

Consult Before You Decide

a study in local democracy



Residents march against the Joviel plan to develop the High Street - 26 January 1967

The Residents' Association was 75 years old in 2009. It embodies a thread of local democracy that has run for centuries in the Dittons and Weston Green. Early history of residents' protest and engagement in local administrative matters is scant but recognisable: petitioning the Lord Protector after Henry VIII's death to dismantle the extensive enclosed deer Chase around Hampton Court (1547); protesting the failure of Lord Onslow's heirs to maintain Ember Lane in good order (1783); forming a mutual association for protections against felons in the locality (1792); and engaging in the

basic administrative affairs of the parish. The building of railway lines in the mid-1800s met with strong opposition from Thames Ditton residents to the loss of farmland and commons. This led to compensation for landowners and subsequent large payments to local rates by the London and South-Western Railway Company. Then, in 1873 Chelsea Waterworks proposed to build reservoirs on 50 acres of meadow upstream of the Swan, part of the Palace Estate, where Albany Reach is today. Local residents joined together in Defence

Committees to mount such a strong protest that the House of Lords threw out the Bill, the reservoirs were built at Molesey instead, and what is now our only riverside walk was saved. It undoubtedly helped that famed barrister and former Chancellor Lord St Leonards, then 92, was still active and living at Boyle Farm. The inhabitants of Thames Ditton have repeatedly been well-placed to draw on the resources of some formidable residents.

The late 1800s saw some industry in Thames Ditton, the advent of a newer population to serve it, and the first flush of house-building consequent on the railway links. By the end of the century, the sparse population had more than doubled. The Local Government Act 1894 established county and metropolitan boroughs, urban and rural districts with their own councils, and a year later Esher and Dittons Urban District Council was formed. The focus of local administration shifted away from local householders and the immediacy of the parish. A second wave of house-building followed in the decade after the Great War, and it is from then that we begin to see the pressures that led to residents forming an Association. Traffic was already becoming a problem, and in 1925 we find residents taking a traffic census. The building of Hampton Court Way in 1932 across common land, bisecting Weston Green, was followed by plans to build a by-pass for Esher across the commons too. And so, in 1934, the Thames Ditton Residents' Association was formed to fight it. The ideas and ideals of Residents' Associations were now becoming prevalent: others in South-East England were founded from around 1923 and one had been established in neighbouring Hinchley Wood in 1932. By 1939 there were a thousand Residents' Associations recorded nationally.

The Association was heavily centred on Weston Green (and two years later added 'Weston Green' to its title): only one of the Association's local Government and General Purposes Committee of 10 members did not have a Weston Green address. It is believed that the Association put up candidates for the Council from the outset. The residents of Long Ditton Ward subsequently joined in. The Association campaigned on planning and highways issues, and its support grew steadily. By 1938 membership, at one shilling per head, numbered around 800. There is a certain irony in associations for the defence of local amenities being set up by newcomers, residents of villas lately built over farmland; and in those who were a prime cause of *more* traffic being active in limiting it or lobbying for it to be routed elsewhere! But we must be glad they did so.

There is little record of activities during the period 1939 - 1945. The end of war, however, saw a renascent Residents' Association. In 1946 it had two councillors and the following year saw dissemination of a stirring document with themes wholly relevant to this day:

"...Your councillors can only properly represent you and your neighbours if you tell them what you are thinking.....it is no good sitting back and grousing about the council's sins of omission and commission, if you don't do anything about it..."

"... party politics should be kept out of local government. When we wish to support a candidate we do not ask his religion, nor do we ask his politics, we want to send the best men and women to represent us on the council, without party or creed entering the matter...."

"... the areas we represent should not be allowed to become an arena for a political dogfight for politicians and careerists..."

"... The Residents' Association is not concerned with 'isms', abstruse political theories; nor with ideologies. What we are very much concerned with are the practical everyday affairs of our local communal life..."

"... accepts instructions from no body, no party, no office, no one except the residents who compose it."

