

Chairman's Report – AGM 7th September 2020

The twelve months since our last AGM has truly been a year of two halves. As you know, we had originally intended to hold the 2020 AGM in St Leonard's Church in June, but, as was advised in May, this was not to be. A later date was proposed in October but for various reasons the AGM is now planned to be run electronically by Zoom on Monday 7th September. (See shareholders' email communication for more details). The coronavirus pandemic has not only impinged on our normal timetable but has radically affected the functionality and the socialisation that our Community Shop and St Leonards normally provides.

Looking back to the first part of our year from June 2019 to March 2020, normal life reigned. Our retail business was coming back onto an even keel after the previous year's staff changes and the Post Office, under its Community contract basis, was developing its services under the auspices of Rowena and Claire. Great efforts were exerted in researching and introducing new product lines keeping the shop offering fresh and welcoming. In the autumn, Claire sadly decided to move onto pastures new and we wish her well in her future endeavours. Rowena, thank goodness, was more than prepared to take on the tasks that Claire had performed in Addition to the roles she was already performing. We agreed new working hours and contractual arrangements with her to accommodate this.

In October, The Shop and Gallery Café celebrated our 10 year anniversary of the movement of the Shop and Café into St Leonards with a luncheon party that was attended by over 60 volunteers, past and present. And on January 19th, a celebratory service was held in St Leonards recognising the 10 years since the completion of the re-ordering of the church.

I would normally only be reporting, for the most part, on our last financial year to the end of 2019 with some additional insight into the current year to date but it behoves me to provide more detail regarding current events.

Little did we know what was to happen. With the arrival of Covid-19 cases into the UK it was decided to set-up strict infection control procedures for those entering the Church and the Shop. These included mandatory handwashing; restriction of numbers entering the shop; the erection of infection control screens at the counters and cleaning and disinfection activities on surfaces, screens and doors. More recently, the government has mandated the use of face coverings for customers in shops. It is gratifying to observe a high level of compliance with these procedures by our customers. In March, we contacted all of our volunteers to explore who would be willing to continue to serve behind the counter during these difficult times. We are very grateful to those who were comfortable with providing continued assistance. We fully understand why those who, for health and age reasons, under the present circumstances, felt unable to be involved. We look forward to their return in the future and indeed in July we have been pleased to welcome back some of these volunteers.

An ordering and a picking and packing programme was introduced enabling collection and /or delivery of groceries by members of the Yarpole Good Neighbour Scheme to those in the community who were self-isolating or shielding. We are grateful to the Church for allowing us to use the majority of the space in the nave to set up tables to accommodate these orders as well as for the laying out of newspapers for collection. As of the 15th June when churches became able to allow individual worship, the space being taken up for shop activities has been reduced partially by the purchase of newspaper racks for use instead of tables. All of our disease control activities are still in place as this report is being written and it is expected that this will continue for several weeks or more. As lock-down requirements are relaxed, the Shop Management Committee together with the Building Management Group (BMG) will be finding ways to accommodate these extra shop space needs and the re-introduction of more normal activities such as those of worship and socialisation including, hopefully, increased use of the Gallery Café kitchen facilities and the use of a large marquee which has been erected between the Church and the Bell Tower. The Café opened with suitably distanced tables and chairs in the marquee on July 4th. Necessary social-distancing requirements will still need to be strictly observed in the Shop and the Café for the foreseeable future and this restricts, to a certain extent, how socialisation can be developed as time goes on.

Understanding that income coming into the Church from events and other fund-raising activities has fallen substantially and bearing in mind that the Shop has only been able to function in the way it has of late by virtue of

the use of space in the church, it is only right and proper that the shop should contribute a “rent” to the BMG over this period and this has been implemented.

Before the Coronavirus pandemic appeared, the management committee had been planning to introduce a more up-to-date EPOS system. The pandemic hindered our ability to set-up, install and train-up our volunteers with the new system. The purchase of the new EPOS system has been funded by receipt of a grant from the Post Office for which we are very grateful.

As part of the early planning for the new EPOS system, especially with regard to newspaper sales and also triggered by the need to limit footfall into the shop to collect pre-ordered papers, new systems have been introduced to simplify ordering and purchasing. Similarly, the radical increase in shop turnover caused primarily by its ordering and pick-and-pack offering has required a rapid increase in the number of people holding credit accounts. This, fortuitously, will assist in the future with shop functionality as has the coincidental introduction of a new card reader that allows contactless payments to be made. Hence, a number of the systems developments which have taken place as a consequence of the pandemic will, in fact, be of benefit in the future when a normality (or a new kind of normality) returns.

During all of this mayhem, it is very important to highlight the massive effort that Rowena has put into keeping the shop up and running, together with her husband, William, assisting with back office activities. We cannot commend her too highly. Also grateful thanks to Julian who not only has been heavily involved in the customer ordering process but also, when Rowena has well-earned days off, filled the space temporarily left by our usual Post Office back-up helpers’ inability to assist owing to their necessary shielding requirements. However, in July we were pleased to welcome back both Tony and Richard to assist with Post Office cover.

Finally, many, many thanks should go to the volunteers who have committed to serving so willingly in the Shop during these difficult times.

Thanks also go to my colleagues on the management committee – Alex, Angela, Craig, David, Jon and Maria whose sterling efforts and advice and wisdom have been so supportive. I am also grateful for their combined agreement to stay in post until the AGM takes place.

Where to for the future? There will be a transition stage which will require some careful juggling of space, volunteer rotas and processes. It is also important to note that Eileen Minton has, very understandably, decided to relinquish her Volunteer Coordinator role which has been ably taken up by Kate Griffiths. We cannot thank Eileen enough for all of her superb coordination and diplomatic skills over the years.

Our Shop will come out of this difficult time being stronger and even more highly valued by the Community. Looking back 15 years ago, the foresight and common sense shown by those who instigated its birth surely has been evidenced over the years but never more so than in this difficult year.

Best wishes and stay well

AP