



**Dorset
Community
Action**

RURAL TRENDS IN DORSET

JANUARY 2010 – MARCH 2010



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INTRODUCTION AND KEY FINDINGS

As promised here is our first **quarterly** Rural Trends report. The aim is to provide more up to date information than previously and perhaps too in more manageable chunks than previously! The quarter sees us entering a period of some uncertainty with speculation as to whether we will see a change of government or a hung Parliament and if so what this might mean for us locally here in Dorset. It is clear that, whatever happens, there will be less public spending than in the recent past and this is bound to have an impact locally too. The recession has not hit us as deeply as other parts of the country and there are some signs of recovery but nevertheless this has on the whole been a difficult quarter with unemployment up and many smaller businesses in particular struggling.

1. VILLAGE SHOPS, PUBS AND POST OFFICES

The picture here continues to be one of difficulty, particularly as regards post offices. It is clear that as postmasters and postmistresses retire or move, the Post Office is taking this as an opportunity to reduce the service. So for example the Post Office in Portesham closed in February when the postmaster retired and will be replaced by an 'outreach' service two mornings a week in the Village Hall. It is hoped this will be operational by May or June. In Chetnole the village postmaster initially decided to close the shop but to continue to run the Post Office. However he has now handed in his resignation as postmaster too so from the end of June another location must be found and again it is likely hours will be reduced.

The Post Office in Shillingstone closed suddenly in March and negotiations are currently underway to see if it can be relocated in another shop in the village. Meanwhile Stourpaine Post Office is due to close in the middle of April and Post Office Ltd is currently conducting a consultation on future services in East Stour. East Stour Post Office is currently an outreach service running two days a week in the village hall so it is hard to see how much further the service can be reduced. None of the other villages in the Stours (Stour Row, Stour Provost and West Stour) have a post office service at all.

As mentioned above the village shop in Chetnole closed recently. There was however better news at Buckland Newton where the village shop re-opened with new owners, a new name (the Old Chapel Stores as the shop was formerly a chapel) and with the addition of a nearly-new designer clothing section. Also the Post Office service (readers may remember Buckland Newton was one of the Post Offices reduced to an outreach status in the network review) now operates from the shop, albeit still only for three hours on three days a week.

Thorncombe Village Shop was chosen for the launch of a new online network for community shops set up by the Plunkett Foundation (www.plunkett.co.uk). As the Chief Executive of the foundation said at the launch: *'Community-owned shops such as Thorncombe have proven that when you harness the creativity of a whole community, you will have a shop that is a real asset to everyone'*. The shop and cafe are progressing very well and initial targets are being surpassed.

Rural pubs, like shops and post offices, continue to find times difficult. In fact in recognition of this the government recently announced a three year, £3.3 million package to make pubs more successful and help communities buy into struggling pubs to keep them running. Tailored business advice will be available through 'Pub is the Hub', and a pilot programme will be run through the Plunkett Foundation to provide grant support to fifty community owned pubs. (<http://www.communities.gov.uk/news/corporate/1511255>)

But not all is gloom. The Chetnole Inn, after winning Freehouse of the Year in the Great British Pub awards of 2008 got a highly commended in the Best Food Pub in the West Country this year. It was also included for the second year running in the Michelin guide 'Eating Out in Pubs'. Furthermore it intends to open a farm shop in the skittle alley and has applied for planning permission to do this. Meanwhile the Gaggle of Geese at Buckland Newton won the Wessex regional title in the Rural Enterprise category of the Countryside Alliance Awards. The Royal Oak in Bridport was extensively refurbished by Palmers and renamed the Market House.

Villagers in Toller Porcorum are still waiting for the independent report on the feasibility of re-opening their village pub, the Old Swan, closed in 1999. However the Dorset Piddle Brewery has bucked the trend of closing pubs and actually just taken over the Dolphin in Blandford. The brewery is one of the new breed of 'micro' breweries and produces real ales, including the 'Piddle in a Bottle' at Piddlehinton. Since Hall and Woodhouse is moving closer to its £5m development for a new brewery at its Blandford St Mary site, it is clear brewing will continue in Dorset for some time yet!

