



ALTON CHAMBER NEWS

The Voice of Alton Business

January 2012

Jubilee Celebration Plans Taking Shape

It is pleasing to report that the recent meeting of Alton Town Council's special Jubilee group underlined the ability Alton has to put on events. The Olympics are tending to dominate this year's calendar, but the Queen's Diamond Jubilee won't be missed out in Alton and the villages.

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Jubilee Plans Afoot!



Alton

CRAFT MARKET

HAMPSHIRE FARMERS' MARKETS

NEXT CHAMBER MEETING

PRESIDENT'S DINNER

Friday 27th Jan
Grange Hotel

GUEST SPEAKER
Cllr Glynis Watts

7.15 for 7.45pm
£25 per person

DRESS CODE
Evening Dress/
Dinner Jacket
or
Smart Lounge suit

Awards are presented to
local businesses in the
categories of

GROWTH
INNOVATION
EXCELLENCE

To book, please contact
the Chamber Secretary
by Wednesday 25th Jan

EDITORIAL TEAM

Editor: David Gay
Sub-Editor: Stephen Lewis
Financial: Alison Fleming
Community: Pat Lerew
Sec Corner: Stephen Lewis
Entertainment: David Gay

AS YOU WERE !

Financial report from HSBC Bank

2011 ended as it started, with the MPC leaving interest rates at 0.5%. In fact, the sum total of policy changes after 12 monthly meetings in 2011 was to increase QE by £75 billion. Despite the lack of action by the monetary authorities, however, there has been a very marked change in the economic climate. Relative to the forecasts of 12 months ago, growth prospects have deteriorated, inflation and unemployment are both higher and, according to the OBR forecasts, the Treasury's fiscal plans will be way off target. In addition, global GDP has disappointed, with the EU staring down the abyss of another recession, or worse.

For businesses and households, a further period of restraint (rather than recession) is likely, making this the most protracted upturn since 1945. Going into the third year of recovery, GDP remains 4% down on the pre-recession peak of 2009.

In the past few weeks, the Bank of England in its Quarterly Inflation Report, the OBR's report in the Chancellor's Autumn Statement, and the OECD's economic review have all marked down their growth forecasts for the UK in 2012, with warnings that even the modest rates predicted will look optimistic if problems in the Eurozone are not resolved. Against this backdrop, there has been little the MPC could do, having played most of its best cards three years ago.

An extension of QE is about all that is left and while more is widely predicted, no decision is expected until the early months of this year. Interest rates are now likely to be on hold throughout 2012 despite the above target inflation. And while the Chancellor offered selective support for some activities, there was no real fiscal easing and 'Plan A' for the public finances is still very much the primary policy objective.

The domestic economy wobbles

Just 18 months into the job, Chancellor George Osborne has learnt how stubbornly resistant the real world is to political policies and economic models. Just 12 months earlier, he thought growth in 2011 would be 2.1% and 2.6% in 2012. In November, a chastened Mr Osborne pencilled in 0.5% for 2011 and 0.7% for 2012. And this has wrecked his fiscal projections of course.

Slower growth means weaker tax revenues as well as higher spending (because unemployment is higher for example) and over the forecast period, the Chancellor will need to borrow an additional £111 billion and his ambition to eliminate the structural deficit will now stretch into the next parliament.

The growth forecast is in line the Bank of England view in November's Quarterly Inflation Report, which looked for 1% in 2012 compared with the 2% in August's Report. Like the OBR, the Bank of England expects growth back at trend by 2013. The good news was on inflation which is now likely to come in below target by end-2012 and for the rest of the forecast period, which means Bank Rate should stay on hold until at least 2013. The combination of continued low interest rates with falling inflation will be key factors in sparking the household sector back into life after a long period of weak or falling spending.

For the moment however, all the recent data point to an economy that is slowing from the 0.5% in Q3. According to the CBI, the Retail Consortium and the ONS, conditions on the high street remained challenging in the run up to the key Christmas trading season. As the GDP breakdown revealed, consumer spending was flat in Q3 as inflation squeezed purchasing power and so widespread discounting was needed to sustain volumes. The housing market continues to tread water with approvals still around 25% below the number needed to keep house price growth in positive territory, although both the Halifax and Nationwide indices have shown a degree of resilience.

