



ALTON CHAMBER

NEWS

The Voice of Alton Business

May 2011

ALTON TURNS BLUE AT THE RECENT ELECTIONS !

Following the recent elections, Alton Town Council is now dominated by Conservative Councillors, with only two Liberal Democrats and one Independent. This is a major change to the Town Council which previously was LibDem except for one Conservative.

The District Council elections also proved disastrous for the LibDems who lost all of their Alton Wards to the Conservatives.

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EDITORIAL TEAM

and regular contributors

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

THIS MONTH'S MEETING

WINE TASTING & DINNER

Alton Grange Hotel

Wednesday 25th May

Click [HERE](#) to link to a page with the menu & other info.

This is always a very popular event for members and guests.

As a significant amount of alcohol can be consumed at this event, please give consideration to your transport home !

CLICK ON ICON FOR MORE INFO



Financial Report



Secretary's Corner



WINE TASTING and Dinner



ALTON TURNS BLUE



2011 Royal Wedding
Alton Shop Window Competition



Alternative Wedding Reception

♥ ♥ ♥ *A Report* ♥ ♥ ♥



GOAL SETTING FOR BUSINESS

NO CHANGE - NO SURPRISE !

A Financial report from HSBC Bank

There was little doubt ahead of May's MPC meeting that the Committee would again sit on its hands with Bank Rate. A fall in the annual rate of inflation and a positive first estimate of growth in Q1 (but not too positive) were encouraging signs for the Treasury and took the wind out of the sails of those arguing for an increase in rates. Even before the meeting, two of the three who voted for a rise in March and April appeared to be wavering when they admitted they thought the GDP figure for January-March would be stronger. It is now 27 consecutive months of UK Bank Rate at 0.5%, and the HSBC view remains that rates stay at this level for the rest of 2011.

Recovery back on track

There was probably a big sigh of relief in the Treasury when Q1 GDP growth was reported as 0.5% on the previous three months (a rise of 1.8% over 12 months). The relief was twofold: firstly that the figure was back in positive territory after falling in Q4, and secondly that the rise was not so fast as to increase the likelihood of interest rates going up. Averaged over two quarters, the economy seems to be still rather fragile and in need of the continuing stimulus from historically low interest rates

Much of the market comment on this growth rate was negative, the point being made consistently that averaging the last two quarters suggests that activity was broadly flat. But another, more optimistic, interpretation is plausible. Looked at over 12 months rather than six months, growth was 1.8%, or 2% excluding oil. Then, if the fiscal tightening of 1.5% that occurred during 2010-11 is taken into account, the actual increase in activity is above 3%, significantly more robust.

As the economy braces itself for a further fiscal squeeze, it is also worth noting that each of the past three recoveries has been associated with significant fiscal retrenchments: by Denis Healy in 1976, Geoffrey Howe in 1981, and Norman Lamont / Ken Clarke in 1992-93. Experience has shown that while fiscal tightening slows growth, it does not mean that a recovery stalls or goes into reverse.

The burden of tax increases and spending cuts will fall most heavily on the household sector, which is looking increasingly weak. A recent report by Deloitte concluded that this will be the fourth successive year of decline in inflation-adjusted earnings, the first time this has happened since the 1870s! This year alone, Deloitte estimates that the average fall in income per household will be £780, the biggest annual decline on record. And, given the sluggish outlook for growth, it will be several more years before real disposable incomes return to their 2009 levels.

Evidence of consumer fragility is not hard to find. In March, the British Retail Consortium reported sales were 1.9% lower on the year, with like-for-like sales 3.5% lower. Although slightly distorted by the timing of Easter, these are the weakest numbers since the survey began in 1995. The official ONS series was only a little better and showed that sales seemed to rely on significant price discounting. The housing market continues to tread water according to a variety of indicators from several sources.

Prices have been broadly flat, and the monthly level of mortgage approvals seems stuck in the mid-40,000s. From the BBA, comes data suggesting that consumers remain focused on paying down debt, with higher mortgage

repayments in March (home owners 'over-paying') and unsecured lending staying flat. Consumer confidence is undoubtedly affected by job prospects as much as current spending power and there were a few encouraging signs in the latest set of labour statistics. The number of people in work rose by 143,000 in the three months to February – and, for once, it was more full-time than part-time jobs. There was also a decline in unemployment, but lower because of an increase in the size of the labour force. There is, however, the prospect of further public sector job losses to come, and even for those in work the annual growth in earnings (2.2% excluding bonuses) is still much slower than the rise in consumer prices. Real earnings are under pressure.

Not surprisingly, consumer confidence has stalled at levels normally associated with recessions. The headline reading of the closely-watched GfK survey was -28 in February and March, after hitting a 22-month low of -29 in January. The last time it was as consistently low as this was two years ago, and before that in the autumn of 1990, immediately after the ERM debacle.

The corporate sector to the rescue?

