



**Dorset
Community
Action**

RURAL TRENDS IN DORSET

JUNE 2009 – DEC 2009



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INTRODUCTION AND KEY POINT

Until 2009 Dorset Community Action wrote an annual Rural Trends report but it has decided to alter the format and produce shorter reports more regularly. This report covers the period from June to December 2009 and in 2010 we shall begin producing quarterly Rural Trends reports rather than the one really lengthy report of the past. We hope that in this way the information will be more timely and that we will be able to spot trends more quickly.

Some of the key points from the report are:-

- Life continues to be very hard for village shops and pubs with several closures over this period
- Post Office hours are being shortened in cases where the business changes hands or re-opens after a temporary closure
- Although money is tight for Village Hall projects, refurbishments, extensions and replacements are still progressing
- The outcome of the Purbeck review of schools is still undecided and the period of consultation has been extended
- New Extended Schools provision of an after school and holiday club started in Beaminster, transporting from other local schools
- Transport continues to pose difficulties. The County Council is currently reviewing the operation of its demand responsive services
- Affordable housing remains one of our most intractable problems. Work started on a new 'extra-care' housing project in Blandford
- Local communities continue to show interest in developing their own solutions to the housing problem. Bridport Co-housing are the latest to form
- There is excitement at the prospect of getting a legacy of high speed broadband from the Olympics for the benefit of local businesses and residents
- Crime continues to be low in the county and all the community safety services are judged to be working well. The one area of concern is hate crime, which is believed to be under-reported
- The Playbuilders fund, which has inputted £1.1m over two years into play in Dorset has given a welcome impetus to many schemes throughout the county. In all twenty-two play areas for eight – thirteen year olds will be established or upgraded
- Although unemployment has increased in the county it is still well below the national average. Local initiatives to help include the formation of a Job Club in Shaftesbury and the further development of BLAST (Bridport Learning and Skills Training) in Bridport to improve the skills of young people
- As reported in earlier years, there were tensions in local communities between companies seeking economic development (in this case, gravel extraction at Sturminster Marshall) and local residents and conservation groups concerned about pollution, noise, traffic and the effect on the landscape
- Arts and culture continued to be important to rural communities. The Dorset Cultural Strategy was launched. There were successful Lottery bids to improve facilities at Gold Hill Museum in Shaftesbury and to display the newly discovered pliosaur jaw at the County Museum in Dorchester. Shaftesbury Arts Centre was re-furbished
- Library usage dropped after the introduction of reduced hours
- Financial issues continued to loom large. CAB premises in Bridport and services countywide are to be expanded to meet increased demand
- Green issues were also high on the agenda. Weymouth and Portland Borough Council had the lowest amount of household waste per head of population in the county. We also have high recycling rates in Dorset

1. VILLAGE SHOPS, POST OFFICES AND PUBS

The situation for this sector continues to be rather bleak with the recession adding to other more general societal changes to making it difficult for these businesses to make a living. Much effort has gone into making the new Post Office arrangements work and in finding new postmasters or mistresses when older ones sought to retire. The outreach Post Office service at Kings Stag is now located in the pub. In Lydlinch the Parish Council has agreed to fund an outreach Post Office service.

There is finally light at the end of the tunnel at Broadwindsor where, thanks to a grant from the Village Shops Help Fund, a satellite Post Office will run in the Comrades Hall for two mornings a week starting in January. Although this is good news, it also illustrates a feature that is becoming more evident: whenever a rural postmaster retires or the business changes hand, the Post Office will cut the hours of a replacement. Thus for example in Thorncombe where as reported in our last Rural Trends report the shop has been taken over and run as a community enterprise the Post Office has reduced the hours and is in fact closed entirely on a Wednesday.

There was a crisis at Wimborne when fire destroyed the main Post Office. Fortunately it was possible to locate a new temporary Post Office next door to the Community Learning and Resource Centre (run by Dorset Community Action) which provides the PO staff with electricity, toilets, hand washing facilities and refreshments. The original Martins / PO will take many months to reinstate, so Dorset Community Action's contribution is even more valuable!