The constitution was recast in 1948 and subscriptions raised to half a crown. By 1951 the founding Vice-Chairman, Col. Rees, who had later become Chairman, was still President of what was now entitled the Thames Ditton, Long Ditton and Weston Green Residents' Association. Although only nine members attended the AGM that year, membership remained healthy and voters continued to turn out for Residents' candidates.

Informing residents

There were pre-war attempts to communicate with residents via a newsletter, 'The Resident,' that appeared occasionally, and after the war there were occasional such publications and reports in the local press. From these we can see that while support remained consistent, the Association was sometimes less active, sometimes more. At the AGM in 1958 retiring Chairman P. R. Noakes noted the absence of major issues, which indicated *"the generally satisfactory manner in which local affairs were conducted by Esher Council."* The Association had achieved success on issues such as road safety, street lighting, the condition of paths and ditches, cycling on footpaths, and had

been represented at a public planning enquiry.

In 1960 a smart bulletin announced that the Newsletter would be resumed and a public meeting held at the village hall in Embercourt Road. The meeting would be open to all residents whether members of the Association or not, with Residents' councillors attending, to report and be questioned. The Association's objectives and *modus operandi* were restated. Hitherto, it seems that public meetings had been called only occasionally when there was a particular issue of concern to be discussed, with business mostly being effected by the Executive Committee and subordinate Committees of the Association. This was probably the first meeting to set the pattern of present day Open Meetings of the Association, where it was made explicit that *"matters brought to our notice by non-members receive as much consideration as those which reach us from members."* There followed a list of the Association's activities since the War.

This bulletin and meeting appears to be another of the periodic convulsions to re-energise the Association. A certain T. S. Mercer was about to be elected as Press Secretary. The newsletter, however, does not seem to have lasted.

Threats to the village

In 1964 Long Ditton residents broke away to form their own Residents' Association. But if the parent Association in Thames Ditton and Weston Green was worried about any drift downhill, it need not have been. What was about to happen had effects lasting forty years, galvanised the Residents' Association and boosted membership no end. In late 1966, the Association was tipped off at the eleventh hour that a Council Planning meeting was about to approve a plan to demolish the West side of the High Street, widen the

road, build a 1960s style boxy shopping precinct and put a road from the Octagon to Station Road behind it. This was dubbed the Joviel Plan, after the name of the developers. The Chairman of the Council Planning Committee, Cllr. Limmer (Conservative), who was said to support the developers' plan, himself lived in the village. The Association managed to get consideration deferred while residents were consulted. There followed a highly-organised campaign that received the support of 70% of Thames Ditton people, mostly irate: on one occasion they marched through the village to Councillor Limmer's house in Speer Road. The London Evening Standard devoted a half page to the demonstration under the headline 'The Fury of The Friendly Village.' Drawing on resourceful and well-connected residents, thorough preparation and mobilisation, the Association defeated the plan.

In the aftermath of 'The Battle of Ditton,' residents' tails were up. Membership reached a high point. The constitution was rewritten, providing for a voting general Council of some fifty members as well as an Executive Committee which met monthly, followed by the Association's Council, before monthly Esher Council meetings. In the Spring of 1970 a regular publication appeared at last - the quarterly, Thames Ditton Today. That year, historian T. S. Mercer published 'More Thames Ditton Tales and Scandals'. In the foreword he wrote: *"...the village is being eaten away bit by bit and only perpetual vigilance can save it from losing its atmosphere. Our bulwark against this destruction is the Dittons Residents' Association."*

And so it proved to be, on many fronts.

