



ALTON CHAMBER NEWS

The Voice of Alton Business November 2011

IT'S A CRACKER !

This year's festivities start with the Christmas Lights Switch On in the Market Square at 6pm Friday 25th November. Santa will be making his first appearance of the year!

The Yuletide Festival in the Town Centre will be on Sunday 4th December and it promises to be bigger than ever !

There will be the traditional mix of Craft, Charity and Commercial stalls throughout the Town Centre and Santa will be at the Assembly Rooms !

This year, as part of the Yuletide Festival day , the "Christmas Cracker" at Alton Community Centre will have more stalls than ever before and will be the biggest single indoor market ever held in Alton and, being indoors, it will provide welcome cover if the weather isn't kind.

Santa's Post Box will be in the foyer of the Community Centre from 1st December until 15th December.

All in all, Alton can look forward to a great lead up to the Festive Season with lots of shopping opportunities and lots of fun for the kids !

Click on the icon below for more information on this item

CLICK ON ICON FOR MORE INFO



Financial Report



Secretary's Corner



More information on the Chamber's
ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

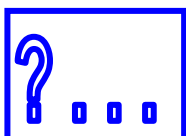


Chamber Christmas Dinner at the Swan Hotel



Christmas Cracker & Yuletide Festival

and more!



... and finally

EDITORIAL TEAM

and regular contributors

Editor	David Gay
Business	Mike Baker
Financial	Alison Fleming
ACE Ltd	Stephen Lewis
Community	Pat Lerew
Local News	Stephen Lewis
Entertainment	David Gay

**THIS
MONTH'S
MEETING
is the
Chamber's**

AGM

and will be held at
Alton Community
Centre on
Thursday
24th November
6pm
for 6.30pm start.

Light refreshments
will be served
before the meeting.

The 'Frinz' Café at
the Community
Centre will be
offering meals
afterwards – please
book in advance.

It would be helpful if you
would advise the
Secretary by Tuesday
22nd, if you wish to
attend.

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THE GOING GETS EVEN TOUGHER !

A Financial report from HSBC Bank

Last month, the MPC increased QE by £75 billion, and there is a widely held view that there is even more QE to come. Despite the fact that the first estimate of Q3 GDP came in at the top end of expectations (0.5%), the Eurozone turmoil has added to fears that the UK economy will weaken. An injection of money is all that is left in the policymakers' locker to stimulate activity but nothing is expected until the early part of 2012. The forecasts for QE (now £275 billion) are for an increase to between £325 billion and up to £500 billion with Bank Rate staying on hold at 0.5% until 2013.

After a series of downward revisions, the current view is for GDP to rise by around 1% this year a rate which could push up towards 1.5% next. Even if this modest growth is achieved, at the end of 2012, the level of output will still be almost 1.5% lower than the pre-recession peak of 2007. For all the weakness of the domestic household sector and the dampening effect of the Chancellor's fiscal programme, it is instability in the Eurozone that has led to the deepening gloom.

This month, the Bank of England publishes its latest quarterly Inflation Report, while Mr Osborne delivers his pre-Budget Report on the 29th, both of which should give insights into the official view of where the economy is expected to go in the coming months.

Still growing

The ONS published relatively good and relatively bad news on the overall state of the economy in the last month. The bad was a revision to Q2 GDP, halving the three-monthly growth rate to 0.1% and trimming back Q1 growth from 0.5% to 0.4%. The weakness of household finances was apparent as consumer spending fell for the fourth successive quarter, the rate of decline accelerating to 0.8% in the three months to June. Perhaps more disappointing in view of the need to 'rebalance' the economy was another negative contribution from net trade, as exports fell by 1.3%.

A more positive note was struck with the first cut of Q3 GDP. At 0.5%, it was stronger than expected and just a tad below the UK's long-term trend rate, but some of it could be attributed to the unwinding of special factors that temporarily depressed output during the previous three months. The fact that the annual growth was also just 0.5%, coupled with a deterioration in the more timely indicators (such as the PMI surveys), suggests that the underlying picture remains weak in what is now the third year of 'recovery'.

It might be clutching at straws, but there were also other positive signs to support the view that growth next year will be on an upward trajectory. Recent retail sales numbers were better than expected in September and up on the previous month, but the environment in the run-up to the crucial Christmas period remains challenging. The prolonged period of historically low interest rates has given households the opportunity to restructure personal sector balance sheets and the first evidence that spending might be starting to emerge from the debt-enforced retrenchment came from the latest consumer credit figures.

Unsecured lending grew by more than expected and the £629 million increase was the biggest rise for six months. Even the public finance numbers moved in the right direction. Net borrowing in September (£14.1 billion) was lower than a year earlier and lower than market expectations, leaving the cumulative figure for this fiscal year broadly inline with the Chancellor's Budget forecasts.