Sadly, despite being named FARMA Own and Local Farm Retailer of the Year for 2009 Goldy's Farm Shop has now ceased trading. The village shop at Chetnole ceased trading in December although the Post Office part remains open and the village shop in Bishop's Caundle is on the market (but still operating).



A small fund has been established www.dorsetcommunityaction.org.uk/Village%20Shops%20Fund to assist village shops and Post Offices, particularly in villages where Post Office services have been reduced or lost, with grants of up to £500. Grants have gone to a wide variety of villages including Bere Regis, Bradford Abbas, Burton Bradstock, Corfe Castle, Iwerne Minster, Leigh and Trent. The message, as always, is that if you are lucky enough to have a local Post Office or village shop, be sure to use it as often as you can!

The situation for pubs continues to look bleak. One of the two pubs in Broadwindsor has now closed as has the Bottle Inn at Marshwood and the Admiral Hood in Mosterton. It is known that many other rural pubs are in a precarious financial situation. Changes in drinking habits and the recession mean that this situation is unlikely to improve in the near future. On a more positive note the Drax Arms at Spetisbury re-opened, renamed the Woodpecker, after a complete refurbishment. It had been closed for three months. Also Palmers brewery has

offered a campaign group SOS (Save Our Swan) five years of free rent to help re-open the long derelict pub in Toller Porcorum. The group also has a grant from the District Council to pay for a business plan to see if the pub could be viable.

2. VILLAGE HALLS

Dorset local authorities have historically been very supportive of village halls, recognising the importance of a communal meeting place to rural communities. But the present financial situation means it is by no means certain they will continue to find the funds for the same level of capital grants in the future and so here too the prospects are gloomy.

There was a crisis at South Perrott when its roof was condemned and the hall had to be closed. However it is hoped that the insurers will cover the costs of repair. At Godmanstone builders have just completed building a new extension and improved kitchen and toilet facilities. Internal painting and decorating will be undertaken by volunteers.

Many other village halls are in the process of making plans to refurbish and repair their halls. In Spetisbury they intend selling the current hall for development and building a new hall elsewhere in the village. North Dorset District Council has agreed the hall can be built on land at Slopers Mead and that they will hand the land over for no money provided the development gets planning permission and there is a satisfactory Business Plan in place. Gussage St Michael, which uses the old school as its village hall has been working hard to raise the funds for an extension that will house new toilets, a kitchen and storage area.

There are also ambitious plans afoot to refurbish Bridport's Town Hall and turn it into a modern community space. The town council, which has earmarked £400,000 from its own reserves towards the work put in a bid to the Heritage Lottery Fund and has successfully obtained £600,000. The aim is to restore the hall and make it fully accessible with a new ground floor community space.

3. SCHOOLS AND CHILDCARE

As we have reported in the past, Dorset's schools generally are considered of a high standard. Again this term many schools have been rated outstanding by Ofsted ranging from All Saints Secondary School in Weymouth to St John's CE First School in Wimborne and St Gregory's C of E Primary School in Marnhull.

The Purbeck review of its school system has had its timetable extended with further public consultations on fresh proposals for Wool and Swanage over primary school provision to take place in February and March and also on whether Bere Regis School should become part of the Lytchett Minster school pyramid. This means the restructuring is unlikely to be implemented until September 2012 rather than the September 2011 originally envisaged.

The County Council is now going out to consult on fresh proposals for Wool that would turn both the current village schools into primaries rather than closing the Church of England school and only having a Catholic School in the village as first suggested. In Swanage the Council has dropped plans to look at merging St George's school in Langton Matravers with St Marks in Swanage and will consult on new plans in the early spring. They also agreed to have discussions with the pressure group Education Swanage, (www.educationswanage.co.uk) which is pressing for secondary provision in Swanage and which has suggested one possibility would be a twin campus site at the Purbeck School in Wareham and Swanage.