Highways

Roads, traffic and parking have been major, often intractable, issues. Faced with lorries and commuters cutting through Thames Ditton to avoid the Scilly isles, in 1970 a traffic census was mounted by volunteers but the authorities seemed more concerned with clearing the roads for more through traffic than in reducing it. A Surrey proposal to put a connecting road from Portsmouth Road to Station Road, demolishing the George and Dragon, was seen off. There followed a series of battles to get Surrey to implement the 1973 Heavy Commercial Vehicles Act by restricting lorries over three tons from the Thames Ditton 'triangle' - and also to press businesses in the Woodlands in Weston Green to restrict voluntarily the movement of HGVs to one agreed route. Finally, in August 1980 an order was made to ban heavy lorries from passing the railway arches at Thames Ditton station. Further operations were mounted to monitor, witness, photograph and report to the police the many lorries whose drivers ignored it.

Parking has also been a long-running issue. In 1971 Ashley Rd car park was established and a year later there were proposals to remove cars parked against the wall of the Home of Compassion, which had caused accidents and one fatality. In 1974 the Association resisted draconian police action to ticket cars parked along the High Street, noting that: *"...a degree of parking in the High St., by slowing down and discouraging through traffic, contributes to its safety.....one of the great benefits of the village both to customers and to shopkeepers is that it is still possible to briefly park and shop."* The problem of all-day parkers became increasingly serious throughout the 1980s:

there was a colourful leaflet campaign to get them to use the car park, with support from local shopkeepers and High St residents who contributed campaign expenses.

In 1992 the Islanders petitioned for speed humps in Summer Road; they even raised £600 which would pay for one hump! The Association asked Elmbridge to look at **traffic calming measures**, and also to prevent commuter parking in Basingfield Rd and Lower Green Rd. Elmbridge carried out a traffic study, but action was deferred while Surrey & Elmbridge considered the issue of parking enforcement following decriminalisation of parking offences. After three years of study, debate and public consultation, controversial speed bumps were installed in 2001, and the 20mph zone in 2003, with a dramatic reduction in accidents. An amended parking scheme, however, ran into difficulties. In Weston Green, suggestions to restrict parking near Esher station led to such a wide area being concerned about displacement of parked cars that a scheme was judged unworkable. In Thames Ditton any scheme not only had to be self-financing but needed to take into account the interests of all residents, including the Islanders, who kept their cars in the area. Moreover, responsibility for Highways was now taken on by Surrey from Elmbridge, and the Association observed that it was *"extremely difficult for our councillors and officers to get access to Surrey's Highways department."* With a Residents' Association County Councillor (Peter Hickman) elected for the first time in 2005, parking was back on the agenda. The Association carried out a further major exercise to consult residents in 2006-2007, and after reconnaissance work by Surrey and extensive official public

consultation, the formulation of a parking scheme again ran into difficulties. Residents' interests as well as those of retail and other businesses, commuters, office workers, and parents using cars for the school run, were too often competing and incompatible. The budget and the allotted time was exhausted before conclusion. As of Autumn 2009, the consultation will be renewed over the next few months under a new Surrey official.

Roads

The publicly-owned commons are an obvious easy route for any strategic planner charged with building a road or railway link from South-West London, crossing the Thames by the reservoirs to link up with roads now established on the north bank and connecting with Heathrow and the motorway system. There were such proposals in 1966 ('Link Road') and again in 1971 ('Ringway 3') and 1975: the 'inner orbital route' - a four lane highway to relieve the river crossings at Hampton Court and Walton. Again in the early 1990s, the HASQUAD (Heathrow and Southwest London Quadrant) proposals to build a new motorway to Heathrow would have destroyed the commons round Weston Green and made Thames Ditton's roads worse rat-runs. Each time such proposals were aired, the Association spent an enormous amount of effort working in conjunction with like-minded organisations to research, consult the public, expose Surrey's Chief Engineer to public meetings and lobby against. To date, that these efforts have succeeded owes as much to the enormous costs of the projects, and occasionally timely economic recession as to the consideration of officials and Ministers. Plans for a third runway at Heathrow are likely, sooner or later, to place a through route across the commons back in the frame.

Other Association activities on highways over the years included a very long and ultimately fruitful campaign to improve safety along **Hampton Court Way**.

