

## The Heart Beats - minding the gap

Unlike previous *Heart of the Village* articles, this one is by a supporter of the project who is not a member of its management team. As I explained in an earlier Newsletter, we live in Mathon rather than in Cradley but sent our children to Cradley School and have strong ties to the village. And while those 'ties' include chairing Cradley Village Players, I'm writing in an entirely personal capacity (you may of course conclude from what follows that there's the material here for a good play: whether it would be a tragedy or farce is for you to judge).

If one topic has come to dominate debate about, and possibly even the future of, the Heart it is the so-called 'strategic gap' (or 'green gap') connecting East and West Cradley. Like green belts, strategic gaps are now part of the language of planning. They denote parcels of land between cities, towns or villages, generally in built-up areas, whose inhabitants wish to stop them 'coalescing'. I'm not a planner but my brief internet search failed to find any other instance of the term being applied to a piece of land *within* a single community and certainly not one entirely surrounded by open countryside.

How did the 'gap' come about? Some years ago the head of Malvern Theatres decided to re-name what was then called Elgar Hall. In the vivid debate that followed (it made the one about Syrian refugees seem cosy), opponents of the change suggested the hall had always been identified with Worcestershire's best loved composer who'd probably conducted its opening concert. In fact, the name had been dreamed up a few years earlier by the district council's marketing team for PR purposes.

Cradley's 'strategic gap' is a bit like that. It wasn't, as you might suppose, featured in Domesday Book but *also* came into use in the 1990s in response to concerns that too much new building might make a rural village feel like a small town. That idea makes some sense and has gained traction with the community. For what it's worth, my own view is that it might in fact be better to permit new houses *within* the village rather than string it out even further by putting them at its extremities but that's a debate for another day.

What has this to do with HoV? Last year Cradley folk received two questionnaires. One was distributed by the Parish Council to inform the Neighbourhood Development Plan that will guide future planning policy. It went through several drafts, one of which I helped write. These differed in length and emphasis but all asked how the council should respond to two community-driven projects - the new sports field and the Heart's shop and café on land donated by Heather Morgan - and three commercial housing developments.

For unexplained reasons, your council chose at the last minute not to use any of these drafts but to distribute a heavily edited version which described the sports field (whose success we all applaud) but not the housing plans and which, instead of explaining HoV, simply asked people whether they'd like a second shop and a café in addition to the butchers (which, to complicate matters a little, is now for sale). When the HoV team argued this omission would cause confusion, they were told the final draft could not be changed and decided to issue their *own* questionnaire to clarify attitudes to their project as specified.

We can't know whether people *were* confused but we *do* know that the outcome of the PC's reduced questionnaire has created confusions of its own.

Analysis of the responses revealed that a majority welcomed the idea of a second shop and café as well as the sports field - a finding matched by HoV's own research which showed 84 per cent supporting the Heart - but suggested most respondents *also* wanted to restrict the number of new homes in the village and to keep the 'gap' free from development.

These results have presented a dilemma for the Parish Council. The 'gap' was originally understood to constitute the field between Cradley Brook and 'bumpy lane' which is owned by Brian Harrison and sometimes called the Beanfield. It is, obviously, unaffected by HoV. Although the council declined requests to include a map with their questionnaire, it is thought that they would like to extend the 'gap' to include what's now called 'Morgan's Field' in token of Heather's generosity and perhaps even other parcels of land as well.

If that happens, those who voted to support HoV but *also* to keep the 'gap' free from development may be arguing for two mutually contradictory outcomes. Whether they have actually done so depends, of course, on what is meant by 'development'. Until now, the term has been understood to mean houses, and since no-one is proposing to build houses on Morgan's field, no conflict arises. But what if it covers *any* building?

The planning consultant employed to write the NDP - a former colleague of the group's convenor - has told the council it would be difficult to devise a policy which allowed HoV to be built within the 'gap' but didn't open the door to wider development. You might think it should be fairly simple to distinguish between a village shop and a factory or housing estate but evidently that isn't so.

At all events, the paradox must somehow be resolved. One way forward would be for those who favour the HoV project but don't want to see any other building in the 'gap' to send their views to the parish council who will, we can be sure, assess them with their customary care and objectivity.

That isn't, of course, the end of the story. As Martin Ham rightly said on these pages last month, HoV can't be built on goodwill alone. It must make an economic case, develop fully worked-up plans and, crucially, gain the necessary permissions. As I'm sure the team will explain in the coming months, these matters are well in hand, and initial discussions with Herefordshire council have been encouraging. First, though, we must mind the gap!

David Robertson