On the Extended Schools front a new after school club and holiday club started in the autumn term at St Mary's in Beaminster and called Schools Out. www.schoolsoutwestdorset.co.uk/info.html The unusual aspect of this is that they collect children from three other primary schools – Parrett and Axe in Mosterton, Broadwindsor and Salway Ash. (The children have to be taken home from St Mary's obviously). The club has been supported both by SureStart and the Extended Schools service.

Schools still seem very interested in 'green' initiatives. For instance at Cerne Abbas First School, which is an Eco school, the children make recyclable lunch boxes, compost their food peelings, and have a Green Finger gang who work on improving the school environment. Cerne Abbas is also a 'rights respecting school', a new nationwide award scheme which promotes the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child as the basis for enhancing teaching, learning, ethos, attitudes and behaviour. In fact, after the last school achieved Level 1 status, every first and middle school in the Dorchester Area Pyramid has now got Level 1 Rights Respecting School status. Allenbourne Middle School in Wimborne was the first Dorset middle school to get this status back in early 2008.

After a very long wait, work finally started on a new building for Shillingstone Primary School. Planning permission was granted in September and a local builder started work in November. It is hoped that the building will be ready for the new school year in September 2010 although this is of course dependent on factors such as the weather!

4. TRANSPORT

Transport continues to be difficult in rural areas although the main corridor routes are reasonably well-used. Consultants are currently undertaking a review of the 'D' services (these are the Door to Dorset services that are at least partially demand responsive). It is thought likely that one of their conclusions will be that the buses predominantly follow the same routes at the same times and that in consequence there should be some reversion to scheduled services.

Sureline, a small company formed in 2002 and based on Portland, has now been taken over by South West Coaches, a Yeovil based firm. Sureline's owner said it was increasingly difficult for small companies to generate profits. It is hoped that service 212 will improve as a result of this change as South West Coaches have promised a more consistent approach to its operation.

The County Council have been consulting on possible changes (and improvements) to the bus services on the Weymouth – Dorchester – Blandford - Salisbury corridor. The services involved are the 183 / 184 route and the 311 Dorchester - Milton Abbas - Blandford service. The aim is to improve the service for the money it spends on these routes and hopefully to also make it easier for people in the Chesel valley to get to local hospitals and supermarkets.

After much vigorous lobbying First has agreed to re-organise the bus routes in Sherborne to give a service to the Coldharbour area of the town. However there has been some delay in implementing the timetable changes so they will not now take place until the New Year.



European mobility week was celebrated in Dorset in September with the opening of two new cycle routes, an off-road cycle route between West Parley and Bournemouth Airport and the new Granby Way cycle route in Weymouth. In addition it saw the launch of Dorchester Car Club's second car, Doris, whose name was chosen by the children of Damers Road First School in Dorchester.

5. AFFORDABLE HOUSING

As usual affordable housing continues to be one of the County's most intractable problems. This is not to say that there is no progress – for instance EDHA (East Dorset Housing Association) has bought twelve two-bedroomed flats at a 'Barretts' development in Wool (Purbeck) for social renting. But given that numerous reports show that the gap between average earnings and average house prices in Dorset means huge numbers of people can never expect to buy, or even to be able to afford commercial market rents, the sheer numbers of those wanting affordable housing makes it extremely difficult to keep up with demand.

As we have mentioned in previous reports, housing needs are many and varied including supported accommodation for those with learning difficulties, traveller sites and so on. This Autumn saw the development of the first 'extra care' scheme in North Dorset formed by a partnership between Synergy Housing Group, Dorset County Council (DCC) and North Dorset District Council. The scheme in Blandford has been designed to give local older people the opportunity for 'supported active living' rather than going into residential care.

Tenants will have access to planned care and support twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week yet with the independence of their own front door. The scheme also gives both active and more frail older people the chance to be part of a community that meets the needs of all residents. Community facilities will include a lounge, dining room, space for hobbies and crafts, IT and hairdressing. Each of the forty self contained flats has been specially designed to be easily adapted to meet the needs of tenants as they change over the years.

In perhaps a sign of a shift in policy by planners several 'eco' farmers got planning permission to have permanent homes on smallholdings in the past few months. Thus at both Wootton Fitzpaine and at Litton Cheney it was recognised that to be viable these kinds of enterprises required people to live on site permanently.

