

Chairman's Column - 24th January 2019

I was sorry to read that Tim Lethaby, the Editor of the Shepton Mallet Journal, has left the paper. Tim did an excellent job. I wish him every success in the future.

Many of our local newspapers have an essential part to play in our democracy: promoting local engagement, acting as a mediated forum for debate and, perhaps most important of all, holding those in power at all levels to account. The growth of electronic media has undermined the funding of all daily and weekly newspapers, and made it particularly difficult for local newspapers to survive.

The Internet, and its double-edged social media platforms, allows everyone to post stories, or display their wit and wisdom (or lack of), and pontificate about issues, or more often focus on trivia. It is not the same as a properly funded paper; nor can it replace good investigative reporting by trained journalists.

Our weather has been particularly peculiar this year, with mainly mild conditions despite the present cold snap. The 300,000 snowdrops that have been planted around our town are poking their heads up to remind us of the upcoming Snowdrop Festival that celebrates the life and work of the local 19th Century horticulturalist, James Allen.

Last weekend, The Daily Telegraph ran a feature on Allen's work as the first person to deliberately save and germinate snowdrop seed. His lasting legacy can still be seen in three surviving cultivars (or distinct snowdrop variants) called "Robin Hood", "Magnet" and "Merlin". Local horticulturist Dominic Weston is quoted, saying: "Galanthophilia..." (*or snowdrop obsession!*) "...is at an extraordinary level in the UK and it was mad that the town wasn't getting the benefit of it."

Shepton's Snowdrop Festival will be held on the 16th-17th February. The lead up to this wonderful weekend of events has already had many committed volunteers out planting bulbs and fundraising. This coming weekend the organisers are seeking volunteers to deliver leaflets to all homes in Shepton, and I have already put my name down to help. For more information, or if you can spare an hour or two to help, go to www.sheptonssnowdropfestival.org.uk or email the snowdrop team at admin@sheptonssnowdropfestival.org.uk

After the recent decision to relaunch the Shepton Mallet Neighbourhood Plan, we held our first meeting last week. 12 members of the public were introduced to our consultants, and we had the results of the recent open forum at the Sunday Market. It was gratifying to hear that the community largely supports ideas that had originated in the work done on the Neighbourhood Plan in past years. There is still time for people who wish to play a part in shaping Shepton's future to join this group. You can contact myself or Cllr John Parham.

In the coming year there will be lots of opportunities for people to get involved to make Shepton an even better place to live, work and play in - whether it's joining one or more of our wonderful community groups, or helping the council shape the town's future. With Town and District Council elections coming up in May, there will be lots of chances for people to make a real difference to our town and surrounding area.

Chris Inchley, Chair, Shepton Mallet Town Council