

MORE AN ALRESFORD PIG THAN A HAMPSHIRE HOG

by
NEVILLE WADE.

It's a remarkably English trait that any community, no matter how small, forms segregated groups. Those who study such matters are able to define these within so-called socio-economic classifications. This art has provided big business with the facility to analyse potential markets and, through the appropriate media, aim its products to precisely the right prospective customers.

It would be too cynical to assume that the population of a small town can be so clinically sorted. But the fact remains that there are those who need and those who provide. It is on such a basis that our welfare state succeeds, although it is doubtful if Ernest Bevin envisaged what can be seen all around us. What is a microcosm is the way in which a community relies on its voluntary social and welfare services. Compare, for example, the people who drive a mini-bus in their spare time with those who man our lifeboats. It is almost as though voluntary service to the community has become a pre-requisite, some sort of relief valve, essential to the contrast between home and work.

The social volunteers in Alresford are no different, and no less well-established than those in a thousand other English towns and villages. Many 'helpers' were born and bred here and serve others as did their fore-bears, almost as if one generation transfers its duty to the next. Again, there are many towns like Alresford which have a high proportion of immigrants. These hail not from farthest flung colonies, but from other parts of this country. Their careers have brought them to the area and here they settle for a few years. Many take an interest in the community the churches, the leisure activities, youth organisations and the schools, but they are still outsiders and since it is more common to hear the accents of London, the West Midlands, Oxbridge or the North Country than a Hampshire dialect, they can never be of that ilk.

LOSS OF DIRECTION

Within this complex framework, the outsiders inevitably become involved with what is happening, especially if their businesses or offices are Here. They may have some particular talent - typically local bank managers inherit several charity accounts with each new posting. Alresford is no different in this respect. Help for events organised by the Community Association, for instance, is cheerfully given whether it be the loan of Transport or help in mowing grass. People generally like being asked to help and enjoy participating in a pleasant diversion without a motive labelled "community service". In the past this has been epitomised by the Donkey Derbies, fetes and garden parties held in Alresford during the 'sixties and 'seventies and most effectively revived in spirit during the 1977 Silver Jubilee celebrations. What did become evident was a strange situation where there was a gradual loss of direction in such activities. Money was raised, but for ill-defined purposes. At the same time, the desire to contribute increased and was found to be a frequently shared but seldom expressed feeling.

Basically, there was an impression amongst people whose circumstances had brought them to Alresford that they were privileged to live in and enjoy such a delightful town. Coupled with this was an arguable view that in any society, which has an above-average level of personal income, there will be those who are disadvantaged. Furthermore, the gap in social terms between the two will widen because those who need help are inhibited by their status from seeking and receiving assistance. This is by no means intended to denigrate the work of voluntary organisations, but is a statement of the situation which was considered to exist in the summer of 1973. It was on the 6th of December in that year that two such local "immigrants" met for lunch at the Ship Inn, Bishops Sutton and, sharing the philosophy which has been described, laid the foundations of a group in Alresford which would come to change that situation. The idea was that if sufficient individuals shared common views about how they could serve the community, then the synergy of combined effort would be put to good use. It was decided that those two who had met before Christmas

would each ask six or eight others to meet. It would be a gathering of men only and strictly by invitation. Within hours, this concept had provided the group with its name. "You are nothing but a crowd of male chauvinist pigs" was the retort from a certain person's somewhat independently-minded secretary, when told of the plan.

REGULAR MEETINGS

The inaugural meeting of about fifteen was held on 17th January, 1974, again at the Ship. The most vexed question concerned the style of organisation being created. Resoundingly, it was agreed that this would not become an affiliated group of Lions, Round Table or such. Not for Alresford would there be allegiance to any national organisation nor petti-fogging rules. It would be most pleasant to meet for an evening of conversation, anecdotes, food and drink. The consensus was that this should be more than a dining club and soon it was settled that regular monthly meetings in hospitable surroundings should be held. Since then, many hostelrys have been patronised including the Globe, Bell, Swan, Plough and so on.

By April, the first social event, a skittles evening had been held and the first good deed accomplished. Somewhat clouded in mystery, this was less than an outstanding success. When an old age pensioner's garden needs attention, removal of prize blooms to the compost heap and careful tending of abundant weeds is not the most desirable objective. Consequently, it was resolved that charitable support should be by fund-raising events rather than practical 'good' works.

Despite protestations earlier expressed, it became necessary to produce the semblance of a constitution in order to open a bank account. A symbol was also devised and notepaper produced. That first constitution lists the two objectives of the Alresford Pigs Association which remain valid today: firstly, to encourage social intercourse between members: and secondly, the giving or raising of support, financial or active for charities or charitable objects known locally or to members of the Association.

It was in the knowing of the charitable objects that problems arose. Contact was established with the churches, the group health practice, the police, relevant local authority departments and other voluntary groups. Initially, there were considerable misgivings amongst Alresford's establishment towards the Association's motives. It probably took three years, and the raising and distribution of considerable sums before the seriousness of the Association was recognised and accepted as genuine. Perhaps it was hitherto rather infra dig to actually have fun whilst helping the less fortunate members of society.