2. VILLAGE AND COMMUNITY HALLS

This quarter has seen the celebration of some major refurbishments or completed projects. Netherbury celebrated in February with its oldest resident and its youngest cutting the ribbon. Milborne St Andrew celebrated the completion of £124,000 worth of work with a party with guests including the Yetties and the local MP. The hall now offers a drop-in computer centre, pottery and art clubs and a monthly lunch club. Meanwhile in Blandford a new £500,000 parish centre was opened at the parish church. The facilities include a hundred seater hall and two meeting rooms.

In Ferndown the Barrington Centre, a community centre in Penny's Walk, was saved from financial difficulties by the decision of the Town Council to award it £45,000 over three years. The centre made a loss of £26,000 in 2008 - 2009, largely due to a big increase in costs especially for utilities. The building is owned by East Dorset District Council and operated by a community association.

Work finally started on the building of the £600,000 Children's Centre and Community Centre at Leigh Park, near Wimborne. The Residents' Association have been campaigning hard for a community meeting place for six years. (www.leighparkcommunitycentre.org.uk). Planning permission was granted in January and it is hoped the centre will be complete by August.

3. SCHOOLS AND CHILDCARE

One of the biggest issues in last year's report was the proposed re-organisation of Purbeck schools into a two-tier system. The County Council has now rejected any idea of having any form of secondary provision in Swanage but are still considering the results of public consultation on their other revised proposals. One of the proposals includes cutting numbers of admissions at St Marys, the Catholic First School in Swanage and this is being vigorously opposed locally. The school was rated as outstanding in its last Ofsted report and has recently achieved Arts Mark Gold status.

Elsewhere one of the county's smallest schools at Cheselbourne with twenty-six pupils on its roll was rated as outstanding by Ofsted. The report says 'outstanding relationships between staff and pupils, together with the high quality provision, mean pupils love coming to school'.

News was not so good elsewhere, however, when the Funky Monkeys, a new after-school club at Sticklands School in Evershot was rated inadequate at its first Ofsted

inspection. The majority of the criticisms were to do with safety procedures and these have been speedily addressed. Ofsted returned to Whitchurch Canonicorum playgroup in February after judging it inadequate the previous summer and re-rated it as good. This was at least partially as a result of community effort with fundraising resulting in new equipment and fencing.

The interest shown by schools in green issues continued unabated. A Dorset Schools Eco-Summit was held at Bryanston School in March with more than 350 pupils from forty schools participating. Pupils tried out straw bale building, riding electric bikes and making a greenhouse from plastic bottles. They also saw demonstrations of making biodiesel from waste cooking oil and using a waste digester to turn food waste into biomass fuel. At the end of the day several schools pledged to try growing their own vegetables, having learned about food miles.

This theme could also be seen at Portesham which held its regular Eco week the first week after half term when children are taken off regular activities to themed eco or green ones. For older children this includes preparing and cooking a two course meal in two hours using as few food miles and as many local ingredients as possible. Meals usually include local meat, fish, milk, cream and cheese, vegetables from local gardens and allotments with flavourings provided by locally grown herbs and sweetness from locally produced honey.

At Thornford the school created a new sensory garden, thanks to a small grant from Yeovil Agricultural Society, which will help the school enhance its status as an Eco Green Flag National Award winning school. March also saw the launch of a school competition to recycle textiles. The challenge is to collect the highest amount of textiles per child in each school with the winning school awarded £600 per tonne collected. The textiles collected will be sorted and baled and sent to Africa or Eastern Europe.

