

FOREWORD

The Meppershall Village Plan was born out of the 2000 Rural White Paper that set out the government's plans for the countryside. The Parish Council elected to have a 'lay' team take on the task. It has been two years of work by the team. I must stress TEAM. This is not a task that any one individual could have undertaken and still have obtained the consensus of the whole village.

The purpose of the plan is to provide a vehicle for the villagers to have their say in what they would like for the village, the way that they believe it should develop, facilities required and the necessary services.

The plan is intended as an advisory document to all local levels of government, Parish, District and County. However, it is not binding on them, but it forms part of the overall strategy documents that enable them to make the best, informed decisions (although many do not believe that to be the case, this is the individual's prerogative).

However, it is not all council. Many times during the period that this plan has been under development, we have heard the call 'Why isn't the Parish Council doing this or that?' The answer generally falls into two categories; (1) no one has told them so they don't know about the issue or (2) it is something outside the Parish Council's remit.

The provision of youth facilities, parking control, even dog fouling has either to be passed on to another agency, or it is totally outside the Parish Council's control.

In this plan there are a number of items that are listed as Parish Council, or Parish Council to pass to District (or similar) BUT, and it is a big but, there are a number of things that, if the

villagers really want them, then they (the villagers) will need to rally round and see that they are provided.

The Committee, a team of about ten volunteers which I have been proud to chair, have seen this process through. We do not say that it is a perfect job, but we are all proud of what we have done.

Throughout the whole process, the villagers were kept informed via regular bulletins in the Meppershall Messenger. The Meppershall Messenger is the village magazine which is delivered ten times a year to each house in the village. What was happening, how to contact and whom, events and results were given so that as many people as possible were kept informed.

It is one thing to generate a plan. The next vital step is to see it through. This plan needs to be a living thing.

There is a need for a new team to ensure that

- all parties sign up to the plan.
- all parties carry through their part of the plan.
- where circumstances change and tasks are done, the team will need to see if there are changes to be made to the plan.

Any new item added to the plan or items taken from the plan are done as the result of new consultations / fact finding to ensure they meet the needs of the village.

A proposal for a Meppershall Village Forum is being formulated and once this has been thoroughly thought through will be published in the Messenger, with information as to how you can be involved.

J West

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Meppershall Village Plan Steering Group

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PEOPLE IN MEPPERSHALL

(With thanks to Sandra Read. - Manor Farm.)

Meppershall is a linear village of approximately 1.25 km in length, in Mid Bedfordshire. The village is on a spur and rises to 85m OD at the church and Motte and Bailey castle remains.

From pottery evidence, the centre of Meppershall has been in continuous occupation since the Iron Age and the recently excavated site in the centre of the village [now completely buried under the new development] was stated to be a Romano-British 'farmstead'. Further excavation indicated that at one time in this period the spring on the site had a religious purpose and high quality pottery was recovered from there. At this time Meppershall would have been known for its skilled craftsmen as very delicate bone working and evidence for a kiln was found on the site. These people did not have the parish boundary we now know and the Roman villa and cemetery nearer Campton would have been part of their everyday life.

By the time of the Domesday Book, Meppershall was an agricultural village, though not always a peaceful one. In the fourteenth century King Stephen stayed long enough to write several historical charters here. Unfortunately, one of the de Meppershall family was considered to be a problem and the King was here to besiege the Motte and Bailey. After this, Meppershall seems to have settled down to its quiet agricultural life again. Records show that it was a virtually crime free place, the workers being well looked after by their employers. Some prospered well and were able to have their own flocks of sheep in their employer's fields.

Life went on well until John Leventhorpe inherited the manor in the sixteenth century. On a quiet Sunday after the church service, the parishioners and the Rector left the church and

found nine men, led by John Leventhorpe, in Church Lane with swords and hooks "arrayed as men of war" who attacked them. The villagers fought and fled protecting the Rector from John and for weeks they were not allowed near the church and the fields around the manor were not tended. Even the men with leases from the manor dared not enter their land.

