

Melksham Chamber of Commerce and Industry – President's report to AGM 9.5.2017

Written by Graham Ellis

I'm stepping down this evening from the position of President of the Melksham Chamber of Commerce. Traditionally, this role is held for a year or two; I had the honour of being elected to the position in 2009 and thank members for re-appointing me at each of the subsequent seven Annual General Meetings. It has been an honour to serve The Chamber and to look out for the wider Melksham business and resident's community for all this time.

Time passes. My wife Lisa retired from working day to day for Well House in January this year, and it's time for me too to wind down. As noted last month at the regular meeting, Lisa and I are reducing the plethora of commitments that we have built up since we moved to Melksham at the tail end of 1999. We still remember our very first Chamber meeting in 2000, where we were made so welcome - and although a lot has changed in Melksham, it remains a beacon of welcome to newcomers, and thrives on that welcoming attitude.

Our reduced commitments mean we're consolidating to one property - our home on The Spa.

We have more space than we need just to live, and the Well House Collection - our Museum for Melksham - will probably be moving there. This will allow it to expand, and will allow visitors to see inside one of the historic Spa Houses which are a motif for Melksham. My IT training courses have taken me away more and more in recent years; occasional small classes will be held in Melksham - either in my office / conference room at The Spa, or in a room rented elsewhere - perhaps even here at Well House Manor, though we'll no longer be the proprietor.

I'll continue in my role as a director of TravelWatch SouthWest, and with TransWilts Community Rail Partnership. Moving on from developing commuter and local residential traffic on the local railway to attracting visitors from outside the area and indeed from overseas, it's logical for TransWilts to rebase itself at one of our stations - with the historic station at Chippenham, gateway to our line, being the logical choice. There will still be a lot of activity in Melksham too - the Melksham Rail User Group holds its AGM this Friday, for example.

In eight years, I have met three MPs for Melksham, worked with a three layer local government arrangement and seen it become a two layer system, and bed in. I have seen an increase in regulation and paperwork on small businesses, in spite of election pledges to the contrary. Much of it for the good of staff, but things good businesses have looked to provide anyway. I have seen promotion of both charity and local government business in direct or consequential competition with startups of commercial companies, with local government professing not to compete yet doing so.

And yet with all of those political and commercial pressures, I've seen Melksham thriving and growing. The likes of Herman Miller and Knorr Bremse have chosen to base their UK operators here. Companies like Copper Tires continue to be major employers, the likes of Gompels and Superior Graphics grow. Lisa and I never cease to marvel as to how - with even the most obscure requirement - you can find a source on Bowerhill. And our town has seen a flurry of new supermarkets, yet continues to have very few vacant shops.

But although I talk about local sourcing, the modern information era has changed the world out of all recognition over the past 8 years. 8 years ago, the Wessex Association of Chambers of Commerce provided centralised secretarial, phone, fax and support services to aboy 20 chambers across Wiltshire; that's changed - with tools now being available for support within the towns where central pooling of resource was previously the only sensible way, and the Wessex Association has re-invented itself into "Inspire" - a significant business in its own right, contacting work for Wiltshire Council and others from whom it was previously fiercely independent, and competing with the likes of the Federation of Small Businesses (and local chambers sometimes) for membership offering consolidated support services such as legal advise. Links remain between the Melksham Chamber and Inspire, but Inspire is a child that was born of six local chambers and has now grown up and left home.

Modern businesses operators have little time for trade association meetings. They join (if it's made cheap or free, and easy) so that they have the backup of the association if they have problems, but rarely attend meetings. And indeed with local government having moved from being lightweight to employing tens of thousands of staff in the county, all of whom interact in some form or another with local residents and businesses, the Chambers have moved very much more towards concerns between local businesses and the infrastructure and service providers.

This issue of attracting member isn't limited to chambers. FSB membership has dropped by 40% in the last 4 years, and the Melksham Independent Traders association formed and wound up. Council lead initiative such as the Town Centre and Bowerhill groups rely on council support rather than being independent, and even then may just splutter along.

But businesses are used to change, to experimenting with ideas and to moving forward with the times.

Melksham is a very different town to it was 8 years ago - but a thriving one. Not all aspirations have been achieved, but some have, some are underway and (alas) some have been still-borne. It's a better town - not (frankly) due much if at all to my activities as president, but I've thoroughly enjoyed being here to support the progress - much of it being oiled by the most local level - town and parish - councils not only Melksham, but also Melksham Community Area.

A big "thank you" too to Chamber of Commerce committee members and officers - in recent times Colin and Phil - for their hard work which is so much part of Chamber - but also to others before them. I wish you well for the future; Well House Consultants will remain as Chamber members if we may, but I'll stand down from The Committee too in order to give free reign for the future.

Looking forward ... what do I see on the agenda? I will leave these as subject areas for the incoming President, officers and committee to develop.

- * Neighbourhood Plan
- * Road and public transport - e.g. new bypass and bridge
- * Elections
- * Campus and Skate Park
- * Brexit (with international companies HQ'd in Melksham)
- * Canal
- * Healthcare Provision
- * Housing and hotels
- * Looking after an ageing population

- Graham Ellis

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