As we have mentioned in previous reports there is a strong will amongst local communities to address some housing problems locally. We have reported on the work of the Community Land Trusts in West Dorset and in Purbeck. Another group is Bridport Co-housing (www.bridportcohousing.org.uk), a non-profit group, set up and run by local people, to help meet the local need for affordable housing. In addition to homes for people on the Housing Register, the group aims to offer units for owner-occupiers at affordable prices, ranging in size from one bedroom apartments to four bedroom houses. They held a public meeting in November in order to identify the level of interest in co-housing from people on the housing register. The group would like to build thirty sustainable houses in conjunction with Synergy Housing Association.

Despite these welcome initiatives as a recent independent overview of local public services found affordable housing is still one area of significant concern in Dorset. It wrote 'There is an acute need for affordable homes in Dorset. There has been a big increase in the number of people trying to find a home through Councils' housing registers. But house prices are still too high for many local people. The number of affordable homes built in the county falls well below the total needed. Most private housing is in good condition but mobile homes and some homes rented from private landlords are of poor quality. The range of accommodation for vulnerable groups in Dorset is comparatively weak. For example, there is little accommodation for people with a mental illness, drug and alcohol users and ex-offenders.

The strategic approach to housing is becoming stronger, but still has some way to go. Dorset councils have good information on housing need and conditions. But there are still some weaknesses in plans to ensure that there are enough good quality homes for all local people'. (<http://oneplace.direct.gov.uk>)

6. HEALTH AND COMMUNITY CARE

Undoubtedly the biggest story in health at the moment is the financial crisis facing the County Hospital in Dorchester. It is anticipated that two hundred jobs will be lost in the near future, including some front line staff, as a result of the financial shortfall facing the Foundation Trust. It is currently losing £0.5m a month and both the Chief Executive and the Board Chairman have resigned.

It is difficult to know what the long-term fallout of this will be. There have been fears that some services would close as a result; in fact women organised a march in early December to insist on the importance of keeping the breast cancer unit at the hospital amid fears that that might be closed and Dorset women obliged to travel to Poole for treatment.

To add to its difficulties, the Trust's hygiene standards were found wanting in a spot check by the Care Quality Commission although the situation had been rectified by the time of its return visit ten days later. Furthermore, although the Care Quality Assessment had classed the hospital as good, a different assessment known as the Dr Foster assessment claimed that the county hospital's death rate was above average and gave it a safety score of 10.96 (as against a rating of 88.36 for Poole for example) putting it in the second lowest band.

All was not entirely gloomy on the health front however. In August Minette Walters opened a new specialist unit at the County Hospital for dementia patients being treated for other non-related health problems. The League of Friends donated £2,500 to the unit which will use reminiscence therapies and similar strategies to help the patients. Still on the mental health front in September Dame Joan Bakewell presented an award to the Shaftesbury Memory Café, a joint venture between the Alzheimer's Society and NHS Dorset's community mental health team for older people. The memory café takes place fortnightly and a spin-off group Singing for the Brain has now been formed in Gillingham. It was the first memory café to start up in Dorset but there are now others running in Sherborne, Ferndown and Weymouth.

Dentistry has long been an issue in Dorset and there was more good news here with the announcement that NHS Dorset recently received additional funding for more dentistry and will be commissioning in seven locations across Dorset; this may involve setting up new practices or expanding existing ones. Also there are some interesting plans afoot to develop education links between the Weldmar Hospicecare Trust, other hospices and a University in the South-West. The director of nursing aims to make the charity a specialised centre for end-of-life education in the region in the next five years. The intention is to develop links with hospices in Taunton and Yeovil and possibly to get the University of the West of England involved.

On the community care side of things, adult social care services got an improved rating from the Care Quality Commission in December in comparison to their last rating. They are now considered to be 'performing well' as opposed to the previous year's judgement of 'performing adequately'. There was particular praise for the way the introduction of personal budgets had been handled and for its partnership work with organisations such as NHS Dorset. The work of POPPS, the Partnership for Older People Programme, was also considered particularly valuable. On the other hand the report thought there needed to be more work to help older people continue to live at home and it was also concerned that only 26% of people with mental health problems had had their needs reviewed in 2008 / 2009.