The only craftsman known from this time, because he had to pay tax, was a carpenter and it wasn't until 1603 that the village had a forge that was independent of the farms. This blacksmith's son, John Robinson, went to America as a teenager and became one of the founders of Exeter, New Hampshire. He prospered until he was shot by Indians, and some of Robinson's New World descendants have visited the village recently.

Meppershall was a parliamentary village during the Civil War. Life went on much the same although there was dissent because the Rector, Timothy Archer, was put in the Fleet Prison for the duration simply because he met King Charles when he graduated from university. His family fled to Maulden, except for one daughter, Rebecca, who went to live with her uncle in London. Rebecca married a Mr. Vaughn and became the first woman alchemist in the country. When she died her body was brought back to Meppershall for burial.

Meppershall has had some exceptional Rectors. Thomas Salmon, who succeeded Timothy Archer, published many works on music and his two sons Nathaniel and Thomas were also authors whose books are still quoted today. James Webster, who built the present day rectory in the nineteenth century, was a highly respected, fair and considerate magistrate though he did refuse to enter into the register the births of the girls born to the Lord of the Manor by his housekeeper and the clerk had to do it. He became their guardian a few years later and was well loved by them. This was fortunate as their other guardian was John

Field of Polehanger. He was always being brought before the magistrate, Samuel Whitbread, for cruelty to his workers and even caused one to die for which he was imprisoned. When he complained to the magistrate about someone he was sent home each time. He was the only bad master in the village to be found in all the records, though it seems to have been due to a quick temper as, for each case, he gave more in compensation than he was ordered.

Life was easier in the eighteenth century for the villagers than in the nineteenth century, though the farmers went to extraordinary lengths to help the local poor. In the middle of the nineteenth century Meppershall was enclosed, all the open field systems changed and each farm was given land in a block as we know it today. This meant that the workers lost all their rights to wood, fruit and herbs from the hedgerows and had nowhere to graze their animals as even rough land was included. Like many good villages Meppershall did provide some allotments in Hoo Road to help alleviate the difficulties. Even gleaning, the way most people in the village got their supply of grain, was technically illegal. The farmers in Meppershall decided to allow it – but regulate it to be fair to all – and gleaning could not start until the school bell rang. This was not indicating that the children were in school though; all hands were needed to get a supply for the family.

Throughout the nineteenth century, even after schooling became compulsory, the school records show children absent because they were working in the fields or kept at home plaiting. Straw plaiting was the only way the villagers had to increase their income and the smallest child knew “Over one and under two, pull it through and that will do”. Some tiny children are listed in the early censuses as straw-plaiters. The beginning of compulsory education later in the century led to children being listed as scholars but that didn’t reflect the reality of their lives as

families could not manage without the extra money. When the weather was bad the school was even known to shut because the children were unable to get there, as they had no shoes.



Workers at Elletts Nursery in the Early 1930's

On the whole, Meppershall was quite a healthy place to live but the division of some old cottages, to cope with the growing families, led to overcrowding. In 1875, a housing report was undertaken. One cottage in Sand Lane [Fildyke Road] had six adults and four children in two small rooms. Many cottages were overcrowded and the newly built houses were considered to have privies too close to the wells. Inevitably, the school records start showing cases of infectious diseases caused by these contaminated wells.

There were 42 wells in Meppershall, some houses having to get water from nearby homes. The bakery, started in the late 1840's by James Roberts, then followed by his son Ephraim, had a 100

foot deep well. In 1902 Ephraim noticed that his well cover was off and looking down saw his wife a long way down, stuck by her petticoats. One of the bakers, James Bluffield, with the aid of a rope managed to get her out and later received a Royal Humane Society Award for his bravery having “so gallantly rescued her”.