Planning

Planning has been a bread-and-butter subject for the Association from its inception. It has made decisive interventions on crucial planning issues since the Joviel Plan ignited the fighting spirit of the village in 1966. A host of lesser but cumulatively important applications has been rigorously contested. The Association also demonstrated a constructive approach.

In 1973, proposals to build 150 houses on the **Old Pauline** sports grounds were successfully resisted, along with plans to build a twelve-storey block of flats on the site of decaying **Ferry Works**, and the Council's intentions to develop the remaining **Albany** riverside including the replacement of the old Vaudeville club, then used as a warehouse. On the Albany site, a competition for redevelopment proposals organised by the Association was won by the Skiffers, and the Association played a part in ensuring that the plans eventually approved contained provision for the continuation of that sporting club. Equally, the Association took a constructive view of the Old Paulines' subsequent plans to build the health and squash club we have today, with accompanying parking (some of which was parlayed into use for High Street offices and others). After reviewing the options to acquire the Ferry Works site for public access to the river, which proved costly and unfeasible, the Association promoted the work of architect Katharina Halasz, a resident,

for a sympathetic restoration of this significant industrial building to provide continuing local industry and employment without noise, smell or other drawbacks.

This positive approach was successful enough for the same architect to be called upon for the conversion of **AC Cars'** premises in the High Street into a mixed development of residential and office accommodation, with parking, that we now have at Harvest Lane. Again we see the Association being constructive, but firm. Having given the proposals a fair wind, residents were not going to stand by when the developers later breached planning conditions to add height to the building in construction. The Association has always been eager to retain a mixed economy as part of the character of Thames Ditton, rather than yield to pressures to convert buildings to residential use. As well as plans for the AC Cars site, plans to redevelop the old **Foundry** opposite Ferry Works were also supported, with modern offices, sheltered accommodation, and provision of more parking spaces.

In 1993 the Association found itself fighting on two major fronts. **Sainsbury's** had proposed a superstore on the Seething Wells Waterworks site, and **Tesco** revealed their interest in the site of the old Milk Marketing Board at Giggs Hill Green. These sites were already in commercial use. The Sainsbury's proposed supermarket was twice as big as their Cobham store plus parking for up to 800 cars and 431 houses and flats. Tesco proposed a marginally smaller store but nevertheless huge, with a filling station and an office block. Several of the surviving small retailers in Thames Ditton would have been



Ferry Works - an outstanding restoration to preserve local employment

put out of business, and when the association researched at first hand the daily vehicle movements at Cobham and other superstores it was plain that the already serious traffic problems in our area would be quite insupportable with either new supermarket, let alone both. Moreover the listed waterworks building at Seething Wells would be demolished and the prospect at Giggs Hill Green irretrievably impaired. A packed Open meeting at the Vera Fletcher Hall revealed

overwhelming opposition to the Tesco proposals in particular.

Working with neighbouring associations and others like-minded, the Association hired a barrister and was represented at appeals. Both supermarket proposals were rejected in 1995. The Association then went to work to find a constructive way forward for the Giggs Hill Green site. By now, Residents' groups

formed the Cabinet in Elmbridge Borough Council and those from Thames Ditton were well placed to be heard and heeded. At the end of 1996, after no less than four sets of developers' proposals had gone to appeal, plans were approved for 140 houses, 4 acres of recreational land and a health facility. That we have these facilities, public tennis courts and a recreational area is to a very large extent attributable to the Association's efforts as is the fact that we do not have a gated and private estate there with maximum density of identical houses facing the Green. An article in the Summer 1997 issue of Thames Ditton Today, "The Final Chapter" by Stan Perry (planning convenor) and John Barton well illustrates the painstaking, detailed work of the Association, its constructive approach, and firmness when developers' intentions varied from what was approved.