The County Council have decided to 'decommission' the provision of meals on wheels, currently provided by the WRVS. The numbers of people receiving meals has been steadily decreasing – there were 309 throughout the county in March 2009 as against a current number of 166. The net budget for Meals on Wheels is £55,300. POPPS have appointed a Community Development Worker specifically to work on Access to Nutrition, one of whose aims is to develop eating opportunities in the community. A new Tuesday Lunch Club has been formed in Verwood for example and a monthly Sunday Social in Christchurch. The

worker is also working with each individual current recipient of a Meals on Wheels service to plan a suitable alternative.

7. INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION

As mentioned in the last report, one of the most important potential developments in this field is the high speed links that BT will bring to the County for the Olympics in 2012. As the communications sponsor BT is laying fibre optic connections to all the Olympic venues including Osprey Quay. Now they need to be convinced it is worth their while leaving these in place after the games are over. To this end the County Council have asked all local businesses to complete an online survey in order to gauge what the future demand is likely to be. (www.dorsetforyou.com/broadband)

BT, and other communication providers, will require a strong business case of the potential online demand and usage from the private sector, public sector and resident community in order to further invest in the digital infrastructure. Many business organisations, such as the Federation of Small Businesses (FSB) are encouraging their members to complete the survey as they are anxious to prove the case and for Dorset to be in the vanguard of technological improvements as they believe this will give Dorset businesses an edge over other parts of the country.

Dorbag, the Dorset Broadcasting Action Group, (www.dorbag.org.uk) has continued to campaign for better radio and TV coverage for Dorset, particularly from the BBC. They were pleased when in November the BBC announced three new appointments locally to support more regional output, two in Dorchester and one in Exeter but with the main focus being Dorset. However they consider these to be only the start of ensuring Dorset has a proper local service as most of the rest of the country does.

8. COMMUNITY SAFETY

The One Place area assessment found that community safety was a good feature of life in Dorset. 'Dorset is a safe place to live. Crime rates are low and continue to fall.

Compared to the rest of England, more people believe that the police work well to make the area safer. More people are also satisfied with the level of service they get from the police and fire services. They think that the police and other public services that work together on the Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships, such as the District and County Councils, fire and health services, are successful in dealing with crime and anti social behaviour'. They also felt that there were very good projects under way to help stop criminal behaviour and that the Youth Offending Team works well.

Despite the generally low crime rate, there is one area where the police believe crime goes largely unreported in the County and that is around hate crime. They believe most victims of attacks motivated by race, religion, homophobia or disability are suffering in silence. Although the number of hate crimes reported in Dorset has risen, the police believe many others, particularly where motivated by religion or disability, are not reported and so they are encouraging not only victims but also witnesses to come forward. In fact in West Dorset focus groups are being held in 2010 in a partnership between Dorset Race Equality Council, the South West Dorset Multicultural Network and Equality Southwest to capture the nature of issues and problems facing black and minority ethnic residents in the area. The focus groups

are being held in Bridport, Dorchester and Sherborne as these are areas that are known to have suffered from hate crimes in the recent past.

There has been a slight increase in crime rates, which is generally put down to the effects of the recession. In August a rural crime seminar was held at Kingston Maurward College in collaboration between the police, the Country Land Association and the National Farmers' Union. There were presentations about property marking and the successful 'Stop That Thief' campaign established in West Dorset in 2007 to combat rural crime.

There have been numerous other initiatives to encourage people to feel safe over this period such as a Safety afternoon organised by Age Concern Dorchester and the Drink Safe Street Safe scheme in Weymouth and Portland. This is part of a drive to reduce alcohol and drug related violent crime and to steer people away from anti-social behaviour.