Against this apparently good news is the fact that CPI inflation jumped to 5.2% and the RPI to 5.6%, the highest since 1991. This was unfortunate for the government which uses the September figure to index benefits and so will add to government spending. The Bank of England's Inflation Report this month will almost certainly re-state its view that inflation will fall in 2012 even if Bank Rate is left at 0.5%. There is, therefore, no need now to address a problem that will sort itself over the next 12 months, particularly if raising interest rates will damage business activity. The labour market continues to disappoint.

The latest official figures point to a further deterioration as unemployment rose and the number of people in work fell. In this environment, pay growth has remained subdued, with average earnings increasing at a rate well below current inflation rates, implying a continued squeeze on real incomes and spending power. And the housing market remains becalmed. According to the three main sources (Nationwide, Halifax and RICS), prices dipped in September - although the Nationwide index was broadly flat in October.

The number of loans for house purchase eased back a little in September (to 51,000), the first fall since April. But neither the change in prices nor approvals is very marked or significant but signals a market going nowhere at the moment, although it is a key indicator of consumer confidence.

Europe

The risk the Eurozone turbulence poses the UK comes from several directions. Trade is the most obvious since the EU is our largest market. In 2010, £142 billion of our £265 billion of exported goods went to the EU, a 54% share. Of the top eight destinations, only the US was not in the EU. Taking account of invisibles and services as well as goods, the value of Europe rises to almost £300 billion.

With forecasts for growth in the area being marked down close to recession, the prospects of the UK using exports as an escape route to fill the hole left by weak domestic activity seem increasingly problematic. On the basis of past experience, exports could fall by as much as 1.5%, or around 0.2% of UK GDP. If Eurozone weakness translated into stronger sterling, of course, the effects could be even more marked.

An even bigger threat comes from the financial consequences of a disorderly default involving one or more countries. Although the contributions from the UK government to the rescue packages are relatively modest, there may be more to come if the IMF is involved. Although the UK banks comfortably passed the stress tests on Greece, a more widespread default would change the dynamics. And even if British banks have not lent directly to the affected countries, there could be indirect exposures to the banks which have and to companies which will struggle in a recessionary environment.

Some estimates have put the negative impact of the current crisis (including wealth and confidence effects) as high as 1.5% of UK GDP, which could even double if the currency were to collapse. Since growth in 2012 is not expected to be much above 1.5%, the prospect is alarming. With very few cards left to play in terms of interest rates, QE and taxation, the Chancellor's concerns about the euro are understandable. Even an 'orderly' resolution of the current problem will not be pain free for the participants, and those on the fringes will suffer collateral damage. Since the focus of the policymakers has been on debt and default, and the prescribed remedy has been austerity, there is a high probability of recession in the Eurozone in 2012. Growth has yet to feature on the agenda.

Conclusion

The outlook seems unambiguously bleak with few options left to the policymakers to turn it around. While this is certainly not where the UK expected to be two years after recession ended, there are signs that the slow fragile recovery will continue in 2012. Inflation will come down, the corporate sector is in good financial shape, household debt has been reduced and public finances seem to be on track. The Chancellor will spell out his priorities for next year in his Pre-Budget Report at the end of the month, and he will almost certainly home in on the need to sustain output growth. Without growth, his fiscal targets will fall by the wayside. Mr Osborne is very unlikely to say so now, but should the need arise next March, he may use fiscal policy to stimulate activity (VAT, income tax, employers national insurance, etc.). There is light at the end of the tunnel !

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Looking for those shoots of growth

This year has seen it's fair share of unseasonably warm weather in both Spring and Autumn, but it would seem that the weather gods have finally noticed that it's November. As many will have noticed, many of the large retail chains have been promoting Christmas earlier than ever in the hope they can bring in more money this winter. Given the news of the ongoing problems with Greece and now Italy, things are not looking good for 2012.

There don't seem to be any "green shoots of growth" as indicated by the past Labour government, so let us pray that 2012 doesn't get any worse. Although Alton has its fair share of empty shops, our independent retailers seem to be clinging on. However, it would seem that Little Green Dragon has closed and we are losing both parts of 'Experience' (under the Town Hall) in the New Year. I am sure that others will go before things get better and it is regrettable at a time when we are trying to prepare for the coming of Tesco.

Recessions are not only cruel for businesses, but they also take away sometimes long-standing products and services for consumers. One can argue that failing businesses are being naturally pruned out to leave behind the better-organised entrepreneurs. Whilst there is some truth to this, it is certainly not true across the board. For instance, we lost Alton Craft Centre and Lantern Foods because neither owner could sell on their businesses. The latter had, in the space of five years, established itself as a purveyor of fine foods, but of the few that expressed an interest, none were able to take over in time for the lease deadline.