Always seeking the proper application of planning guidelines as well as consultation with residents on planning proposals, the Association has also devoted effort to the planning strategy that underpins those guidelines. It campaigned from 1970 for the establishment of **Conservation Areas** in Thames Ditton and Weston Green and with the Town and Country Amenities Act 1974 these soon became a reality. It researched and submitted on the 'Surrey Structure Plan' in 1978 and since then on further **strategic planning documents** for the county and for Elmbridge, has latterly contributed to the reappraisal of the Thames Ditton Conservation Areas and is now considering the Elmbridge draft Core Strategy for the period to 2026. From 2001 it also pressed for all phone masts to require planning permission.

Shops

As well as providing parking for shoppers,

the fostering of small retailers that contribute to the village character has been a concern since the mid 1970s. In 1977 a major tussle failed to prevent closure of the sub-Post Office at Winter's Bridge. In 1988 Alison Dwelly, then 16, wrote a seminal work in Thames Ditton Today recording the disappearance of village shops over the previous decade, which led to the Association setting up a working group: the support of our local MP was also enlisted. From that time the Association has actively, and usually successfully, defended small retail premises against change of use. With some setbacks: in 2004 the Association, after mobilising the whole of Weston Green and researching and mounting an energetic case, unsuccessfully resisted the closure of Weston Green Post Office as part of the euphemistically-named "Post Office Network Reinvention Programme."

Water in, water out

Drains and water have been frequent themes, with the Association predicting, then reacting to the floods of 1968 and lobbying for the flood prevention measures then instituted; trying to nail the sewage smell in the High Street for thirty years and in 1989 pressing Thames Water to reduce pollution entering local rivers; during the present decade successfully persuading Thames Water to invest several million pounds in upgrading the sewage scheme for Thames Ditton; and battling hard with county officials and others to get drains properly maintained near Esher Station and in Station Road. Support for residents' efforts to preserve the two ponds in Weston Green, and involvement in works to clear the flow of the River Rythe, have also featured.

Noise

1972 saw the start of a long campaign against

excessive aircraft noise which took years of research and effort, working with like-minded organisations in the area. After persuading Surrey and Esher to support more acceptable proposals on local overhead routes, lobbying London Airport and the Department of Trade made an impact. Subsequently plans for a helicopter service linking Gatwick and Heathrow to be routed over Thames Ditton and Weston Green were seen off, and the route was moved to the north side of the Thames. Aircraft noise re-emerged as an issue in 1987 when airlines pressed for increased night flying from Heathrow. The following year, the Federation of Heathrow Anti Noise Groups (in which the Association played an active part) was successful in getting night flights restricted.

Community, amenity and social

The Association has always been active with small, but cumulatively significant, initiatives to beautify the villages by planting trees - particularly after the great Storm of 1987, and also along Albany Reach and Giggs Hill Green; planting flowers and bulbs, and occasionally organising litter picks or scrubbing graffiti.

The swell of support following the Battle of Ditton led to the Association's first recorded social evening: 300 people sat down to a dinner staged by 'younger members' at the youth Club in 1971, the forerunner of the annual residents' Christmas Party. Events were also organised to mark the Queen's Silver Jubilee year, and the millennium celebrations when a domed tent was erected at Colets for a Ball. Latterly the Association has fostered and provided insurance cover for the Christmas Fair in the High Street.

Scouts, Guides, and sporting clubs have also been given modest, and sometimes significant, support. The Association played a role in securing new accommodation for the Ajax Sea Scouts and modern premises for the Skiffers; in preventing developers' plans to build 12 houses on the Tennis Club and supporting the Club's subsequent efforts to change the law (and then staging a fund-raising event for the Club's appeal to buy the freehold); in supporting the Cricket Club and the Harry Hawkes Eight; and currently in supporting the Guides' efforts to raise funds to restore their hut.

The Association has been very active in the long-running battle to preserve hospital facilities in Thames Ditton, and in the purchase of the old Village Hall and its restoration to the Vera Fletcher Hall. But these histories are more properly set in the context of the Friends of the Hospital and the Vera Fletcher Hall Committee with which key Association figures were involved.