PACT (Partners and Communities Together) meetings throughout the County suggest that road safety issues are the top concerns of local residents, including speeding through the villages, parking issues, inconsiderate driving and similar. So fed up were the residents of Marnhull with excessive speeds that they set up a Marnhull 25 campaign after a village meeting in June aimed at calling the attention of drivers to the importance of driving within the speed limit and preferably driving at 25 mph or less throughout the village.

The Fire and Rescue Service saw the official opening of its new fire station in Dorchester and planning permission for a new fire station in Weymouth. The Comprehensive Area Assessment report thought good progress had been made by the service in reducing the number of deaths on Dorset's roads and in fire. It acknowledged the 'firm action' taken in response to the rise in the number of people killed in house fires and praised a number of other community safety initiatives such as using local fire stations for various fire safety initiatives and encouraging home safety checks for vulnerable people.

Imaginative ways of getting the message across have included a 'crash' course on road safety at Gillingham Youth Centre and getting messages about fire safety across outside the gutted and burnt out buildings in Wimborne after the large scale fire there.

First Responders schemes continued. The Broadwindsor group managed to get an appeal for more volunteers in the Western Gazette whilst Cattistock, a relatively new group, raised £120 from a bottle in the local pub, towards the purchase of an oxygen saturation monitor.

9. PLAY AND YOUNG PEOPLE



Play has received a considerable boost with the government's Playbuilders fund, which allocated £1.1m to Dorset with the first projects' allocated funds due to be spent by March 2010. The fund is for play projects for the eight – thirteen age group and requires at least three consultations with the children. So for example Colehill Parish Council put out pleas through the parents newsletter at the local middle school for the children to come along to view designs at Oliver's Park where they are to replace the large multiplay unit that was almost at the end of its life.

A total of twenty-two play spaces in rural Dorset will be developed and / or refurbished. A particularly exciting and innovative design has been chosen at Jarvis Field in Stalbridge and it will be very interesting to see its final launch!

In Chickerell the children of the school asked the Town Council for a new playground. The Town Council have since been working very closely with a newly formed community group known as 'Chickerell @ Play' to progress plans for this in the village. The Town Council voted at the August meeting to donate a portion of land at the Willowbed field to the Playground project plus a cash donation to get the project started. This donation was made to the community playground group on the understanding that the local community would also need to raise 10% of the total budget which is likely to be around £80,000. Recent fundraising activities include a cake sale at the local school, sales of calendars, badges, key rings, filling Smarties tubes with 20p pieces, a children's Christmas party and a tour of the village with carol singing by Santa's sleigh. An open afternoon was organised in November for people to look at the plans and vote for what they wanted.

In Crossways planning permission has finally been granted for a multi-use game area. Conditions were applied concerning the skate bowl necessitating some further planning but installation is expected to start soon.

Unfortunately play areas seem to have been particularly prone to vandalism over the past few months. Fire, believed to have been started deliberately, wrecked the climbing frame at Winterborne Whitechurch, a particularly popular piece of play equipment. In Poundbury benches, stone plinths and concrete slabs near the youth shelter were pushed over or damaged. Meanwhile in Sherborne the Town Council put up a sign at the skate park warning that the equipment will be removed if the damage does not stop. This brought an indignant response from many of the young people using the skate park, pointing out that it was not them who caused the vandalism but they would be penalised if it closed.

An interesting project was launched in the Sherborne area of a mobile youth service created from a converted limousine. A youth worker takes the vehicle out to places such as Culverhayes car park, and the skate park but also to the outlying villages such as Bradford Abbas.

The young people of Dorchester have been particularly active. Dorchester Youth Extra, the youth forum for the county town, held its Annual General Meeting in December and outlined some of its achievements. These included organising 'holiday hang-outs' in Dorchester, Charlton Down, Crossways and Puddletown where activities included hair braiding, pottery and designing T-shirts. There was also a large-scale open air music festival at the Bank Holiday where despite atrocious weather a very good time was had.

Dorchester Skate Park continued to do well and ran a very successful fun day known as the SK8 Jam and Bike Try-out. Run as part of a bid to promote healthy forms of travelling people could not only try out skating and cycling there were even mobility scooter races! Later in the year a cheque for £300 was received from Dorchester BID (Business Improvement District) for the purchase of benches. It is hoped that a local furniture maker will be found to supply them.