The labour market conditions underline the difficulties in the domestic economy. The latest official figures, covering the three months to September, point to a further deterioration. Not only was there the biggest decline (197,000) in employment for over two years but also an increase of 129,000 in unemployment, a rate of 8.3% and the highest since 1996.

In this environment, pay growth has remained subdued. Average earnings (excluding bonuses) in the three months to September were just 1.7% higher than a year earlier, well below the rate of inflation. In such an environment, it is not surprising that the GfK consumer confidence index (-31 in November) is stuck at levels normally associated with recessions.

In industrial terms, the key PMI surveys in November for construction and services continue to hover just above the crucial 50 threshold. Although this points to growth rather than contraction, both are well down on the 55+ in the first three months of 2011. Most disappointing has been the downward slide of manufacturing. From a reading of 61 at the start of 2011, the sector is now just 47.6, implying a fall in output to come. This is in line with a weakening in the ONS data and suggests manufacturing is bearing the brunt of the Eurozone turbulence.

And then there is the on-going inflation problem, which came in above target for the 21st consecutive month in October. But, encouragingly, at 5% the annual rate was lower than September, raising expectations that the peak has passed. In the new year, the 2.5% VAT increase drops out of the numbers and the annual rate of CPI inflation should be set on a downward path. Any fears that this could eventually convert into a deflation problem are offset by the inflationary consequences of the increased QE programme.

A chill wind from Europe

It was not unreasonable for the Chancellor to point to a deteriorating external environment for 'Plan A' being blown off course. He re-stated his commitment to getting the public sector finances back on track but took very few steps to keep to the original timetable. His package of measures, largely welcome and worthwhile, do not however amount to much of a fiscal stimulus and he has instead put back (to the next Parliament) the date for eliminating the structural deficit.

From the Treasury's point of view, it means an additional £111 billion of borrowing more than originally planned, in effect digging the hole even deeper before he climbs out. His justification (and not to be under-valued) is that the UK is holding on to its triple-A credit rating, without which the debt would be even more burdensome.

But, in policy-making terms, far more important for the UK than the Chancellor's Autumn Statement are the efforts of the Eurozone authorities to protect the euro. There is no pain-free option and non-Eurozone countries will suffer collateral damage. Particularly sensitive is the position of the banks, with French and German institutions especially vulnerable. The threat by one of the agencies to look closely at the credit ratings of all the Eurozone countries will either add to the difficulties or provide the spur needed to find solutions. But a key transmission mechanism for the Eurozone's problems to the UK (apart from the loss of export opportunities) is the impact on the financial sector, either directly or indirectly.

Conclusion

It is beyond a shadow of doubt that the general economic picture is weaker now than was expected 12 months ago, and weaker than at comparable points (two years) after the end of previous recessions. This is partly because the legacy of the past (debt in particular) takes years to unwind and partly because the fragile global environment blocks off an obvious route to growth. But households have had the best part of three years to restructure personal balance sheets and the corporate sector is in good financial shape but not in a mood to spend. The public sector looks to be the weakest link going into 2012.

In this environment, the MPC was very unlikely to change its policy stance and the outcome of the December meeting was the same as for ten of the 11 other meetings this year. For 2012, more of the same is the most likely scenario. If we are lucky !

SECRETARY'S CORNER

By Stephen Lewis

WELCOME NEW MEMBERS

I am pleased to have signed-up two recruits, one returning and one entirely new to the Chamber:

Independent Asbestos Consultants Ltd.

Managing director: Mr. Lee Fielder
E-mail: enquiries@i-ac-ltd.com
Tel: 01420 88851 Mobile: 07400 118765
Post: 98 Westbrooke Road, Alton, Hants. GU34 1JL
Web: www.independentasbestosconsultants.com

Alton Herald Newspaper (Farnham Castle Newspapers Ltd.)

Sales Manager: Miss Tina Lemon
E-mail: tina.lemon@tindlenews.co.uk
Tel: 01420 82819 / Direct dial: 01252 725224
Post: 13 Market Square, Alton, Hants. GU34 1HD
Web: www.altonherald.co.uk

NEW EDITOR FOR NEWSLETTER

You may have noticed a few tweaks to the design of this edition, this is the prelude to a change of editor as of the February edition. There has been a perception that the Secretary is the editor, when in fact all the while David Gay has been soldiering-on as newsletter editor.