Healthy eating also remained high profile this term. For example for the first time the education programme organised by the Christchurch Food Festival Education Trust got funding to visit all the schools in the borough to promote healthy eating. The programme launched on Tuesday 19th January when the Food Festival's president, Mary Reader, accompanied local chefs Ian Hewitt and Jamie Fanger to The Priory School where they demonstrated dishes which show the influence of immigration on English cuisine. Dishes included hummus, cucumber and feta salsa and pitta bread, showing the Greek influence, ginger and spring onion stir fry to show the Chinese influence and seafood crepes to show how the French have affected our cuisine. Following a successful venture last year when Mudeford Junior School pupils had 'hands-on' sessions where they themselves prepared and cooked some dishes, the same thing will be happening again at Mudeford and also at two other schools which have the right sort of facilities – Highcliffe St Marks and Burton Primary.

Other good news included the opening of a new wing at Gillingham School. The £2.4m learning centre includes an ICT suite with forty-four PCs and five Apple Macs, three new science labs and an independent learning centre. The numbers at this school have risen very considerably over the years, from 820 pupils in 1990 to 1500 in 2005 and to 1760 in January 2010.

In another potentially very innovative development the County Council agreed to act as co-sponsor on a scheme to develop a 0 -19 Academy on Portland. The lead sponsor is Professor Stephen Heppell whose grandchildren would be some of the first students if the scheme comes to fruition. The scheme has strong support from the local MP and all but one of the existing schools on the island.

4. TRANSPORT

On the transport front for once there was some good news alongside the usually disappointing. The first part of the County Council's showcase scheme, the Weymouth Transport Package for the 2012 Games was unveiled. The showcase will improve all the bus stops on the Dorchester - Weymouth - Portland route with raised kerbs, new bus stop flags and marking out of yellow boxes. Later this year, work will start on a real time passenger information system, which will put real time data at one hundred of the most used bus stops, on buses, on the web and via mobile phones. Other parts of the transport package include electronic signage to available car parking spaces and CCTV at busy town centre junctions.

There were other small scale improvements in West Dorset, funded from the underspend on free bus passes in the district. For instance a new shared taxi scheme was started in Eype in February. The taxi runs on Wednesday and Saturday mornings from Eype into Bridport, calling at various locations including the hospital and the health centre and returning at lunch time. The taxi has to be booked in advance and costs £1.50 each way but is free for concessionary bus pass holders. This is running for a trial twelve month period. A similar shared taxi scheme also started from Tincleton to Dorchester on Wednesdays, also picking up in Stinsford, Bockhampton and Waddock Cross, again on a trial basis.

Another good move was the extension of the Axe Valley Ring and Ride to two new areas and the extension of the Marshwood school bus to Chard on schooldays. This is the first time there has been a bus in Marshwood for years!

In another development Wilts and Dorset bus company have altered their fare structure raising the age at which children have to pay adult fares from fifteen to nineteen and allowing accompanied children under seven to travel free. In addition the unpopular system of charging children full adult fare before 9.00 am on weekdays is discontinued. On the other hand children's fares have been raised from 55% of the adult fare to 70%.

Dorchester Car Club celebrated its first birthday in January and has now appointed a Development Officer. They are hoping to develop the scheme to other areas in the county. The scheme is on a three year trial and in its early days has proved more successful than expected.

On the rail front there was considerable disappointment in Swanage that no funds have been allocated for the re-opening of the Swanage – Wareham line. Network Rail have decided £3m is needed for signalling and other infrastructure work to fully reconnect the Swanage line to the national rail network. The money must be found very quickly as Network Rail proposes to do the work at Worgret Junction in 2012 when they are upgrading the main Weymouth – Waterloo line between Poole and Wool. If the junction is not re-signalled at the same time the cost of doing it later will be significantly higher. The Purbeck Community Rail Partnership has been given a brief extension in which to attempt to find the money. (http://news.bbc.co.uk/local/dorset/low/people_and_places/newsid_8513000/8513078.stm)

5. HOUSING

The shortage of affordable housing in the county as always remained the main issue. Shelter brought out a housing league table assessing how good local councils were at getting enough homes built. The table below shows the results for the six Dorset local authorities.