A new youth club opened on Portland after a trial run in the summer. The club opened at the Osprey Leisure Centre in November and runs every Friday from 7.30 to 10 pm for eleven to sixteen year olds. Plans are also afoot to get a youth club running again in Charlton Down.

10. EMPLOYMENT

As reported in last year's Rural Trends, although unemployment has increased in the County it is still quite low compared to the national figure and has shown signs of falling. The latest figures available (November 2009) show the Dorset County Council area to have 2.2%

unemployed claimants with the lowest rate in North and West Dorset (both 1.6%) and the highest in Weymouth and Portland (3.4%). This is lower than both the regional and the national average.

Nevertheless job losses were reported throughout the County including at the Land Registry, DEK and Ultra Electronics, all on the Granby Industrial Estate, just outside of Weymouth, at Ceewrite and at the Spa Hotel on Portland and at Hatchpaines Construction Ltd on the Sunrise Business Park in Blandford.

On the other hand there are hopes that up to fifty jobs will be created at Osprey Quay on Portland where the South West Regional Development Agency has agreed a contract with developers for seventeen small business units aimed at small to medium sized enterprises in the marine sector. There was also good news for the chocolate firm House of Dorchester when Tesco agreed to stock its Chunky Chocolates range in forty-two stores in the West Country.

In July volunteers launched a Job Club in Shaftesbury, partly to fill the gap caused by the closure of Jobcentre Plus locally in 2007 and which had become more keenly felt with the rise in unemployment. The Job Club meets every Friday to give practical advice on training opportunities, how to write CVs, skills workshops, interview preparation and so on. (www.shaftesburyjobclub.co.uk)

As mentioned in the last report, BLAST (Bridport Learning and Skills Training) was established to help provide more local training opportunities for young people in the area. After a successful pilot before the actual centre was opened, where 80% of the young people trained found work or college places - they have now succeeded in opening a Skills Training Centre on North Mills Trading Estate. The project is run in partnership with Nacro, who provide the training.

Tensions around economic development were highlighted in Sturminster Marshall where residents, councillors and the National Trust objected to new proposals to extract gravel and sand on two new sites, in addition to the sites proposed the previous year at Henbury Farm and Vines Close Farm. As with the original proposal residents were concerned about the effects of extraction on the landscape, the risk of flooding, mud, noise, light pollution and proposals to create lakes once the extraction had been completed. A major concern was traffic. On the other hand new sites are needed in the county so that the demand for these minerals can be met. There will be an official consultation period in 2010 and it seems as though objectors will be vigorously ensuring their views are heard!

11. ARTS AND CULTURE

Arts and culture has great potential to bring communities together and this can be seen in all sorts of local activities such as village pantomimes and plays, local choirs, carnivals and festivals, celebrating our heritage whether this be our distinctive food culture, our literary heritage such as Thomas Hardy and William Barnes, our local rural crafts and many others. The Dorset Strategic Partnership (DSP) launched its Dorset Cultural Strategy 2009 - 2014 during this period (www.dorsetforyou.com/culturalstrategy) Its aim is to place culture – in its widest sense – at the heart of quality of life.

There was some good news on the museum front when in December Gold Hill Museum in Shaftesbury learnt that it had been awarded £400,000 from the Heritage Lottery Fund. This, together with the museum's own resources, mean that a total of £640,000 can be spent on a complete refurbishment and the museum will be closed for the whole of 2010 to enable this to be carried out. A new two-storey extension will be built and the exhibition space will include artefacts from the Dorset button industry, which started in Shaftesbury.

Meanwhile an amazing find by a local amateur fossil hunter of the skull of a pliosaur, 155 million years old, will eventually go on display at the County Museum in Dorchester with the aid of £18,000 from the Heritage Lottery Fund and £1,000 each from Dorset and Devon County Councils. This is one of the largest pliosaur skulls ever found and is 2.4 metres long. It will be scientifically analysed and prepared before going on display.