The knock-on effects of the recession are making us think twice about spending money on 'luxury goods' and this too must be affecting manufacturing the world over. Jobs are at risk and for those like myself working from home, many are struggling to get work. I am sure it will come to an end, but I can't remember such a deep depression in my lifetime. When you look at the pictures of the 1930s depression, it is clear that it hit even harder, and famously large areas of America became a dust bowl, presumably because of drought and lack of cultivation. Even now, I gather that a lot of people have lost their houses in the USA, so let's hope that it doesn't get as bad here.

Life goes on and I can only wish you all well in trying to keep your businesses going. If you ever wonder why you are in business, remember that we are all an essential part of the country's economy. Despite the feeling that the large corporations are taking over, the smaller businesses make up a large chunk of our nation's economy. It has been said in the past that we were a nation of shopkeepers. It is now truer to say that we are a nation of innovators, small businesses and highly-skilled people. Oh, and by the way, we are the fifth largest manufacturing nation in the world. Remember that next time someone says that our country is no good any more. Today's challenge might just be to survive, but tomorrow our task is to capitalise on our strengths so that we can again shout about our country's prowess.

Alton College Foundation Scholarship

The college held a award ceremony recently and the Chamber was able to make its first scholarship award to a second-year student called Hester Watson. In the process, we have established a new kind of one year scholarship designed to encourage promising first year students to continue to finish their courses. Our Vice President, Andy Goodall, took part in the final interviews and I gather that the competition for our scholarship was close.

At the ceremony it was pleasing to see so many students receiving scholarships and we were reminded that this is the tenth year that the foundation has awarded scholarships. All are sponsored by local businesses and individuals, many of whom spoke at the presentation.

For those who haven't been involved with the college in some way, it is easy to forget that it is one of the country's leading college of further education and Alton Chamber is very pleased to be supporting one of its students.

Committee members leaving and those anew

We will be saying goodbye to two long-standing committee members at the coming AGM – David Gay and Mike Baker. David Gay has been involved with the Chamber for over 25 years and has been President four times, plus he was Secretary before me for ten years or more. We have talked about making some kind of long-service award and I would be the first to recommend that David be lauded for his contribution to the Chamber and Alton's business community. David is continuing to edit this newsletter and so I take my hat off to him for his staying power and willingness to contribute his time.

Mike Baker joined the Chamber more than ten years ago, I understand at the time when he was planning the Millennium celebrations. He was President for four years and made a great contribution to both the Chamber and AIM (Alton Initiatives Management Ltd.). His work as chairman of AIM led to the establishment of many of Alton's events and the recognition that events are important to Alton, and that we need a Town Manager to run them.

Before we get too watery-eyed, I am pleased to say that we have two prospective committee members who are standing at the AGM: Cathy Hogg of Charwell House and Abdul Loyes of Balti Tandoori. Assuming that the members vote for them, both will be a real asset to the Chamber.

We are always looking for new committee members, especially those in businesses in the Mill Lane area. We have but three members in this area, and this isn't an implication that they should stand, but rather that we need to find new members who will want to promote the issues that are important to those many businesses.

Christmas Shop Window Competition & Quiz for the public

We are organising our established competition for our retailers. We will be judging on Monday 19th December and will present the certificates later in the same week. If you are a retailer, please can we appeal for you to do all you can to decorate your window, as this sort of thing helps to make the town more appealing for shoppers over the festive season.

We thought that we would repeat the quiz for the public, but extend it over a week or so. We will write to retailers about both the window competition and the public quiz, asking for their questions for the quiz. As we did last year, we will make a questionnaire for people to pick up in shops.

Chamber website offline

It is regrettable to report that the Chamber's website is not working at present. This is due to some kind of technical problem being experienced by the designer.

We are not happy about the situation and it is likely that we'll move the site to a new host and start all over again. We apologise for this interruption to the service and we will do all we can to get a new website up and working as soon as we can.

