



# A Future For Guiden Morden?

Guiden Morden village is facing what is probably the most challenging period in its history. It has encountered change before – most recently in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century with the coming of the Coprolite diggers, which resulted in the village population doubling almost overnight. Yet the village survived and prospered. Since the 1950s, the village has steadily changed – from what had long been a quiet parish of established families, dependent for their wherewithal largely upon local agriculture and farming – into a more cosmopolitan community of families and individuals drawn from further afield, each with broader horizons and differing aspirations and affiliations, that looks for its work and leisure pursuits outside the immediate locality.

The experience of Guiden Morden is not unusual. It is replicated in communities across England and gathers emphasis the closer one moves towards any major conurbation. It is set in the context of a national society that is becoming progressively more affluent and more demanding – a social infrastructure that is proving less and less able to shoulder the burdens placed upon it as more and more demands are placed upon it – and a national trend towards independence and self-sufficiency. No longer can we rely upon “Them” to provide, or to put things right. “They” no longer hear or see. Increasingly, we find ourselves thrown back upon our own initiative and resources.

While not wishing to appear defeatist, we do not see this situation getting better. In fact, we suspect it will get steadily worse. So, what does this mean for our community?

Increasingly, we believe, we shall have to ‘stand on our own feet’ in the provision of services and facilities. Already, within the space of relatively few years, we have seen most of our pubs, all of our shops, our Post Office and many local craftsmen disappear. Our public transport services are constantly “under review”. Our local library has closed. We strive to maintain and support our village school, and there is a valiant effort to resuscitate a village shop.

In a wider context, Guiden Morden, standing alone, simply cannot muster the “clout” required in today’s competitive society to achieve access to services and resources available at regional and national level. Our community finds itself in ruthless competition with others for dwindling resources. The recent frustrations, in the context of funding for a new Village Hall, have shown clearly that a rural community like ours, of under 1000 souls having few social problems and exhibiting little true deprivation, is accorded a low priority.

Many of those who have lived here for some time hark back to “the days when the community worked together to make things happen”. “If we wanted a football team, we got together and formed one. If we wanted a children’s playground, we went out and

built one.” This will be, we suspect, the tenor of the way forward in the future. However, we believe there is also a new dimension. Increasingly, we anticipate that there will be a need to work with other local communities – Steeple Morden, Abington Pig-gotts and possibly Wrestlingworth and Ashwell (as far as county demarcations will allow) – in order to achieve collaborative solutions to common needs, to address common challenges jointly and to pool available resources in order to maximise benefit.

Within our village community, too, there will, we believe, be an increasing need to put aside minor differences and to co-ordinate effort. Already, differing opinions, values and aspirations are dividing our community. Our Appraisal has shown that there are relatively few areas where there is a clear, strong majority for one particular point of view. Much more common is divided opinion and differing values. The ‘old hands’ deprecate the indifference shown by newcomers to the village; incomers find it difficult to ‘break in’ to the long established ‘cliques’, and even more difficult to access the traditional ‘centres of influence and decision-making’ within the village. Rising property values fuel the distinction between the “haves” and the “have nots”. Personal affluence establishes a growing divide between the “four car family” and the “no car family”.

The question must therefore be asked – “Where do we go from here?”

## Establishing priorities

The Appraisal Group believes that our first priority as a community must be to forge common, agreed goals to which most, if not all, residents are willing to subscribe. To this end, there must be far greater openness in debating the challenges that we face as a village and in reaching consensus. It is not sufficient, in our opinion, simply to ‘leave it to the Parish Council’ or to rely upon stilted discussion once a year at the Annual Parish Meeting. Worthy though our Parish and District Councillors are – and despite their best efforts on our behalf – experience shows that there are very definite limits on what they can achieve and many constraints which militate against the effectiveness of their actions.

It is for this reason that we believe that the village requires a new impetus – a new focus for debate that can work in close collaboration with, and advise, those who traditionally represent our interests to the wider world. A “village think tank”, if you will.

## A new Vision

We also feel that our village urgently needs a new vision for the future – a clear set of objectives for our community that are based upon a firm consensus of resident opinion. A ‘blueprint for the future’. Put simply, a statement of where, as a community, we want to be in 50 – or even 20 – years’ time.

**Collaboration**

Finally, we believe that we must actively seek to collaborate with similar communities in the immediate area, to pool ideas and resources – to reach a wider consensus and to present a bolder and more effective “front” to those outside our locality who may be reluctant to support and resource our aspirations.

How do we do this?

**An Agenda for Action**

We suggest that a first move is to open to **effective debate** within our village the findings contained in the two parts of our Appraisal Report and, in particular, the Recommendations contained in this present Report. It must be a debate in which a majority of village residents participate. In our view, it must be for our Parish Council to initiate – and to lead – that debate.

The aim must not be to emphasise differences or to focus on dispute; the aim must be to achieve consensus, to hammer out conclusions and to forge **common, achievable goals**.

Once defined, these goals can be brought together and given substance. They can be costed; they can be given timescales for implementation; they can be given an action focus. Taken together, they can form a co-ordinated “**Parish Plan**” – a costed and budgeted set of agreed proposals designed to take our community as a whole into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century – a clear and unequivocal agenda for our elected representatives and an effective weapon with which to join battle with those Authorities and Funding Agencies who now direct all our lives.

This formative process must, we believe, be taken forward in a new spirit of openness and a willingness to seek **collaborative solutions** with other communities in the immediate locality. The time for “going it alone” is past.

We do not believe that it is for the Appraisal Group, however democratically elected, to take forward a programme of this nature. We have already said that it is, in our view, the role of the Parish Council to take the lead. However, it is unrealistic to expect them to shoulder the burden alone. We have mooted the concept of a “village think tank” or focus group. Such a group might most effectively operate as a sub-committee of the Parish Council; it would, however, need to be demonstrably democratic in its composition, truly representative of all sectors of the village, transparent in its deliberations, and avoid becoming merely a mouthpiece for the more prominent and more voluble within our community.

Once established, particular goals (or groups of associated goals) might be placed with Action Groups, comprised of Parish Councillors (not only from Guilden Morden), local residents and others of relevance from outside our community, with a remit to turn aspiration into action. Progress would be actively monitored by the Parish Council, and regularly reported to the village through GAMUT and the village Website, being reviewed annually at the Annual Parish Meeting.

In the Introduction to this Report, we said that there are likely to be few, if any, quick and easy solutions. It will require time, effort and commitment on the part of the village if even a part of our suggested ‘Vision’ for the future of our village is to be achieved. However, certain it is that nothing will be achieved if a start is not made on the task. And the time to start is now.

