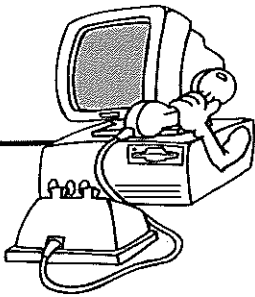


Communication



One of the primary messages to come from the Appraisal is that communication both within the village and also with other

agencies and communities beyond the immediate village boundary needs to be improved.

WITHIN THE VILLAGE

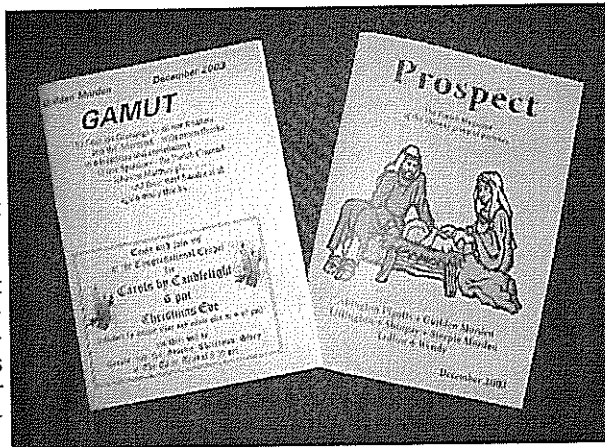
Traditionally, there have been many means by which local information and gossip has circulated within our village. Of these, the much-lamented Village Shop has been shown by the Appraisal responses to have been much more significant than might have been thought – at least on a par with local Pubs and Churches, and its loss has been felt by many villagers far beyond its role as merely a source of goods, provisions and services. This particular communication vacuum, the Appraisal Group considers, has yet to be filled.

More formal information sources are *Gamut*, *Prospect* and local noticeboards operated by various religious and secular agencies. Only *Gamut* received in-depth consideration in the Appraisal.

'GAMUT'

Circulated free-of-charge monthly to all village households and funded by the Parish Council (with printing facilities generously donated by Johnson Matthey plc), *Gamut* has operated since 1980 primarily as a Village Diary (GAMUT's original purpose) and to enable the Parish Council to communicate in a very limited and formal way with village residents. Its format and mode of compilation has changed little over the years, although the Appraisal Group very much welcomes the inclusion, following publication of Part One of its Report, of regular pages setting out rather more about what our Parish Council is doing on our behalf. We hope that these pages will continue.

From the Appraisal, it is clear that *Gamut* remains the primary source of information for the village and is valued by most residents. Invited to suggest ways in which it might be improved, we were overwhelmed with responses (226 individual comments) – by far the majority of which expressed a similar view, that "it is good as it is". As one person said, "it's a good, honest 'Mini' that doesn't pretend to be a 'Rolls Royce'". That said, we detected that there might have been confusion in some minds between *Gamut* and *Prospect*. It was pleasing that a number of respondents congratulated John Curtis (who has edited *Gamut* for many years) on his continuing work.



Two primary sources of village information

What are the primary sources of local information used by villagers?

GAMUT	77% use frequently 23% use only occasionally or never use
Local Newspapers (excl. free papers)	65% use frequently 35% use only occasionally or never use
PROSPECT	63% use frequently 37% use only occasionally or never use
General village noticeboards	18% use frequently 82% use only occasionally or never use
Parish Council noticeboard	10% use frequently 90% use only occasionally or never use
Church/Chapel noticeboards	10% use frequently 90% use only occasionally or never use

In addition, around 4% of respondents specifically mentioned "gossip" or word-of-mouth as an important source of local information for them.

Even so, some changes were felt by some to be worth considering, and we believe that their suggestions should be offered for wider debate:

- include fewer 'Big Brother' announcements from the Parish Council (eg. instead of criticising people for leaving out their rubbish, be more positive by reminding us of the collection times.)
- feature contributions from a wider range of local groups and organisations
- extend the Events listing to include Steeple Morden and other local villages
- improve quality of presentation and graphics
- ensure that both 'sides' are given when featuring a controversial issue
- feature a regular and up-to-date list of local tradesmen and services
- encourage its greater use as an 'open forum' for village views (yet others said they would prefer less space devoted to controversial issues!)
- feature more information on Planning issues and applications
- a free 'wanted' and 'for sale' section for local people
- publish information about Parish Council proceedings and Agendas for their meetings

- a section for local birthdays and anniversaries

One aspect that we found worrying was the relatively significant number of those who mentioned the late arrival of *Gamut* "often after events have taken place" and we recommend this for remedial action.