SUMMER MADNESS

In July 1974, the first major fund-raising event was held, and many lessons learned. This was a Barn Dance and was in aid of the first 'project-of-the-year': Tichborne Down Hospital. By kind permission of the Rawlings family, the dance took place at Grove Farm, Medstead and was a great, social occasion. Profit, small by later comparisons, enabled £250 to be donated to the hospital. The event also became noted and is now a regular feature of the Alresford summer madness. Soon ideas for future projects and social activities abounded and the first of many sub-committees was formed to investigate these. A wide variety of possibilities were considered, some being rejected and others pursued, often becoming annual events. One of these was the Christmas Ladies' Night [although it is privately referred to in other less inoffensive terms). The formal evening at the Bell saw black-tied Pigs behaving very well, before removing themselves to the bar. Also that Christmas, a Pig Santa Claus visited the National Childrens' Home at Old Alresford. Indeed the N.C.H. became the major project for 1975. The policy established at that time is another important cornerstone of Pig ideals: cash is seldom donated and a degree of self-help is encouraged. Many items ranging from a climbing frame to freezers were given to the Home for the direct benefit of local children in need. That season of goodwill also found Pigs clambering over

Alresford's sedate Georgian facades to secure Christmas trees and lights on shops, offices and houses. A sub-contract task for the Chamber of Trade which is repeated each year and helps boost the charity funds.

The new year brought a flurry of activity, centred largely on fund-raising methods. It was decided to hold a sponsored walk and to look at other less energetic possibilities. The walk raised over £500 and showed how relatively minimal organisational effort could raise large sums if many people were involved. This success also had the stimulating effect of raising the Associations sights for the next summer dance.

And so the pattern was set. In the ensuing months decisions were made to investigate mini-buses, both for Tichborne Down and the Community Care group; to look for more major projects and to provide support when requested. The principles of the Pigs remained clear: whatever was done socially would be primarily enjoyable; whoever was asked to join the Association must be unanimously acceptable; no individual member must seek personal aggrandisement for work done by the Pigs and the confidentiality of welfare work would be respected.

LOCAL CAUSES

This latter aspect resulted in the formation of a permanent three-man team whose task was to look at social needs and to react, up to a stated cash limit, in emergencies. Help has, through this method, been given to many families: providing logs in winter; a washing machine for a one-parent family; much-needed holidays; medical equipment and so on. Local traders when asked to help, perhaps in locating a particular item or by giving discounts, have always been extremely generous and are usually found to be glad to be involved in a Pigs' project, almost as though the care and responsibility with which the Association provides help is an assurance of aid going where it is most needed. Another local cause which was added during 1976 was the Finder Centre. The approach by the Pigs to this establishment typified this sense of responsibility, which is considered axiomatic when distributing money raised from the general public for charitable purposes. It was not until after an independent expert had examined the Centre's accounts that it was agreed to assist. Once the decision had been made, much was done. By the end of that year, the Pigs had contributed £1,200 for a new mini-bus and had paid for half a cine projector for Tichborne Down - examples of self-help being sought; had held another 'Sows' night; had erected more Christmas decorations; had appeared in several places as Santa Claus and had added Makins Court Old Peoples' Home to the list of beneficiaries. Significantly, a major discussion took place on future policy and organisation, in the light of two full years of work. From this evolved a code for members of the Pigs. This remains and, although the total amount raised for charity is several thousands of pounds, the spirit of the very first meeting is still the quintessence of the organisation. Membership is by invitation only and those who belong are expected to make a genuine and thorough-going commitment to their responsibilities. The results of their endeavours are sometimes seen, sometimes not: seats around the town; contributions to the Jubilee Memorial Gardens and the doctors' E.C.G. machine; a lift for the swimming pool at the Pinder Centre; acknowledgements for help towards the purchase of two mini-buses; annual events such as the barn dance and tug-of-war; bowling for a pig-in-a-tin at the Alresford Show and the N.C.H. fete; a freezer and carpet for Makins Court; holidays for senior citizens and many other instances of help for families and individuals in need.

With some 25 members involved, Alresford has a truly unique organisation which will not extend beyond the immediate area and will not grow in number. The town also has that which any community needs - a socially-conscious group which can respond quietly, quickly and efficiently when called upon.

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Editor's Note:

Neville Wade and Mike Goulbourne (then Lloyds bank manager in Alresford) were the two people who had the initial initiative to contact likely people to consider forming a charity group.

However, as a founding member, my memory of the origin of the "Pigs" name is different from Neville's. I was one of those who ensured that women are NOT disbarred from membership – any PERSON may be accepted for membership if proposed and seconded by current members and accepted at a vote. The origin of the name was when a wife came to the Ship to drive her husband home at the end of the inaugural meeting, and as she looked through the door cried "what a load of drunken pigs!". We had been unable to think of a name up until that point, but "Alresford Pigs Association" was immediately adopted.

Glenn Gilbertson 2012