Council	Ranking out of 323 local authorities	Nos on waiting list	Average no of houses built in each of the last three years	Annual wage needed to afford average priced house in area.
EDDC	300	2365	23	£57167
WPBC	284	3349	57	£40833
WDDC	254	2313	70	£52500
NDDC	218	1051	50	£48988
Purbeck	197	1333	60	£51567
Christchurch	140	2450	50	£53258

The table shows that, despite the best efforts of local authorities, housing associations and others, we are still a long way off providing an adequate supply of affordable homes in any part of the county.

Councils are however doing their best to progress schemes. For example West Dorset District Council has given a £120,000 grant to Knightstone Housing Association to help finance proposals to build twenty-four new affordable homes in Dorchester. This development of fifteen houses and twelve flats will be mainly for rent with some for shared ownership. Obviously the bulk of the cost is expected to come from government grant but the council is funding the shortfall.

It is also underwriting loans of up to £220,000 to help three families build their own homes at the Flaxhayes affordable housing development in Bridport. It also has an Open Market Homebuy Scheme in operation and can lend £320,000 to help people in need buy homes on the open market.

On Portland, building has already started on the seventy-seven units of housing required for accommodation for the 2012 Olympics. This is considered good news for local people as once the Olympics are over nineteen of the units will be provided for rent via a registered social landlord. This includes eight three-bedroomed and one four-bedroomed home, which has been identified as necessary to meet local need. The project is being built by ZeroC who, as the name suggests, are specialists in sustainable, low energy construction.

In North Dorset a new disposal protocol has been drawn up by Signpost Housing Association after the furious reaction of councillors to Signpost's plan two years ago, without consultation, to sell off a number of properties in the district. Now they promise not to dispose of any social housing in North Dorset unless there is a continued and demonstrable lack of demand for it because of its location or size.

Of course, as we have mentioned before, the community's housing needs go wider than merely the provision of standard social housing. In Weymouth two homes for young people with mild learning difficulties and on the autism spectrum were due to close as part of a funding revamp. The Dorset Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) support group has taken over the running of the homes under the name of Forger Me Not Housing. The Weymouth Women's Refuge closed amidst much protest but there are hopes it may be taken over by a charity and re-opened, possibly at another site in the borough.

Finding more travellers' sites in the county continues to be very difficult. In North Dorset the preferred proposed site lies south of the A30 to the east of Shaftesbury. However local residents objected and although the cabinet had unanimously

supported a recommendation to go out to consultation the decision was afterwards 'called in' by the chair of the overview and scrutiny committee. Even the proposals for a temporary site for the Great Dorset Steam Fair have caused much controversy with each parish vying with the other not to have the site in its area.

6. HEALTH AND COMMUNITY CARE

There were some big issues around health and community care in this quarter. On the health front the crisis at the County Hospital in Dorchester was at least partially averted when they backed out of plans to make two hundred staff redundant. The trust's reworked plan is to save cash by not replacing anyone who leaves. The PCT has worked with the hospital trust to find ways of avoiding expensive redundancies and to keep the hospital going. There are however still fears that some services are bound to be cut back given the hospital has a deficit of £7.5 million.

The situation as regards dentistry appears to be improving slowly. For example Corfe Mullen Dental Surgery has got planning permission to extend its premises allowing it to increase its two NHS surgeries to four. New NHS dentistry services had been recognised as a high priority in the parish plan.

On the care front much anxiety was caused in Swanage when Care South announced it would stop running the James Day Home at the end of the financial year, meaning twenty-two residents have to be re-housed. Care South claimed that a rent rise of 30% from Dorset County Council from whom it leases the home meant it was no longer financially viable. The County Council has ruled out running the home itself and local campaigners who have formed a Save James Day Home Action Group, are worried that the building will be demolished when it could be refurbished to bring it up to modern standards and re-opened as a care home, for which there is much need in the area.

Also on the care front two care homes were branded poor by an independent watchdog, Cerne Abbas Care Home and Drayton House in Bridport. Homes are graded on a three-star scale and in both cases the homes got no stars. Even after a random re-inspection three months later they found in one case many of their requirements for improvement had not been carried out.