The Appraisal Group would also like to see items in GAMUT credited to their authors by name, rather than by cryptic initials, making clear—where appropriate—the status/role of the contributor.

'PROSPECT'

This monthly magazine is primarily a communication medium for the Anglican churches within the "Shingay Group" (6 parishes), although it does also carry material relevant to the Congregational Chapel in Guilden Morden. It is not clear how the Congregational Chapels in other local villages communicate with their parishioners. By its nature, it enjoys a wider circulation than *Gamut*, reaching Steeple Morden, Abington Pigotts, Shingay, Wendy and Litlington in addition to Guilden Morden. Like *Gamut*, it is delivered free-of-charge to all households, costs being met from advertising revenue, voluntary contributions and Church funds.

A recent change of Editor has resulted in a more 'upbeat' style of presentation for *Prospect*, and, in addition to extensive paid advertising for local businesses and services, it includes news and information of a secular nature and now plans a Diary of Events covering all the communities within its distribution area. Unlike GAMUT, its design and layout is 'professional' and clearly benefits from modern computer-based graphic techniques; it also has the advantage of being stapled (a criticism voiced about *Gamut*).

Prospect is firmly among the "top three" methods of information dissemination within our village, being only just superseded in the Appraisal results by *Gamut* and local newspapers.

Noticeboards

The Group offers no particular conclusions as to the various noticeboards around the village beyond commenting that the 'general' noticeboard - ie. that in Church Street opposite the former Shop - attracts more readers than any other, probably by virtue of displaying advertising for local events that would formerly have featured in the shop window. In the light of this situation, it is possible that the quality (and perhaps the size) of this particular noticeboard could - with the agreement of the owner of the wall to which it is fixed - be enhanced.

Word-of-Mouth

In any close-knit community, gossip will always provide a major channel of communication and, from the responses volunteered to the Questionnaire, this holds true for our village, with 25 respondents specifically mentioning it - whether in the Pub, at the School gate, at local group events or elsewhere.

Village Website

At the time of our Appraisal, an informal Website for the village had just ceased operating and, hence, few respondents indicated this as a significant local information source. In November 2002, the Parish Council launched a new Website for Guilden Morden (www.guildenmorden.gov.uk) and the Appraisal Group watches with interest to see whether the site will contain the sort of dynamic and regularly updated information database that local people require.

Village Diary

Although not specifically mentioned in the Appraisal responses, the Appraisal Group is aware that, for many years, a Village Diary was maintained at the former village shop enabling organisers of village events to record their plans and thus avoid unnecessary 'clashes'. Although the Diary was continued for a while after the shop closed, through the good offices of village resident, the facility has now ceased. The Group is of the view that a Village Diary is essential to avoiding wasted time and effort on the part of activity organisers within the village—and could provide a ready source of data for GAMUT and PROSPECT to publish, thus achieving our objective of wider appreciation among residents of what is happening within the village.

Village Forum

During 2003, there has again been tension over GAMUT as a forum for debate on controversial issues affecting the village. If GAMUT, PROSPECT or the Village Website fail to provide such a forum, the Appraisal Group is concerned that villagers will have no effective means of expressing their views and opinions on key issues, beyond demanding a formal Village Meeting. We consider that, for so long as GAMUT and PROSPECT continue in their present form, GAMUT should offer a moderated (but uncensored) forum for comment on local issues by publishing letters and e-mails from village residents.

OUTSIDE THE VILLAGE

For communication beyond the village boundaries, telephone and Internet are clearly the primary options. At the time of the Appraisal, 206 village homes had a computer and 173 (84%) of those had connection to the Internet. This is said to be significantly above the national average, although it is probably unsurprising for a relatively affluent area such as ours, having close employment associations with high-technology centres like Cambridge and Stevenage. A survey carried out by Cambridgeshire County Council in 2002 showed that 61% of residents in the County have access to e-mail and the Internet, compared to 55% in 2001 and 31% in 1999, and that over half of these go online from their own home.

We have no doubt that the proportion of village homes with Internet access has increased since the Appraisal, and will continue to increase rapidly as e-mail and Web access become more the 'norm' for communication and information dissemination.

Internet

Unfortunately, Internet access is currently almost wholly telephone-based, and for our village this means British Telecom who, in the absence of cable and other forms of connection, maintain a monopoly of telephone line (if not service) provision. Appraisal respondents put Cable relatively low among their priorities for new or improved Services to our village; however, a number mentioned that ADSL Broadband telecommunication access would be valuable, allowing, as it does, simultaneous telephone and Internet access over a single telephone line.