AGM**Joint Annual General Meeting of
Alton Chamber of Commerce & Industry (ACCI)
Alton Chamber Enterprises Ltd. (ACE)****AGENDA**

- Apologies for absence
- Minutes of 2010 AGM (ACCI)
- Matters Arising (ACCI)
- President's report (ACCI) and Chairman's report (ACE) for past year
- Treasurer's report for past year (ACCI & ACE)
- Proposal for 2012 Subscriptions (ACCI)
- Proposal for auditors for coming year (ACCI)
- Election of Committee (ACCI)
- President's address (ACCI) & Chairman's address (ACE) for coming year
- Any other business (ACCI & ACE)

**Chamber Christmas Dinner
at the Swan Hotel
13th December 7pm for 7.30pm**

This festive social event is for members to bring friends, relatives and colleagues. The cost of the meal is £18 for 3 courses and £16 for 2 courses. Drinks are not included. If you wish to attend, please contact the Chamber Secretary by **5th December** giving your menu choices from the following:

STARTERS

- Tomato & Jersey cream soup (v) with multi-grain bread & butter
- Brie & cranberry filo parcels (v) with cranberry sauce dip & salad garnish
- King prawn cocktail with multi-grain bread & butter
- Chicken liver, Madeira & oven-roasted mushroom pâté with thick-cut toast, caramelised red onion chutney & butter

MAIN COURSES

All with British root vegetables, Brussels sprouts & crispy roasted potatoes

- Hand-carved British roast turkey breast with all the trimmings
- Slow-cooked beef in a Tuscan red wine sauce with chestnut mushrooms, balsamic roasted onions, garlic & thyme
- Oven-baked salmon tail fillet with a tomato concassé & dill butter sauce
- Chestnut & mushroom roast (v) with a cranberry & cashew nut topping

DESSERTS

- Christmas pudding (v) with brandy sauce
- Cream profiteroles (v) with chocolate sauce & double cream
- Mascarpone & Madagascan vanilla cheesecake (v) with a spiced mandarin & red berry sauce & double cream
- Luxury chocolate tart (v) with chocolate sauce & double cream

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Alton's Yuletide Festival!

Town Centre,
4th December 2011
10am to 4pm

Christmas
Market

Santa's
Grotto

Stall in the
Assembly Room

Nativity
Donkeys

French
Market

Carol
Singers

Dancers

Merry Christmas
From Alton Town Council

Bands

Victorian
Street
Organ

Sweet
Exhibitions

FREE
Parking

Craft & Charity
Stalls

Children's
Rides

Alpacas

Further details on
www.altonevents.co.uk
or 01420 83986

Christmas Cracker !

Sunday 4th December

10am - 4pm

Alton Community Centre

STALLS GALORE

FREE ADMISSION

FREE MULLED WINE AND

MINCE PIES,

HAMPER RAFFLE

SANTA'S POST BOX

FRINZ CAFÉ OPEN

CHRISTMAS CHEER, SNOW MACHINE

and much, much more !

For more information ring

01420 85057 or pop in to the Centre.

Other festive treats happening in Alton this season!

Friday 25th November

Christmas Lights Switch-On

From 5:50pm in the Market Square, Alton begins its festive season with a visit from Father Christmas accompanied by a kids funfair, carols, music and panto characters.

Weekends in December

Santa Specials

The ever popular Christmas trains on the Watercress Line return again on 3rd, 4th, 10th, 11th, 17th, 18th, 19th, 21st, 22nd, 23rd & 24th December. See www.watercressline.co.uk

Saturday 10th and Sunday 11th December

Christmas Tree Festival

Visit St. Lawrence Church's Christmas Tree Festival with mince pies, tea and coffee. All donations to the Church of England Children's Society.

Saturday 10th December

Farmers' and Craft Market

A chance to sample and buy some of Hampshire's finest produce and pick-up some unique hand-crafted gifts from 10am till 3pm.

Friday 16th and Saturday 17th December

'The Present'

Written by Noël Jones with music by Harriett Morris, The Discarded Nut and Edge Theatre Companies come to the Assembly Rooms with a tale of two children's Christmas adventures your family will never forget. Suitable for 7 yrs plus. Tickets £7.50 and £5.50 (concessions) available from the Allen Gallery and Curtis Museum. Call 01420 82802

Friday 23rd December

Carols Around the Tree

Join the Salvation Army in the Market Square singing traditional carols around the Christmas Tree between 7pm and 8pm.

Sunday 15th January 2012

'Arabian Nights'

The Proteus Theatre Company return to Alton Assembly Rooms with their latest production. Shows at 1pm and 5pm. Tickets cost £6.50 and £5.50 (concessions) and are available from the Assembly Rooms on 01420 82203.

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? ... and finally

Stuck for an idea for a special present for someone in your life ?
Then why not book them an Adult Education course to study a new hobby?

Alton Community Centre has Leisure Learning Brochures now available detailing a wide range of day and evening classes for next term.



Leisure Learning in the Alton, Alresford, Horndean, Bordon, Liss and Petersfield Areas.

Discounts Available:
10% for A.C.A. Members,
25% off for over 60's
and 50% off for those on applicable Benefits.

Please enrol early
To ensure that your class runs

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