A squeeze on the personal sector, uncomfortable though it will feel for many people, is an integral part of the 'rebalancing' of the UK economy away from an excessive reliance on household spending. And there are signs that the corporate sector is responding to the stimuli of lower interest rates, competitive currency and global growth. But not all sectors. The construction industry was the obvious laggard in the Q1 GDP figure, output falling by 4.7% in just three months. The survey methodology for construction is, however, very new and there are doubts about the robustness of the figures. Both services and manufacturing continue to progress at rates consistent with a steady recovery.

The better-than-expected trade figures in February, attributable to an impressive surge in exports of goods to non-EU markets such as China, Brazil, Russia and Turkey, reflected the global nature of the UK's recovery. The forward looking surveys of industry suggest that both output and exports will grow in the next few months.

Perhaps the single best indicators of the short-term outlook for business are the PMI surveys, which every month check the pulse of industry. In all three sectors, manufacturing, services and construction, responses remain above the critical 50 level, and have been for well over a year.

Policy priorities

As the media keep pointing out, consumer price inflation is currently running at double the target rate, and the MPC is being criticised for consistently missing its objective. But the real issues for the medium term are keeping growth on track and restructuring the public finances. Both of these rank more highly than ensuring inflation is 2% rather than 4% and both are more achievable if interest rates are kept at their present levels. And since there are already deflationary forces at work which will pull the CPI lower anyway (in particular, slow earnings growth), there is no compelling reason for the MPC to raise rates in the short term. "More of the same" will be the most appropriate policy stance for several months yet.

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New Members

I am pleased to report that we have gained three new members since our last issue:

Brendoncare Alton (The Brendoncare Foundation)

Charity running 10 care homes for the elderly
Mr. Kevin Young (Home Manager)
E-mail: kyoung@brendoncare.org.uk
Tel: 01420 549797
Adams Way, Alton, Hants. GU34 2UU
www.brendoncare.org.uk

Little Green Dragon

Art, craft and self-sufficiency retail
Mrs. Claire Maxfield (Proprietor)
dragons@thelittlegreendragon.co.uk
01420 87801
3C Normandy Street, Alton, Hants. GU34 1DD
www.thelittlegreendragon.co.uk

Acqua Doria Limited

Independent Domiciliary Care Provider
Ms. Wendy Keating (Branch Manager)
admin@acquadoria.com
01420 85202
Channing House, 14 Butts Road, Alton, Hants. GU34 1ND
www.acquadoria.com

Little Green Dragon was previously a member when Jackie Slack was the proprietor, so it is good to welcome them back into the fold. Claire has now combined her 'Make Do & Mend' shop with Little Green Dragon. Looking at our other new members, it is interesting that they are both in the care sector.

Membership renewals

I'm sorry to keep banging on about this, but there are still a number who have yet to renew and we really do need your financial support to keep things going.

Alton Cinema Group

This is a very new initiative that has already got a following of interested people. For those not in the know, the proprietor of Alton's Palace Cinema has long expressed a wish to sell-up and retire. The Palace Cinema is 100 years old and although it has seen better days, many people still remember it in times past when it had two tiers of seating. Thus, as well as being a cinema, it has a historical place in Alton's fabric. A group is forming to look at the options and see what can be done to continue the service. It is early days, so there are a lot of discussions about what to do next, when and how. As a local resident, I am involved in the group and we are looking for more people to help with the project. If you would like to take part in some way, please let me know.

Supermarkets & Retailers

In the last issue, I wrote my own opinions about how I see the supermarkets to be a threat to the town centre. The Chamber Committee was concerned as our agreed stance had previously been one of neutrality, given that we exist for the benefit of all businesses in Alton. We have met again since then and decided that we should still remain neutral but that we should do all we can to support the smaller town businesses to help redress the balance.

Committee member and retailer Sanya Ward has put forward the idea of creating a retailers' group and we fully support this. The questionnaire that's gone out about the Saturday "Food Lovers' Market" included a place for retailers to express an interest in this group, so I'll let you know how this has got on. The idea of this group is to make sure that retailers have the chance to coordinate their ideas, work on events, promotions and other related issues that concern all those in the group. For instance, a past manager of Waterstones (Caroline Finch-Stanford) asked if there was any coordination about Christmas and New Year opening times. This is the sort of thing the group can do, as well as thinking about the bigger issues that require a greater undertaking.

Focus DIY in administration

Although Focus is an out-of-town warehouse branch of a national chain, in its short time in Alton it has established itself as a service to the town. You may have seen in the national press that the company has gone into administration. The administrators have decided to keep the business running, partly because the company has a large warehouse full of unsold stock and also in the hope of selling the stores.

It is somewhat ironic that next door there is a strong chance that Tesco will be building, whilst the Focus site could become vacant. We will only know if Tesco are coming once the planning inspector has made their report in a few weeks' time. Meanwhile, Focus were in the process of applying for planning permission to divide their shop into three, offering two units for other businesses to lease. Whilst one presumes this idea has been shelved, it seems to be in Alton's interest to encourage the continued use of the Focus site.

Although the Chamber committee have yet to formally discuss this matter, we have been exchanging E-mails to explore the options. We have heard that some stores are likely to be taken over by B&Q and others by Wickes (now part of Travis Perkins). Given that Alton's Focus store was rumoured to be very successful, it would be desirable if the Alton store were picked out by one these two chains. It is not possible to make promises, but we'll do what we can avoid another derelict site gracing Mill Lane.