This format of A4 newsletter was launched in October 2003 by the then editor Bill Wilde and when David took on the role in 2005, he continued to develop the design and content. At the same time, yours truly took over as Secretary, and over time I have played a greater role in the production and sub-editing of the newsletter. Now that David has stood down from the committee, it seemed an appropriate moment to change editor...

You guessed it, it's me, Stephen Lewis, your ever-faithful servant! This task is not new to me; in my previous life in Epsom, I edited Surrey Business Club News for 4 years. It had a lot in common with the Chamber's newsletter in terms of its object: keeping the members informed.

I approach editorship with both enthusiasm and dread, in equal proportions! I enjoy writing, designing and editing, but I hate deadlines. Having said that, without deadlines, I am bad at getting things done, so it's a catch 22 situation.

There will be changes. I plan to move from Microsoft Word to a 'proper' desktop publishing programme, allowing me better control over the design and layout of the newsletter. Another change is likely to be the introduction of advertising, providing a cost-effective way for members to promote their businesses. I would also like to have more articles provided by the members – it's a free way to publicise what you do and engage readers. I hope that I will be able to build on the good work of my predecessors, keeping members informed about local news and views.

SHOPWATCH RADIO

Thanks to the efforts of the Police, I can now say that the system had been restored to working order just before Christmas using a hired analogue radio repeater. We have only received a few payments from the radio users towards the cost, so I have got to chase them up.

We are still hoping to install a digital radio system. To this end, I will be attending the upcoming EHDC Community Forum to see if we can get approval for some funding. Whilst this will be a help, we cannot expect the district council to foot the entire bill. Our town centre EHDC councillor Nicky Branch has been a huge help and I hope that our combined efforts will bear fruit later this year.

Councillor Branch and I also met Gareth Lewis of Southern Cooperative. He sits on the board of the Portsmouth Business Crime Reduction Partnership (www.pbcprp.com) and they have a lot of experience and information to pass on. One of the things that impressed us is that they have a dedicated manager for their 'Business Security Radio' system. Given that we are a smaller town, I have mooted the idea of sharing such a person with Petersfield if they feel that a similar radio system would benefit their town.

BUSINESS FAIR

This idea was suggested by Paul Susans of Wettone Matthews accountancy practice (ACCI members). Paul is chair of 'Alton 4 Business' (www.alton4business.org.uk), a business networking group that meets once a week at 7.30am every Wednesday at the Grange Hotel. He put the idea to the Chamber's committee and we have been ruminating about it over the Christmas period.

The basic concept is simple – to give local businesses, especially those which are small and medium-sized, a place to promote their products and services. We were also considering including a careers fair, but we are now moving towards promoting apprenticeships instead.

As you can tell, we haven't fully developed the concept. However, I have been communicating with people in Caterham (east Surrey) who run a similar event. There is talk of funding being available, so we have many avenues to pursue. One thought on the table is to combine this event with the relaunch of ShopWatch Radio. All things are possible, so watch this space.

CALLING PETERSFIELD BUSINESSES

Thanks to a passing comment made by EHDC councillor Hilary Ayres, I was able to contact the Association of Petersfield Businesses. I have long known that Petersfield had some kind of business organisation, but I hadn't been able to find any details. We will be talking to them about ShopWatch Radio and hopefully build a lasting link.
See: www.petersfieldtown.co.uk

Next ACCI events

- January 27th: **PRESIDENT'S DINNER** – Alton Grange Hotel – £25 - 7.15 for 7.45pm
- February 8th: **BUSINESS NETWORKING** – Alton Grange Hotel – Free! - 6pm
- March 22nd: TBA (possible a visit to a local business)

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President's New Year Message

As we start the New Year I guess that most of us in business are still facing difficult times and an uncertain future. Having said that, I sense that the uncertainty that many faced over the past couple of years is beginning to settle and I know several businesses where the first few weeks of the year have been particularly encouraging. Therefore I don't want to be too pessimistic as we face the challenges of 2012.