Local Government and boundary change

From the outset the Association resisted local government reorganisations that would dilute the local voice on local matters or lead to decisions being taken in more distant bodies. In 1971 it supported Esher Urban District Council's bid to remain a separate authority, but reorganisation in 1973 saw Esher merged with Walton & Weybridge to form Elmbridge. Elections that year to the new council (to exist from 1 April 1974) saw 3 of the Association's candidates topping the poll, and a young mother of four, Ruth Lyon, elected for the first time. But now the Association had three out of sixty-six councillors (subsequently 60) instead of three out of thirty-six on the old UDC. The Local Boundary Commission's demarcation of wards was

undermined by an unwanted challenge from Long Ditton, and in the subsequent public enquiry the Association successfully prepared and argued a case for the status quo in conjunction with the Thames Ditton Conservative Association.

While Weston Green has generally been attached to the ancient Elmbridge Hundred, the history of the Dittons lies predominantly with Kingston Hundred and parish: but we have always been on the very borders, with residents preferring Elmbridge and Surrey. Tussles have arisen, and will likely occur again. In the winter of 1989 a battle loomed to prevent Thames Ditton and Weston Green wards being transferred to Kingston (with its high density planning guidelines). In 1992 the subject arose anew with a Boundary Commission proposal to transfer the majority of Long Ditton to Kingston, which could well have expanded to include Thames Ditton and Weston Green. The Association supported Long Ditton's opposition to the proposal, and the outcome was success. Then in 1994 the Local Government Commission reviewed council structures in Surrey with the aim of reducing two tiers to one. That year there were not one but two Boundary Commissions - on parliamentary and local government. Kingston constituency was to be split and part joined with Richmond. Kingston wanted instead to take in the Dittons, Hinchley Wood and Molesey. Again there was a good deal of research, preparation and lobbying with satisfactory results. Kingston's constituency plan was rejected, and in 1995, Secretary of State John Gummer decided to preserve Elmbridge, retaining two tiers of local government in county and borough.

Politics without politicking

Like other Residents' Associations, the Thames Ditton and Weston Green Residents' Association was established as a non-political organisation. But to put forward candidates for election is in essence a political act. The foregoing history of achievement makes abundantly clear that direct engagement has brought significant and worthwhile benefits to these villages. The Association has taken a pragmatic view at the cost of frequent agonising over politics. It tries to avoid party politics and prefers to focus on issues.

In these parts the dominant political force during the past century has been the Conservative Party and we can see that in the first three decades of the Association's existence the people who made the new Tories, the growing business and professional middle-class, were essentially the same people who made the Residents' Association without the political hoo-hah. It would not have been in the Association's interest to rival the Conservatives too strongly: in 1951, the Thames Ditton Conservative Association had some 2000 members. The Residents' Association numbered some 800 households. Probably, many of these were the same. For many years there was evidently a tacit understanding that there was room to co-exist: the Association's candidates for the borough Council might not often be contested by the Conservatives and vice-versa; there was no challenge at County level; and a residents' group running the local Council was hardly viewed as a serious prospect.

A turning point was 1966 and the Joviel Plan, which energised the electorate behind the

Association and flagged up an area of contention between Residents and party Conservatives - development that put profit first. And a principle dear to the Association - consultation of the residents. Similar things were happening elsewhere in Elmbridge. By 1976 there were 36 Conservative councillors, 14 from Residents' Associations, 7 Labour and 3 Liberals. The Conservatives still had one councillor in Thames Ditton and one in Weston Green with the Association holding the other seats. The Conservatives gradually lost ground in the borough. In the mid 1980s a joint Residents-Liberal Democrat administration briefly led Elmbridge before Conservatives regained control in 1988. The Residents had an appetite to contest more seats when there were candidates available. Shortly after 1988, Conservatives were also instructed by Central Office to contest every seat (nationwide). The days of any 'tacit understandings' were gone.