80% of the UK is currently connected to Broadband and 63% of homes in East Anglia are currently so connected. At the time of preparing this Report, 142 households had registered with BT an interest in having Broadband connection on the Steeple Morden exchange (Ashwell already has Broadband); the 'trigger' demand level set by BT for upgrading this exchange is 300—one of the higher trigger levels for such investment - which currently places us 82nd in the priority listing for connection in East Anglia. Village residents should be encouraged to register their interest in Broadband at www.bt.com/broadband.

That said, BT say that they are looking at alternative technical and commercial solutions (eg. Broadband satellite and wireless services) for areas where the demand for Broadband ADSL does not balance with the cost of upgrading the exchange, and we are aware that there is a local initiative to register community interest in obtaining these alternative services for our village. We applaud and encourage this initiative. Meanwhile, we regret that our village will continue to be chained to BT telephone services for the foreseeable future and we encourage other Line service providers to consider extending their cables to this area in order to break this monopoly situation.

Links with Steeple Morden

A second aspect of 'external' communication is the remarkably high Appraisal response in favour of stronger working links with Steeple Morden. Asked whether the two communities should co-operate more in the provision of village facilities, 48% gave a clear "Yes", against 30% who said "No" and 22% who were uncertain. The Appraisal Group is aware that a fair measure of co-operation already exists - with such joint groups as The Morden Players and the Heron Self-Help Scheme, but we believe that the principle could be taken a great deal further than this - to the advantage of both communities. During the compilation of this Report, we have become aware of the existence of under-utilised sports facilities in Steeple Morden while Appraisal respondents in Guilden Morden actively seek the provision of identical facilities in our own village. Such duplication is clearly nonsense.

Taking the Appraisal response as a clear mandate for future action, we suggest that existing collaboration should be extended to such areas as -

- the provision of all sports and leisure facilities/amenities and clubs
- the provision of new statutory services and facilities (eg. Gas supply and ADSL)

- the provision of public transport services
- the provision of postal services

The Group is also of the opinion that the two Parish Councils should hold joint meetings at least twice in each year to discuss issues of mutual interest to both communities and should liaise closely on issues of mutual concern that may arise. The fact that both Councils are served by the same Clerk is seen as advantageous in achieving this aim. At this stage, the Group stops short of recommending that a single Parish Council serve both villages, but we do not discount this as an option for the future.

As the need increases for communities to exercise progressively more influence in order to have their needs and aspirations recognised by external agencies that are competing for resources, the Appraisal Group does not discount the prospect of the two Parish Councils being amalgamated in the medium term, subject to assurances regarding balance of representation. We suggest that the advantages and disadvantages of this course should be further explored.

Reference is made elsewhere in this Report to the need for greater two-way communication between our Parish Council and village residents over major issues affecting the village as a whole, the need for open debate and more effective consultation - particularly on Planning and issues of future development.

Postal Services

Finally, the Appraisal Group notes with concern the recent downgrading of postal delivery and collection services to the village. At the time that the Appraisal was carried out, the village enjoyed two postal deliveries each weekday and two postal collections Monday-Friday and one on Saturday and Sunday from all boxes - and 63% of households considered village postal services to be either "Good" or "Reasonable". We have since seen one of the daily postal deliveries withdrawn, and the remaining delivery re-scheduled in such a way that some households do not receive their mail until lunchtime. More recently, the morning mail collection has been withdrawn, leaving just one daily collection.

CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Despite the recent changes (for the better) noted in both *Gamut* and *Prospect*, and the recent launch of a Village Website, the Appraisal Group cannot but conclude that, in terms of communication, our village remains in the 20th Century rather than the 21st. *Gamut* has shown its worth as a means of information dissemination—and although most respondents to the Appraisal consider it to be 'good' or 'very good', the Group does not believe that it is perfect or incapable of improvement.

Although 173 village households had access to the Internet at the time of the Appraisal (a figure that has probably increased since then), this is still less than half the village; so the Internet does not yet provide a total answer and some sort of printed vil-

lage newsletter still has a major role to play. The question is, has the time come to replace *Gamut* with a more comprehensive Community Newsletter – supported by local advertising—that embodies pages devoted to what is at present covered by *Prospect*, *Gamut* and the Parish Council newsletter? *Prospect* is already carrying increasing amounts of secular material – including a Diary of Forthcoming Events (one of the primary functions of *Gamut*), and were the Parish Council Newsletter pages transferred to a composite publication, would the village’s information needs be served more cost-effectively by a single monthly publication?

A few respondents drew attention in their replies to successful joint village newsletters in other nearby communities – Ashwell, Therfield and Gamlingay being examples – and made comparisons that were unfavourable to Guilden Morden. We feel that what has been achieved in those other villages certainly bears further scrutiny.