The general business environment does however pose a few challenges for both the Chamber and its members. With this in mind, the need for the Chamber to strengthen the help provided for members to network with potential customers and suppliers is a fundamental service that we should be enhancing over the coming months. We have already started by strengthening our links with other networks groups within the area and plan to hold joint events. We are also planning a Business Fair later this year.

Taken as a whole, the services offered via these networks are extensive. These include general office services, software expertise, web and graphic design, copy writing, facility management, accountancy, legal services, etc. Where companies have been forced to down-size over the last few years, what better opportunity could exist for our members to fill their resource shortfalls? The first networking event is on 8th Feb (see below), so please come and get involved.

Effective networking also depends on an effective on-line directory and this issue is currently on the agenda. I am fully aware of the Chamber's past shortfalls in this area and we are addressing these issues as a matter of urgency. This improved on-line presence will also help promote the town, and its retail and social offering.

Your Chamber committee is also forging ahead with all our ongoing projects such as the ShopWatch Radio, town centre enhancements, etc. So while the Chamber appears to have several opportunities to enhance Alton's business environment over the coming year, what we can effectively do will ultimately depend on both funding and continued enthusiasm of the Committee and supporters. Hence I'll end with a plea - we need your continued help. Help to recruit new members, help to support our events and where possible, help with your skills and expertise where they can assist us in achieving our challenging goals.

So, happy New Year to you all and I sincerely hope (no, I am convinced) that by the next New Year we will find ourselves in a much more positive business environment.

Andy Goodall

BUSINESS NETWORKING EVENT



**Wednesday 8th February
6pm; Alton Grange Hotel**



ALTON CHAMBER
OF COMMERCE
& INDUSTRY



We all know that during times of economic difficulties business tend to down size their workforce. This essential cost saving activity leads to a loss of in-house expertise and capability. In turn this often results in inefficiencies, lowering of customer service standards and limits ability to effectively respond to new business opportunities.

Whatever your business sector this problem can often be resolved via local networking. Being local these potential supply partners are able to offer flexibility and the ability to understand your business objectives and needs – features not always offered by remote, national suppliers.

Your Chamber, in partnership with Alton 4 Business and the Alton Business Club, are providing their members with the opportunity to address this market by holding a series of joint networking events and activities – the first being on Wednesday 8th February at the Grange Hotel, 6pm.

Within these networks there is an extensive range of expertise and service providers - many of which are world class. These business services include ad-hoc secretarial services HR expertise, graphic design, facility maintenance, drafting, design, book keeping, sales and marketing, accountancy, business consultancy, etc, etc.

Hence, whether you are seeking to fill a resource gap, looking for strategic partners, or looking to offer a service this event is probably for you. This event is informal, so there's no commitment and no need to make a presentation - just bring some business cards and join in.

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Christmas Window & Quiz Winners



JC Solicitors - Most Festive Window: Services



Empathy – Best Newcomer



Bottega Dei Sapori – Best Small Window



Hair – Best Decorated Building



Botanic Garden – Most Festive Window: Retail



Sheila Betts Flowers – Best All Year



Christmas Quiz 1st – Parkes Family



Christmas Quiz 2nd – Ellen Morrish & brothers



Jubilee Plans are Afoot!

The Chamber of Commerce has long been an advocate of events as a means to increase visitors to Alton. In the past I might have been writing about events run by AIM, but since its demise, it is fortunate that the Town Council has continued to invest in events. In this case, they have budgeted an extra £2,000 to help run the many Jubilee events happening over the period.

The Town Council is running some of the events, but a number of other organisations have stepped forward to run events. Whilst Alton's many organisations don't always pull together, we are capable of making things happen when we put our minds to it. It's easy to take all this for granted, but there are aspects of Alton's community spirit that people in other towns can only dream of. We collectively run some excellent events, the number of which increases each year, and we are getting better at it all the time.

