

**Annual Report 2019-2020
Councillor George Illingworth TD, Chairman, Warwick District Council.**

Who twelve months ago would have predicted the unexpected course this year would take?

Before the election I was in that precarious position of Vice Chairman. Too many of those have failed to be re-elected. I thought of Alan Wilkinson only four years before. Despite the dramatic overall results I was a survivor and had crossed the first hurdle. The next problem was to be elected Chairman at the Annual Meeting in a Council where there was no overall control and which was potentially to be run on the Chairman's casting vote.

Much to my relief you elected me without dissent for which I thank you all. You then appealed to my better nature and innate sense of fairness by offering an alternative vice-chairman so that I had to use my casting vote for the first and only time. You may have assumed that I was driven by the realisation that the alternative would mean giving the casting vote to the other side and losing control the next year. Had you calculated as I had that if Cllr Sidney Syson, the proposed alternative, had become vice-chairman then at this year's Annual Meeting an alternative chairman could have been proposed, I could have used my casting vote again and Sidney would have been vice-chairman for a year but not become Chair. I thought that would have been most unfair on her so indeed it was my better nature and innate sense of fairness after all.

After that the other Council Meetings were an anti-climax. My expressed wish that we should all work together was heeded such that I was never near using that casting vote again. For making my job of chairing those meetings so easy I thank you all, though the failure of the PA system in the first meeting must have caused many new members to wonder what they had got themselves involved in.

The whole idea of a council is that members meet together, discuss issues and then decide on a course of action. Our inability to do that in the last few weeks has created a whole new world. I thank councillors for their support for decisions necessarily taken in their absence; the Executive members for acting so effectively and particularly all the officers for not only keeping the routine work of the Council operating but also taking on additional activities despite the awkward working arrangements. I hope that we can now adapt to a new way of distance and virtual working for as long as it takes which involves all councillors.

Meanwhile for the first ten months I had an active and enjoyable Civic year, supported by Joanna. You will not be surprised to learn that I maintained an Excel spreadsheet of our activities. Before the shutters came down in the middle of March I had attended 168 events and made 54 speeches. Of these events 83% were within Warwick District though I did represent the District a number of times in neighbouring Districts, Boroughs and cities, but only venturing as far as Atherstone on North Warwickshire. By natural selection rather than good planning the spread across the District was remarkably close to the population. I visited all twenty four Town and Parish Councils and a number of the historic sites open during Heritage week. Sadly I attended the funerals of three former District Councillors and would have attended fourth, Bernard Kirton, had the current lockdown not prevented me.

It is invidious to pick out highlights, because all events are premier to their organisers and participants, but I must mention the visit by HRH The Princess Royal to the new Riding for the Disabled facility on the Shrewley/Rowington border where we were in the Reception party presented to Princess Anne. In opening the facility she gave a most impressive speech which clearly came from the heart. Her personal support for the facility and the event was palpable.

I must also mention the Reception we gave to the visiting Australian Bowls team, together with an England team, in the dramatic setting of the Glasshouse in Jephson Gardens. The visits we paid to the Bowls England Championships and their presentation Dinners indicated that the Bowls World has a high regard for this Council and district and we should all be proud. One of my few awkward moments in my year though was when I met the man from Worthing.

At Christmas I spent over two hours touring Riverside House meeting as many employees as possible, irrespective of whether they had entered the competition for decorations, and also visited some of the outposts such as the Crematorium offices, William Wallsgrove House and the Lifeline operations room.

One peculiarity of this District when compared with our neighbours struck me during the various Civic visits. Most other areas whether Coventry, Solihull, Rugby, Nuneaton, Stratford have one central town which is the focus of all Civic activity. I was entertained in some very impressive Mayor's parlours and Civic Suites. Here in Warwick District we have several significant and historic towns which perform a Civic function most effectively, and provide local focus.

Those towns with their Mayors are also important charity fund raisers whereas we have agreed that is not a key function for the District Chairman. I have supported the local charity events when relevant and as announced my personal charities were the Royal British Legion and Imagineering. I was able to support the Poppy Appeal with £8,000 received from the recycling of metals at the Crematorium and I visited some of the after-school Imagineering Clubs at schools in Kenilworth and Warwick, giving hands-on help to some of the projects.

Sadly the Civic year came to an abrupt end with the restrictions on gatherings. There were a number of events in the pipeline and invitations pending. That total would have approached 200. I was particularly sorry to lose my own Parish Supper on 1 May. This would have provided an opportunity to thank not only parish chairmen and clerks but also District councillors from all parties for the way everyone had worked for the good of the residents of the District.

I was also looking forward to visiting various events around the District over the recent Bank Holiday weekend to commemorate VE Day 75 and I appreciate all the effort that had gone into planning those events. Another casualty was the ceremony organised by the High Sheriff to lay 10 Wreaths at the National Memorial Arboretum at Arlewas at the end of April which would have been a most moving event. Finally a few thank yous.

To all the members of the Chain Gang who made it such an enjoyable year. These included three District Councillors who were Mayors of their towns, Neale Murphy, Bill Gifford and Rob Margrave. No wonder it was so enjoyable.

To my Chaplain, the Rev Stella Bailey, Vicar of St Nicholas, Kenilworth and her Curate, Rev Richard Moore who have supported me over the year.

To Chris Elliott and the officers of Warwick District Council from various departments including Committee Services and Media who have ensured the smooth running of Council meetings and other aspects of the role.

To Mark Ashfield who is our new chauffeur and attendant. Mark and I started the job together and trained each other. He soon learned that I was keen on timekeeping and his years in the Army probably helped us quickly establish a great working relationship. Mark is a big man and was often mistaken for my bodyguard. He really came to the fore at one of the Imagineering visits where his background as an electrician found him explaining circuit diagrams to the enthralled children.

And of course to Roma Armstrong. Roma has now completed 20 years with the Council so she must have sorted out 20 Chairmen. Dealing with all the issues and ensuring they did the right thing at the right time. I am sure that some were easier to deal with than others but I am not going to speculate where I might fit in. Had the Annual Meeting taken its usual form I was planning to invite Roma up on to the platform to present her with her Certificate of Service. Sadly that is not now possible but I hope there will be a future opportunity to publically recognise her achievement.

Similarly I hope there will be a future opportunity to formally hand over the Chain of Office to Cllr Martyn Ashford. He is taking the Chair in unique circumstances and will have to evolve a completely new way of working. I congratulate Martyn and wish him every success. I hope that before too long he can enjoy the more normal Civic duties and activities that should be part of the role.