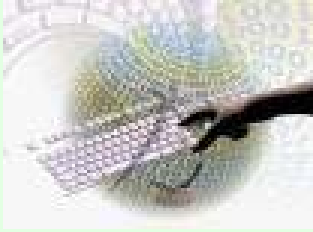
Whereas AIM used all of the income from the Tuesday Market to pay the Town Manager and partially finance events, the Town Council has set aside a “pot of money” to finance events. However, some of this pot is being used by the Council to fund events which had previously been financed from the general Council budget.

It will be interesting to see how this policy develops in the future and whether the Tuesday Market money will continue to be used to promote events in the town which benefit local businesses, as intended when AIM was set up – or will the money just get consumed into the Council’s general funds.

The Chamber will keep a watching brief – and Council elections will be coming up in May !

Further information: www.brunomart.com

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VIRTUAL FILING SYSTEM

An Article by Stephen Lewis

I recently heard about one person who prints all relevant E-mails and then deletes the original E-mails. He then complains about all the paperwork everywhere! I also know that many people let their E-mails build-up in their InBox, so when they want to refer back to a past message, it is hard to find. Here are some of my tips to help you manage your virtual office:

1. Only ever print E-mails and attachments if you need them away from your computer. If you have an iPhone, iPad, Kindle, or a portable computer (laptop, MacBook, notebook), then the chances are that you will be able to manage without printouts even when at meetings.
2. Delete the rubbish E-mails as soon as you can so that at least you're only left with E-mails that are relevant to you.
3. Create a filing system within your E-mail programme. If you download E-mails to a programme like Outlook or Outlook Express (Pop3), you have the option to create folders and sub-folders. I created a folder called 'Archive' at the top level and then have a vast number of sub-folders for all the activities I'm involved with. When I want to store an E-mail, I simply open up the branch of the folders I want to access and drag and drop the E-mail into the folder. If you use Gmail (webmail), you can create 'Labels' which perform a similar function, but you can't have sub-divisions, so the list could get quite long.
4. Sort through old E-mails not filed every so often and take the time to file or delete them. This is the hardest to do because E-mails that demanded action or had multiple actions tend to get forgotten and then build-up despite your best efforts. When the mood takes me (not often) I go through as many of these old E-mails in my InBox and file them. Although you have to mentally put your arm behind your back, you'll be surprised how satisfying it is and how fast you can reduce the numbers if you work from the oldest first.
5. File all your sent E-mails almost as soon as you've sent them and file them in the same folders as the E-mails received. You should be able to keep your 'Sent items' or 'Sent Mail' folder empty.
6. Try to write E-mails that only talk about one topic, or at least concern only one organisation. However, you can't always avoid this, so whether it's an E-mail you've written or received, copy them into the relevant folders. You can do this by drag & drop – just hold 'Control' whilst you drag and a plus symbol will appear to indicate that it will be a copy. In Gmail, many of the things in items 4, 5 and 6 cannot be done, but there is an option to tick the labels for any given E-mail, thereby allowing you call them up by subject.
7. Do a search of E-mails if you need to find a particular piece of information. If you have sub-folders, make sure you select the option to search sub-folders. In my version of Outlook, you have to choose the 'Advanced Find' and the option to search sub-folders is in the 'Browse' box that appears when you choose the folders you want to search. Gmail also has a search facility.
8. Above all, don't let a well-meaning relative delete all your old E-mails. I know this happened to our President, meaning that she lost information that she later wished to refer back to.

I hope this helps you to help make the best use of E-mails. My desk and office are untidy, so I'm in the same boat as many people – I just try my hardest to keep my E-mails in reasonable order. If you don't do this, then the burden of an untidy virtual office can be overwhelming because of the volume of E-mails that we all send and receive each day.

Pat Lerew says to me, "You never read my E-mails". The truth is that I scan E-mails for things that demand immediate action, file things that I want for reference but need no action and leave things that require attention later. I have yet to find an easy way to cope with the latter category, but I'm working on it!

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February meeting report



MEET THE COUNCILLORS

This meeting is part of the Chamber's continuing efforts to bring all three levels of local government closer to businesses in Alton. A panel, chaired by our President Pat Lerew, faced nearly 20 members to answer a range of questions relating to local business issues.

The panel was made up of councillors (left to right) David Willoughby (Mayor, ATC), John Smith (ATC & EHDC), Andrew Joy (EHDC & HCC), Glynis Watts (EHDC) and Richard Millard (EHDC). Councillor Richard Millard sits on the EHDC cabinet representing Economic Development.

The range of topics included the cost of car parking, the reinstatement of a town manager and the South Downs National Park. The discussions were well-balanced and everyone kept their cool, leading to a productive evening. Councillors had the opportunity to both speak and listen, so it was most definitely a two-way discussion.

The Chamber of Commerce is aware that many business people find it hard to understand which council does what. It takes time to get a handle on how to approach the different councils, to know who to complain to and where to ask for help. They may also be unaware that councils are very conscious of the importance of businesses in the local economy and in providing jobs.

Both EHDC & HCC each have an Economic Development Office and their role is to do what they can to help and support businesses. As well as council support, they have links to a wide range of support organisations that are there to help businesses. I urge you to make the most of what they've got to offer.

All in all, the event went well and the feeling was that it was a worthwhile event to repeat in the future. One member described it as our own version of Question Time. In our case, we would like the panel members to feel that it was as much for them to hear what people have to say as it was for them to speak.

Although we have yet to programme the next meeting, it is your Secretary's desire to hold another in the autumn. We could consider inviting our MP if members feel that the view from Westminster would help discussions. The list below shows the web addresses for further information:

ATC: **Alton Town Council** (Alton Town Hall)
www.alton.gov.uk

EHDC: **East Hampshire District Council** (Petersfield)
www.easthants.gov.uk/edo/edo.nsf

HCC: **Hampshire County Council** (Winchester)
www.hants.gov.uk/business-advice



ALTON PANCAKE RACE



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