In the twentieth century Meppershall was known for its fourteen glasshouse enterprises. Acres and acres of glass produced cucumbers, tomatoes and lettuce to send to London. As fewer farm workers were needed on the land, this became the major industry and employment in the village. In 1917, a glove factory was started in Hoo Road making gloves for the armed forces with eight machine workers. This moved to the building beside the Chapel and was soon employing sixty girls. This factory closed in 1963.



Glove Factory Workers

Today few villagers work on the land. Farms now use sophisticated machinery and the cheaper imported vegetables

made the glasshouses unprofitable. The majority of villagers work elsewhere.

THE DATA GATHERING PROCESS

In order to generate any plan it is necessary to try to understand the purpose of the plan, what to include in it and what to leave out. In many cases the objective is quite clear and as a result the plan can be concise, detailed and have clear time boundaries. In the case of a village plan the objectives are much less clear.

The finished plan will be presented to all concerned groups and partners as a road map to assist in the development of the village. So, firstly we had to find out what the villagers of Meppershall actually wanted.

This data gathering process started at the very first meeting, with each member of the Steering Group having some knowledge of the village, perceived views of what the village needed and their own personal likes and dislikes. The important thing was to take all those thoughts and ideas and ensure that they were expanded to include as many of the thoughts and ideas of as many villagers as possible.

In 1992, Ron Mitchell had lead a team in carrying out a village questionnaire. This had been a data gathering exercise that produced a very good set of data but had stopped at that point. It was decided that this questionnaire could be used as the basis for our own data gathering exercise but it would need some revision to change questions that had clearly altered over time and to add / take away questions that were now more appropriate or no longer valid.

Each of the Steering Group took on the task of visiting and consulting with various groups (interested parties) around the village. These included Meppershall School Governors, School Association, Pre-school Group, Meppershall Players, Evergreens, Village Hall Committee, Brownies, Mid Beds Conservative Association, Businesses (including Thermodata, ACO, Inspace formerly Wilmott Dixon, Village Stores), Church (PCC) (informally), Women's Institute, Social Club and Baby and Toddlers.

The adjoining parishes were e-mailed via their Parish Clerks, to inform them of what Meppershall was doing, and a meeting was held with Shefford Town Council to discuss items of common interest.

Additionally, each of the Steering Group was to look at a section of the 1992 Survey and see what changes were needed. The sections were:-

- People
- Emergency, Environmental & Other Services
- Housing
- Retail Services & Other Facilities
- Transport & Highways
- Sports, Social & Entertainment
- Employment
- Information & Communications
- Education
- Religion
- Local Countryside & Environment
- Local Government
- Health & Social Services

This feedback was used to modify the questions to be able to capture as many views possible.

Other events were organized by the Steering Group with the aid of staff from the Bedfordshire Rural Community Charity (BRCC). These events were advertised by entries in the Meppershall Messenger, posters and flyers. The three main ones before the questionnaire were:-

1. Planning for Real. This consisted of two consecutive open days, 22/23 September 2006, held in the Methodist Chapel, where villagers were able to put forward their concerns. Mostly, they were able to place their issues on a large scale map of the village which enabled topics like speeding to be noted at certain points of the village. Over 186 people attended.
2. RAVE Bus. 21 September 2006 This was an event primarily aimed at teenagers but with the same purpose in mind, namely to gather their viewpoints. Approximately 14 youngsters between 14 and 17 years of age attended. It was recognized from the start that across the age groups we would probably see different viewpoints on common issues. The feedback from this event is appended as Annex A
3. Green Walks. These were aimed at showing people that Meppershall already had a good deal going for it and that we should build on these things, not lose them.

Compared to some of the other villages, Meppershall's questionnaire was a large one, but it was felt necessary by the team, who wanted to capture as much information as possible in one round, rather than getting some information and having to go back again for further clarification.

From all the inputs the questionnaire was generated.

The Meppershall Questionnaire can be viewed at www.meppershall.org/plan

The desire was to enable as many people, regardless of age, sex, belief etc, to complete the questionnaire and to do this in an anonymous way as it was felt this would enable the person to express their own views without any worries over any come backs. The Steering Group was anxious to get as many meaningful returns as possible to ensure the data obtained was valid.