On a more positive front several small initiatives, some started by charities and support groups, got underway in the county this quarter. The Wessex Autistic Society for example has expanded its area of work into the west of the county and obtained a lease on a building in Dorchester. The expansion of its services has started with a fortnightly drop-in for adults with Aspergers in Dorchester and a similar one in Weymouth. A Young Mums and Dads To Be project based on Portland won an Improving Health and Reducing Inequalities Award at the county Health and Social Care Awards in January. The project was set up by a youth worker and a midwife last year and is supported by the County Hospital and Nacro, the crime reduction charity.

In Bridport a new website has been launched of a parent support group for the parents and carers of young people with Aspergers, autism spectrum conditions and ADHD. (www.BridportSupport.com). The group meets fortnightly and recently held a re-launch party at the Masonic Hall, attended by the local MP amongst others.

It is clear that, in the current financial situation and with our ageing population, health and community care are vulnerable services and so this section of the report needs careful watching.

7. INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION

The campaign for high-speed broadband throughout the county continued. As we have explained before BT will install a high capacity and high resilience broadband connection to Portland for 2012 and will upgrade exchanges in Weymouth and Portland as part of this work. The work will bring broadband speeds of up to 100 megabits per second (Mbps) for the Olympic sailing events. But businesses and residents, particularly in Weymouth and Portland, must demonstrate there is sufficient demand for BT to continue running the broadband after the games. To promote this the Dorset Business Council has set up a Digital Taskforce led by Dr Monica Seeley from Bournemouth.

The switchover to digital TV has thrown up some problems as digital black spots throughout the county mean some people cannot get ITV3 or ITV4 whilst others lose connection on certain channels. The problem seems to lie with those people served by the relay transmitter rather than the mains transmitter. Of course a new transmitter will cost money so it is not certain how soon this problem can be resolved. At the end of this quarter the Mendip transmitter switched off its analogue transmitter meaning that the digital switchover rolled out to another section of the county.

The campaign to keep public telephone kiosks open moved into North Dorset this quarter. BT wants to disconnect the service from sixty kiosks in its second consultation in as many years. As in the past most of the parishes have objected to this proposal, citing amongst other reasons the poor mobile signal in many areas. According to BT's own figures Chettle had 251 calls in the past twelve months: it also has the highest number of kiosks under threat. Marnhull, where BT wants to close three kiosks, also had a high number of calls. It is not clear what the next stage will be.

8. COMMUNITY SAFETY

There was good news on the crime front when recorded crime figures for Dorset fell again. Thus for example in December 2009 there were 3.7 % fewer incidents than in December 2008. Violent crime fell by 6%. There were even twelve fewer arrests over the New Year period than over the previous New Year. The independent British Crime Survey shows that Dorset Police remain the best out of all the forces in England and Wales at dealing with local people's concerns. Coincidentally Dorset Police were also named as one of the top seventy-five public sector organisations to work for, based on the results from a survey sent randomly to over 1400 Dorset Police employees.

Amongst many initiatives and ideas to tackle crime, Bridport are planning to set up a one year pilot community justice scheme. The town council is keen to see this project introduced and are seeking support from the police, Magna Housing and the District Council. Sherborne Town Council however decided to withdraw support for a CCTV system in the town centre as they felt contributing towards the £175,000 cost of installation and £37,000 annual running costs could not be justified. It was proposed to finance this by increased parking charges and councillors were worried this would deter people from coming into the town for shopping.

Portland Coastguard helicopter's future seems safe after plans to overhaul the UK's search and rescue service were finalised. There were some fears for the aircraft's future when the plans to privatise the search and rescue service emerged. A private consortium Soteria has been chosen by the Ministry of Defence to take over the helicopter contract from 2012 and it appears that the main difference is their intention to replace the current Augusta Westland 139 helicopter to a Sikorsky S92A which is bigger and can take two stretchers and two seated at a time.