Next ACCI events

May	Wednesday 25 th	- Wine Tasting at Grange Hotel
June	Thursday 30 th	- Talk about the Trust that's taking over management of Alton's Museums
July	Thursday 28 th	- Summer Barbecue



WINE TASTING and Dinner



The Alton Grange Hotel

Wednesday 25th May

**Reception 7pm for 7.30 pm Dinner
carriages 11pm**

£29.50p per person
inclusive of Dinner and Wine



MENU

Ajo Blanco - Almond Soup Chilled
.....

Ham Hock, Artichoke and Crushed Broad Beans
on Toast with Aioli
.....

Braised Macaroni, Salt Cod, Tomato and Chorizo
.....

Minted Lamb Meatballs, Fried Potatoes, Greens
and Garlic Bread Crumbs
.....

Aubergine with Melted Cheese
.....

Choros with Chocolate and Coffee Sauce
.....

Coffee

The Wines will be selected to complement the Dinner Menu
by Auriol Wines of Hartley Witney



To book for this event please contact
the Chamber Secretary ASAP and
by am Monday 23rd May at the latest.



e-mail secretary@altonchamber.co.uk or telephone 01420 544881

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A Report on the District and Town Council Elections and how the results may impact on the Chamber and its members !

The recent District and Town Council elections threw up some interesting, but perhaps not unsurprising, changes to the councillors elected for both councils.

At District Council level, three prominent Liberal Democrats, Jerry Janes, Pam Bradford and Alan Chick lost their seats to Tories, David Orme, Dean Paul Phillips and Melissa Maynard.

All of the Tory candidates in the Alton Wards were elected with the only LibDems elected throughout the District being in Whitehill and Bordon.

At Town Council level only two LibDems were elected, Jeffrey Smith and Christopher Lawrence and one Independent, David Willoughby, who previously stood as a LibDem. The remaining 9 seats went to Tories.

At the first meeting of the new Town Council, Robert Saunders (lower centre) was elected Mayor, Terry Eccott (right of the Mayor) Deputy Mayor and Graham Hill (beige jacket, behind Mayor) as Leader of the Council.

The Town Council has lost some long-serving members including John Smith, David Crocker and Roger Fitzler, all of whom didn't stand for re-election, and Pam Bradford, Allan Chick Atul Patel, Robyn Fitzler and Pam Jones who lost their seats.

The question we ask now is, "How will the changes at the District and the Town Council affect Alton, the Chamber and its members in particular?"

As the Tories have for some years had a majority at District level, but few representatives within Alton, some people have thought that Alton has "missed out" and suffered a lack of interest ! It is hoped that with a younger, newly-motivated group of councillors Alton will see some benefits.

The Chamber and AIM (now Alton Chamber Enterprises - ACE) have enjoyed a good working relationship with the District Council over the past few years and it is hoped that a newly invigorated Council will continue and extend that relationship.

The Town Council, which has been almost a Libdem monopoly for many years, has no actual remit for the business community in Alton. This has unfortunately lead to the perception that there was a lack of interest and support in the promotion of the Town and its businesses.

With so much "new blood" in the Council the Chamber looks forward to seeing, and supporting, new initiatives to make the town more vibrant and successful.

The official picture above was taken by our very own Martin Saban-Smith. Note that two councillors were absent. Alton Town Council consists of 13 voluntary councillors, plus two paid officials: Town Clerk Steve Parkinson (standing far left) and Deputy Town Clerk Greg Burt (standing, second from right). There are also a number of other council employees who, whilst not pictured, all help to make the wheels turn.



2011 Royal Wedding Alton Shop Window Competition



17 shops made an effort to decorate their windows for this royal occasion. The judges awarded first prize to OXFAM (pictured left); second to Alton Second Hand Books (centre left); third prize to Cancer Research (lower left) and highly commended the efforts of the Little Green Dragon (centre right) and Between the Lines (lower right).

It would have been good to have had more contestants but many other premises had bunting outside and Alton Town Council had made a splendid job of decorating the Market Square. The Chamber would also like to congratulate the Town Council on the celebrations in the Public Gardens.



Alternative Wedding Reception

♥ A report by Tony Causton ♥

Over 100 enjoyed the Alternative Wedding Reception Ball held at the Maltings in Alton on the night of Royal Wedding last Friday in aid of Cardiac Rehab.

Guests were treated to a champagne and canapés reception followed by a delicious feast provided by the Balti House Tandoori from Market Street, Alton. During the meal guests were entertained by a brilliant dance display by dancers from the Bell House Dance Studio in Alton.

An extensive raffle and opportunity to win a Ford Fiesta, provided by Caffyns Ford, were played for during the evening and the band Red Zone ensured that the dance floor was full all evening.

Many thanks to Shirley Jennings of the Shoe Orchard and Alley Cats and Joan Mossop of St Marys Hall Bed and Breakfast and all their helpers for making it such a successful evening. The evening is expected to raise £4000 for the Cardiac Rehab Charity.

Tony Causton - Manager REHAB

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