Photo by Keith Hatch

An interesting project took place at Bridport Museum when it linked up with the Bristol History Group on the theme of 'Crime and Punishment'. There were talks on smuggling, pirate trials and the role of hanging and the use of the 'Bridport dagger' as a means of controlling the working class over this period.

As usual there was a raft of local festivals during this period, including Screen Bites, the food and film festival in the Autumn, Wimborne Folk Festival, Sturminster Cheese Festival, Purbeck film festival, Endorse-it-in-Dorset and a host of others! Carnivals were also much in evidence: these are often both big tourist attractions and great money spinners for local charities but in recent years have had difficulties with insurance for floats and other issues. Most recently the issue has been about moving the floats at night. Originally Dorset police intended to ban the movement of abnormal loads at night but after intervention from the local North Dorset MP and many of the carnival committees, the police have now agreed to provide escorts free of charge 'for the foreseeable future'.

On the libraries front there appears to have been a drop in users of around 10% following the cut in hours introduced last year. Dorchester has seen a fall of 14% and Bridport 13%. Computer usage has also fallen by a third since charges were introduced (although the first half-an-hour remains free). There are however plans to expand Christchurch Library, which is one of the county's busiest libraries but severely lacking in space. The introduction of self service technology continues to be rolled out across Dorset too and seems to be running smoothly.

An expanded and improved Arts Centre in Shaftesbury was officially opened in the Autumn. There are new rooms, toilet facilities, a lift for the disabled and a refurbished box office. The main heating system was also replaced, partly paid for by an interest free loan from the Carbon Trust. However, some work still remains to be done such as updating the kitchen facilities, which cannot be done until the Centre has raised some more funding. This Arts Centre is run by volunteers drawn from its membership (www.shaftesburyartscentre.org.uk).

12. OTHER ISSUES

Given the recession, not unnaturally financial issues were amongst the forefront of concerns in the County. Bridport CAB decided to expand its premises so that it could cope with its increased caseload. The trustees decided to take on the lease of the upstairs part of the building they currently use so they could increase the number of interview rooms, after a huge

increase in the number of clients visiting the premises. Meanwhile Magna Housing Association decided to appoint a financial adviser for its tenants, again as a response to the credit crunch.

The First Dorset Credit Union celebrated its tenth anniversary in July with a concert in Dorchester. Since its inception it has expanded its common bond area from West Dorset to include Weymouth and Portland and more recently North Dorset. (www.blackmorevalecreditunion.org.uk) In July it opened its second service point in North Dorset, in St Peter's Church in Shaftesbury and hopes to open a third service point in Blandford shortly. Its members include all three MPs for the area.

In West Dorset, members of the Citizens' Panel were asked to take part in the first exercise in the district of what is known as 'participatory budgeting', when five projects were pitched to the group who then voted on the one they felt would best help people in the current economic climate. The winner was the coalition of Dorset's Citizen Advice Bureaux who were allocated £25,000 to fund specialist employment advice.

Interest in green issues shows little sign of waning. Weymouth and Portland Borough Council residents turned out to be the best in the country at not creating waste: this is the authority with the lowest household waste per head of population at 289.6 kg, a full 4 kg less than the next best authority. They also recycle 44.2% of the waste they do create against a national average of 36.9%.

In Bridport TLC, a community recycling project opened an 'Arts and Crafts Scrapstore' where scrap items such as card, paper, cloth and decorative materials are collected from local businesses and then made available to schools, artists and individuals. This is a similar scheme to the already highly successful Dorset Scrapstore based at Puddletown (www.dorsetscrapstore.org.uk)

There was continuing interest in allotments with the official opening in the summer of thirty-nine plots in Langton Matravers and in November the official opening of long awaited allotment plots in Crossways. In both cases the fundraising and development of the project was organised by a newly formed Allotment Society - the Langton Matravers Allotment Association and the Allotment Society of Crossways respectively.

There was still much interest in the Transition movement, both Transition Towns and Transition Villages being very active locally. Typical activities include the showing of films such as The Age of Stupid, the setting up of groups to explore solar energy panels and other forms of green energy, book swaps, swap shops, and many other.