Following this line of thought, and bearing in mind the strong mood expressed by Appraisal respondents in favour of closer working collaboration with Steeple Morden, would it not also be sensible to combine a regular community newsletter for both Steeple and Guilden Morden, thus covering the activities of both villages and encouraging joint participation in both? *Prospect* already achieves this – in fact, it covers six communities – so the concept is not as radical as might be first thought. The Appraisal Group considers that the option should be examined.

To facilitate communication with “the outside world” and to bring the village more firmly into the global community – and perhaps to provide an important element of a facility base for home-working and new self-employment opportunities – the Appraisal Group concludes that early provision of ADSL Broadband should be actively sought, or, failing that, a viable alternative system capable of offering similar flexibility and reliability.

The Group deprecates the fact that changes to local postal delivery and collection services have been implemented by Royal Mail entirely without prior notice or consultation with the village community and we believe that our Parish Council must maintain vigilance to ensure that further downgrading of local postal services does not occur in the future.

SUMMARY OF CONCLUSIONS

- Both GAMUT and PROSPECT are very highly regarded within the village and, apart from the local Press, are the primary means of local information dissemination to residents. One of their main strengths is that they are delivered free-of-charge to all households in the village.
- PROSPECT has seen a number of major improvements over recent months, and it now exhibits a high standard of graphic presentation. In presentation terms, GAMUT lags some way behind.
- It may now be time to consider moving to a Community Newsletter of the style adopted by other nearby villages, embracing the content and target audiences of both GAMUT and PROSPECT in a single monthly publication. The potential of combining with other communities such as Stee-

ple Morden, Abington Pigotts, Shingay and Wendy in the production of such a newsletter should not be ignored.

- We believe that the facility of a Village Diary should be reinstated as soon as possible—ideally located in the new village shop.
- There is strong support within the village for greater joint co-operation with Steeple Morden in many areas of community life—a fact that may prove essential if our community “voice” is to be loud enough to be heard by those bodies who increasingly control our way of life. This move towards greater collaboration needs to be led by the Parish Council.
- ADSL Broadband is likely to be essential to the village if the advantages of the Internet are to be fully exploited by residents for both home and business use.
- Postal services to the village have seen a decline in recent years, a trend that must be actively resisted in the future if the village is not to become even more isolated.
- There is a need for greater two-way communication between our Parish Council and village residents over major issues affecting the village as a whole, coupled with a need for open debate and more effective consultation – particularly on strategic Planning and issues of future development.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- We recommend that, if *Gamut* is to continue as an independent publication, then its content should be upgraded to incorporate some – if not all – of the improvements that have been suggested by Appraisal respondents and that its graphic presentation should be improved using current computer-based techniques.
- We recommend that serious consideration is given to establishing a more comprehensive medium of local communication designed to serve the needs of The Mordens as a whole, perhaps using the *Gamlingay Gazette* as a template.
- We see it as important that GAMUT (or any alternative community newsletter that replaces it) should provide a moderated forum for comment and debate by local residents on important village issues.
- We recommend that the Parish Council discuss and agree with the owner of the new village shop the reinstatement of a 'Village Diary' facility, to be held in the Shop and available to all residents.
- We recommend that the new Village Website should be actively developed as a vibrant and dynamic source of regularly updated information and as a moderated forum for open debate on local issues. It should not be merely a mouthpiece for the Parish Council. Links should be established between the content of the Website and the content of any updated Gamut/Prospect/community newsletter.
- We encourage the Parish Council to press actively for extension of ADSL Broadband to the Steeple Morden exchange or, failing this, the provision of a viable and reliable alternative system of broadband data transmission for The Mordens as a whole. In this connection, we encourage as many village residents as possible to register an interest in Broadband provision.
- We recommend that all avenues of collaboration with Steeple Morden are pursued, led by the Parish Councils, which should hold joint meetings at least twice each year to discuss issues of mutual interest/concern to both communities. The option of amalgamation of both Councils into a single Community Council for The Mordens could be examined for the longer term.
- We recommend that advertising and promotion of existing facilities within both villages should be more actively pursued in an effort to create awareness of what already exists and to avoid wasteful investment of scarce resources in duplication.
- We believe that there should be greater two-way communication between our Parish Council and village residents over major issues affecting the village as a whole, and more opportunities for open debate and consultation with residents – particularly on Planning and issues of future development in the village.
- We suggest that, in collaboration with other local Parish Councils, the Parish Council should express concern at the progressive deterioration of local postal services and maintain close vigilance to ensure that the trend does not continue.