Road safety is one of the biggest safety concerns in the county and the start of work on the long-awaited and campaigned for pedestrian crossing across the A35 at Chideock is a welcome relief to many. The traffic-light controlled crossing outside the shop / Post Office should help make the village feel more cohesive rather than split into two halves too.

9. PLAY AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Play has received a considerable boost in recent years and in particular with the government's Playbuilder Project money. February for example saw the installation of a new HIGH5 play area in Highcliffe, Christchurch which cost £57,000, £40,000 of which has come from the Playbuilder fund. A further £13,000 came from the Youth Opportunities Fund. The area has an aerial cableway, an overhead rotator, a climbing zone, a trim trail, a ball court and a shelter. It is linked to the existing play area via a footpath. The final design came about following consultation with pupils from Highcliffe St Mark's Primary and Highcliffe School (secondary) as well as local residents and users of the site.

Fundraising also continued apace in Chickerell, as reported in the last Rural Trends report and Chickerell@Play are edging ever closer to raising their 10% of the costs. An amazing £2,200 was raised at a fundraising event in the village hall called a Bit of a Posh Do! Funding for the innovative Play on Portland project came to an end after two years but it looks very likely the project will be taken over by a lively voluntary group on the island and so will continue in a slightly altered form.

Interest in and concern for young people remain high. In West Dorset the District Council has decided to increase its support to the four youth advice centres in the district. So the RendezVous in Sherborne, The Mill in Bridport, Routes in Dorchester and InSparations in Lyme Regis will each get £8,700 over the next two years. These centres, run by voluntary organisations, offer advice and help to young people aged between eleven and twenty-five. They each have a café or coffee bar and trained workers who can give advice and information on issues such as benefits, careers advice, job training and sexual health.

In Shaftesbury improving facilities for young people is to be the town council's main priority this year. The skate park run by the Skate Alliance at Toby's Young People's Project has proved to be a very popular and successful project and it is hoped to emulate this with other projects to support the development of a host of modern facilities at Barton Hill.

Young people themselves have continued to get involved in a variety of ways. Dorchester Youth Extra for example again organised a very successful under 18's club night during February half-term, this time with a new name of Club Anonymous. More than two hundred people turned up and they are already planning for the next event in the next half term.

Elsewhere thirty young people aged between thirteen and nineteen are being chosen for a pilot scheme of a national programme called Youth 4 U. Action for Children is to recruit, train and support the team who will be trained as inspectors to check that services are young person-friendly in Dorset. The intention is to inspect a range of different services such as libraries, leisure centres, youth advice services and so on by a variety of different methods including mystery shopper, research and interviews, question and answer panels and so on. Dorset is one of thirty-two councils in this pilot project.

10. EMPLOYMENT

Unemployment figures rose throughout the county from 4899 in December to 5436 in January. Purbeck saw the largest annual increase from 447 in January 2009 to 639 in January 2010. However unemployment here is still well below the national average. Unemployment in Weymouth and Portland however rose to 4%, nearing the national average of 4.3% and reaching its highest level since 1998. Unemployment also rose in West Dorset although it still stands at only 1.9%.

Large scale job losses are expected at Pork Farms, a meat processing factory at Shaftesbury. Initially the firm planned to axe ninety jobs as it had lost a major customer. However they then secured a new contract with a supermarket and there is some confusion as to the actual scale of job losses expected.

On a more positive note however Sunseeker International announced plans to expand within the next eighteen months which will increase its workforce by fifty people. The jobs will be predominantly for composite technicians, dealing with laminating, moulding and glass-reinforced plastic. Also on Portland there are now new owners for the Southwell Business Park and for the hotel complex that went into administration last year. The new hotel owners hope the re-opening of the hotel will mean the creation of forty-five new jobs.

In another interesting development plans to open a vinegar factory on a farm in Halstock were passed, despite the fact that planners at the District Council had recommended refusal. The plan is part of a farm diversification project, whereby balsamic vinegar and other fruit based cordial and syrup products are produced, using fruit grown on the organic farm. The idea was strongly supported by the parish council and local residents, who felt it would provide training and employment, boost the local economy and provide a new orchard as well as reducing food miles and helping ensure the sustainability of the farm.