After elections in 1992, of 60 councillors there were just 19 Residents, but 22 Conservatives who refused to form a minority administration: the lot fell to the Residents. None of the political parties would take posts in the Residents' administration, no doubt wagering that the Residents (many of whom were inexperienced at Council) would fail with ignominy. The Residents agreed a common platform which the LibDems and Labour indicated they would passively support. This was a success. Three years later, council tax had been reduced by 35% without a cut in services, and the Residents were set for a protracted sway in Council until 2006.

The Association and our local residents most

certainly benefited from the increased say in borough affairs during a period when there were major issues in Thames Ditton and Weston Green. This came at a price, however. It is noticeable that the Association's centre of gravity shifted somewhat towards Elmbridge and its borough-wide institutions. It also meant that to regain office the Conservatives felt obliged to emphasise differences and attack the Residents: which they did. Meanwhile the Association was able to draw a distinction between politicians in local government and those at Westminster. It retained a useful working relationship with MP Ian Taylor, whose support was enlisted for a variety of causes, including the fight against the HASQUAD motorway proposals, support for small retailers, the rejection of Tesco, and the struggle to preserve local hospital facilities. Many moderate conservative residents drew a similar distinction: they would support the apolitical Association in local elections, and the Conservatives in national elections.

Finally, with the national political parties' continuing chicanery in funding, electoral reform was imposed in 2000. The Association was obliged to register with the new Electoral Commission if its name was to be used by its candidates. Ever pragmatic, with great reluctance it bit this bullet. As of 2009, at least forty other Residents' Associations around the country are now registered with the Commission.

Towards 100 years

There may be newer readers who think - erroneously - that not only is the Association 75 years old, but its members are too, and this story will prompt the question: 'What next?'

or even: 'Will it live to be 100?'

After researching this account, it is clear that the Association has achieved a great deal of real substance and indeed has been that very bulwark described by T S Mercer. Without it, Thames Ditton and Weston Green would have lost more green space and commons, have less commerce, fewer sports, recreational and cultural facilities, be noisier, smellier, wetter, destroyed by roads and traffic and look more like Hounslow. The villages could well have been split up and parts absorbed by Kingston. The Association has stuck to its principles, it has adapted to change: its constitution was again modernised two years ago. Its active members have been, and are, diverse, resourceful and of very wide experience: from architects, doctors, pharmacists and barristers to business people, redoubtable mothers, film producers, shop workers, journalists, experienced civil servants, diplomats, Montgomery's Head of Camouflage and the Government's Chief Restorer of Paintings.

The Association continues to attract new blood, though never as much as it would like. 'Apathy' has been a leitmotif of many a Chairman's annual review for more than sixty years. The growing pressures of working life inhibit volunteering. Yet the Association retains an effective Executive and a band of volunteers that would be the envy of its rivals. Attendance at Open meetings waxes and wanes according to topical issues, but membership remains solid and residents consistently make the effort to vote.

There will always be threats to these villages, small or large, new or - like those of roads, traffic, threats to Green Belt, boundary changes and the downside of living so close to Heathrow - old and oft repeated. The Association has experience in countering them, and a contingency fund. It also has an eye for improvements and a sense of community.

As long as threats remain; as long as politicians fail to consult residents, all of them, and act on local issues accordingly; as long as there are those who care about Thames Ditton and Weston Green enough to volunteer their time; and as long as villagers want the authorities to do things *for* them rather than do things *to* them; then there will be a Residents' Association here.

Keith Evetts

This account is based on items in the Mercer Collection; the books 'Fifty Years of Thames Ditton and Weston Green' and 'A Historical Sketch of Thames Ditton' by Philip Burchett; and reports in the issues of 'Thames Ditton Today' from 1970 to the present day. All these sources are available in the Dittons Library. I have also researched internet archives and taken some oral testimony, though not (yet) as much as I should have liked. With limited time to summarise the story and working alone, I may have included some inaccuracies. I should be grateful if readers would write to point these out (gently!), or to contribute direct personal experiences of events that may add a different perspective. While many individual residents' associations in this country have their own histories, it seems the history of these associations within the broader democratic context has not yet been written.