Because the returned questionnaire was to be anonymous, it was not possible to have a delivery & return system that included people with lists checking on residences, as this would have removed the anonymity. Instead, the questionnaires were delivered by the Messenger delivery team and people were asked to use the provided plastic bag to put the completed questionnaire out for collection and one of the team would collect, without recording where it was from. Alternatively, drop-off points were provided for those wishing to use them.

The BRCC provided a data collection spreadsheet into which we entered all the questions and possible answers. As the questionnaires were returned, the data from each one was entered by three members of the team and accumulated into one file.

Where there were 'extra' comments, these were either added into the appropriate questions, or gathered together in extra fields.

Files to 'read' the data were generated and these were used to look at the overall results.

The data files are very large, in the order of 700 pages if you tried to print it, but it can be viewed at www.meppershall.org/plan

To review the information and outline plan, two open days were held so that the villagers could see the draft plan. Villagers were also able to suggest changes and additions and to help the team understand the relative priorities of the items.

NARRATIVE RESULTS

The questionnaire, which went to each of the households in the village and had provision for each member of the household over eight years old to complete, was done on an anonymous basis. An excellent return, for an anonymous survey, was achieved, with 43.85% of households and 44.87% of the population represented in the results.

Many of the results of the consultations and questionnaire can be quantified and actions noted against them. Others require a more general understanding. So what did we learn? Most will say nothing new, we are just able to put more quantitative data to the known issues.

- When the general demographics of Mid-Beds are compared with the questionnaire return there was a drop off of returns from those in their twenties, with those over 40 giving a high rate of return.
- Over 98 percent of returns were from all white families.
- Few people are trying to leave, many more are trying to get in, or move within the village. 69 percent of the respondents have been here for more than five years, with nearly 20 percent having been in the village for more than 25 years.
- Few people reported that they were registered disabled and those that did, had the access they needed to facilities.

Many people wanted the village to remain unchanged, but the

evidence shows that Meppershall is now a commuter village with the majority of the people working outside the village, many at some distance. The car is seen by ninety percent of the respondents as essential in order to live in the village. It is this same reliance on the car that has spin-offs, many of them adverse. Speeding, where to park, people not making use of public transport leading to its reduced availability (there are several buses that go through Meppershall).

Eighteen percent of the people work in the village, including those who work from home, and a further twelve percent work in Shefford, but a further twelve percent go as far as London. Many people would like to see more work available in the village, though this will be totally dependent on market forces. People are split on whether there should be some light scale industrial units to help facilitate this.

Over seventy two percent were not interested in Adult Education. Of those that were interested, the biggest issue was that the required courses were not available locally.

When a number of the issues are looked at, it appears that the lack of, or ineffective communications are at the centre of a number of things.

- Lack of public transport – whilst the buses may not be at the best times, there are buses to Luton (Route 79), Bedford (Route 201) and Hitchin (Route 89), with some of the early and late buses going via Hitchin Station.
- Where are the footpaths.
- When does the Parish Council meet.
- The location of the Nature Reserve.

Over forty percent of people knew where most of the village footpaths are and a further fifty percent knew where some of them were. We plan to publish the local footpath map with this

plan and also to make copies available at various locations in the village. The biggest problem here was the condition of the paths, whether they were dog mess free and cleared to walk. Less than half found them clear and nearly three quarters found that dog fouling was an issue on the footpaths and other public places.

As previously noted, the Parish Council do not have responsibility for everything in the plan. However, they have adopted it as the Meppershall Village Plan and as such it will provide them with a tool for future discussions with the other layers of local government.

The Sugar Loaf Public House came in for a lot of adverse comment. The information has been passed to the landlord & landlady, but we are in the hands of the owners as to any progress. At the time of writing it is noted that the business is likely to once again change hands and the information has additionally been passed to Greene King.