In another move to promote economic development, £110,000 has been made available from developers' contribution to refurbish empty buildings to turn them into useable workspaces within the parishes of Beaminster, Cheddington, Mapperton, Mosterton and South Perrott.

525 job opportunities will be offered across Dorset through the government's Future Jobs Fund. The initiative was launched at the Corn Exchange in March by Jim Knight, Minister for Employment and Welfare Reform and also coincidentally a Dorset MP. The £3.4 million new jobs programme offers experience in a wide range of positions to give unemployed young people the opportunity to get their careers off the ground. The emphasis on skilling up young people was also evident during Apprenticeship Week, which saw record numbers of young people turning up to open days about apprenticeships throughout the county.

However the economic recovery still looks fragile so we may not see much improvement in unemployment figures for some time. Moreover, if as expected, there are large cuts in public spending after the elections, this may well affect employment figures in the county, particularly in towns like Dorchester which, as the site of County Hall and the County Hospital, has a higher number of public sector jobs than elsewhere.

11. ARTS AND CULTURE

News on this front is a little mixed. On the one hand there are some signs that the recession is causing a few cutbacks in activity. For example a once very popular line dancing club in Gillingham is closing because whereas numbers had once been up to

fifty they are now down to between ten and twenty. It appears this can now no longer run as a self-financing community activity.

On the other hand in one week's edition in February of the Blackmore Vale magazine the following activities are reported upon – a production of Little Red Riding Hood by the Tarrant Keyneston players, the Spetisbury Occasional Dramatic Society putting on a performance of Arthur and the Green Dragon, the Stalbridge Players putting on Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs and the Yetminster Irish Dancers (formed in Yetminster in 1972 and now running classes in Gillingham as well) being the supporting act for Jimmy Cricket at the Octagon in Yeovil. If nothing else, this suggests there are still plenty of active drama groups in the villages!

In addition the four-year Cultural Olympiad Festival, associated with the Olympic Games, is stepping up a gear as 2012 approaches. There should be several associated festivals etc to report on in the next quarter when some of these events actually take place! Also Dorchester Arts Centre secured a grant for just under £36,000 from the District Council with a condition that it improve arts in the wider community. It also made a successful bid to the Arts Council for the Dorchester Festival.

Dorset County Museum was successful in its campaign to save some rare Thomas Hardy manuscripts raising £58,750 in time to keep the items in Dorset. One of those taking part in the fundraising was 104 year old Norrie Woodhall, the last surviving member of the author's Hardy Players drama group in Dorchester.

The Heritage Lottery Fund granted £23,100 to the Blandford Schools and Communities Project which will help people learn more about the archaeology of the site on which the new Milldown Primary School is being built. Evidence has been uncovered that the school site was lived on between 5000 and 4000 years ago. In January, pupils took part in various activities including flint-knapping, storytelling, screening for artefacts, and for two weekends the site was open to the whole community.

12. OTHER ISSUES

There is some evidence that community projects and activities are coming to an end as a result of financial difficulties. For example a community composting scheme known as SHRed has been running in Sixpenny Handley for the past two years but has come to an end as it is not financially viable. TLC, a much admired venture in Bridport is also struggling. It has twenty-seven active volunteers and is in its fifth year but the basic running costs are £18,750 and its income only £15,000. Since the closure of the crisp factory, it is no longer able to sell biodiesel as it has lost its supply of used cooking oil.

Beamminster Community Swimming Pool also looked to be in trouble when both its chairman and treasurer stood down at the AGM but fortunately suitable replacements were found in the nick of time!

Green issues continue to be of interest and the recent upsurge of demand for allotments seems to be part of this. For example the Thornford and Beer Hackett Allotment Association began work on a 1.5 acre extension to the allotments in Thornford on New Year's Day. This provides plots for twenty-eight people but still leaves two people on the waiting list and there is no possibility of accommodating anyone living outside of the two parishes.