It's too early to go into detail about the events being planned for the Jubilee, but we can give you a run-down of the events currently on the agenda. These include an exhibition, bands of all tastes playing in various venues, a beacon-lighting (part of a national scheme), a 1950s fair, 'Big Sunday Lunch' (another national scheme) and to crown it all, a carnival. Yes folks, we are reviving the Alton carnival. That's not to mention the many events being planned in Holybourne and Alton's other satellite villages. The Chamber is contributing by running a shop window competition, whilst the Town Council is playing a large part in getting the carnival off the ground. We may be critics of our Town Council on occasion, but this reinstatement of Alton's carnival will hopefully enable it to continue year on year. This can only be good for Alton and will further add to our calendar of events.

If you are a retailer, caterer or publican, you might be wondering if any of this can benefit you. I'm not sure if the Jubilee events are being designed with visitors in mind, but it will certainly fill the town with lots of people with nothing better to do than enjoy themselves, eat, drink and be merry. I don't mean this in a drunken brawl kind of way, but more the kind of family events that were run last year for the Royal Wedding. If you've got your diary or

calendar handy, we're talking about the 2nd to 5th June, although I know that Holybourne is planning some events during the preceding week so they can involve the schools. Similarly, the Alton Lions are holding their annual charity event, this year called "Hi de Hi", on the following Saturday (9th June) and we are including this in the list of events.

In general, the plans for the Jubilee promise to provide Alton with a good set of community-orientated events. The Olympics period is also likely to include one or two events, but not as many because people naturally want to watch the real thing. Of course, one must not forget the rest of Alton's events, such as the Jane Austen Regency Week in the last week of June, the Alton Show on Sunday 1st July, the Food Festival and Last Night of the Proms both on Saturday 7th July and the Bus Rally on Sunday 15th July. Alton Morris are organising a weekend of dance that same weekend, and the rest of the year's events will include the Classic Car Show, Alton Word Fest, Christmas Lights Switch on and Yuletide Festival – all well-established in their own right. 2013 promises yet more events, two of which are likely to be significant events taking place over several days. All good stuff.

It would be remiss not to mention the Town Manager issue. The retailers support the reinstatement of this position and it was top of the Chamber's list of suggested projects for the Tesco developers' contributions. The success of our events might lead some people to question whether we need further help. The answer is that it all needs better coordination and marketing, and a person who is focussed on promoting the town. To those already running events, such as those at the Town Hall, this is not in any way undermining their efforts. We want all this good work to continue; the extra person or persons will be there to look at Alton's overall offering including events and see how we can do more to further increase visitor numbers and ultimately boost our town's economic wellbeing. However it's spun, the supermarkets will almost certainly reduce the footfall in the town centre and we need to be doubling our efforts to counter this effect. This isn't just a business issue, it's a community-wide issue that threatens the very heart of our town. We have got to address it now before it is too late.

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Alton

CRAFT MARKET



Alton is well-known, maybe even famous, for its markets!
Besides the special event markets such as the Food Festival and the Yuletide Festival, Alton has a regular series of markets.

There is the regular Tuesday Market and the monthly Farmers' market and the Craft market.

All of these markets add vibrancy and character to the town and attract people from further afield than would otherwise be expected.

Alton Craft Market comes to town once a month from March to December. It is normally on the 2nd Saturday of the month, to coincide with the Farmers' Market.

This vibrant event has up to 40 stalls all of excellent quality with hand made items made by the stall holders. The sort of goods for sale are glass, pottery, paintings, embroidered goods, soft furnishings, cushions, and local photography to name but a few.

All the money raised by hiring out the pitches goes to Alton Lions who in turn use it to support local families and charities. Last year the Craft Market made over £5,000 for local charities.

Why not go along and see what's on offer? This year's dates are:

March 10 th	June 9 th	September 8 th	December 8 th
April 7 th	July 7 th	October 13 th	
May 12 th	August 11 th	November 10 th	

The market is on from 10am until 3pm, and you can be assured of an great welcome from a great bunch of enthusiastic people!

www.altoncraftmarket.co.uk

www.altonlions.org.uk/craft-markets



HAMPSHIRE FARMERS' MARKETS



It is appropriate to include a small piece about Hampshire Farmers' Markets. The dates and times are the same as those mentioned above. We fought to keep these markets in 2010 and, like the Craft Market, they now have a following. Please note the dates and patronise them as best you can. Both these markets were identified as being important to our retailers and the town, so long may they continue.



www.HampshireFarmersMarkets.co.uk

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