

**Litcham Parish Council**  
**Minutes of Extraordinary Public Meeting**  
Held on 9th October 2006 at Litcham Primary School  
Called by the Litcham Historical Society to consider:  
**The sale of any of the Allotment Gardens**  
**held by the Litcham in Need Charity.**

Meeting Opened at 7.30pm.

1. Election of Chairman. The Parish Clerk (Mr. J Relph) opened the meeting by asking for nominations for Chairman. John Mitchell was proposed by Ron Shaw, seconded from the floor and elected unopposed by a show of hands.

2. Opening Statement by Litcham Historical Society. Mr Ron Shaw made an opening statement on behalf of the Litcham Historical Society giving the reasons why the Society opposed the sale of any allotment on the Charity's land; firstly it represented the selling off of a two-hundred year old piece of Litcham's History and secondly it went against the spirit in which the land was given by the original benefactor. Mr. Shaw then listed other losses of land that the Parishioners of Litcham had suffered in recent years namely, The Almshouses and Rectory Meadow. Mr. Shaw explained that Mr. Maurice Smith, the current tenant of the allotment in question was not at the meeting as he had become ill with worry.

Mr. Shaw went on to say the sale of this allotment would create a precedent and should be opposed on principal. Although the sale might be within the rules of the Charity Commission he believed that "rules were made for the guidance of the wise and the complicity of fools". He also advised the Trustees of the Litcham in Needs Charity to be careful to disclose their interests, to which the Rev. Jonathan Boston replied that if he was referring to the rumour that he was a close friend of Mr. Gurney (the proposed purchaser of the allotment) he was mistaken. Mr. Gurney had worked in the administration of the Norwich Diocese for many years and many Norfolk clergy were acquainted with him as a work colleague, he assured the meeting that he was not a close friend of Mr. Gurney.

3. Reply from the Trustees of the Litcham in Need Charity. Mr. Mike Oldfield, Chairman of the Trustees of the 'Litcham in Need Charity' replied by giving a brief history of the circumstances leading to the proposal to sell an allotment. Until recently the allotment was used by the owner of "The Priory", (the allotment is adjacent to this property), however when he died at the end of last year the allotment was transferred to the current tenant Mr. Smith. The Priory was then sold to Mr. Gurney who enquired if it would be possible to buy this allotment, the land was valued by Case and Dewing and Mr. Gurney made the Trustees an offer of £15,000, which they considered to be a fair, even generous offer.

Mr. Oldfield then detailed the financial situation of the Trust; currently it has assets of around £8,500, £2,361 of which can be accessed for the benefit of the villagers of Litcham under the rules of the Trust. Part of the Trust's duties involves managing the 20 allotments, totaling 4.3 acres and a further 6 acres plot on the Tittleshall Road, that was once allotments but is now rented as agricultural land for £400 p.a. The allotment adjacent to the Priory is one of the smallest and is estimated to be a quarter to a third of an acre. Many of the allotments are in poor condition and overgrown, the money raised from the sale would be used to improve the allotments and divide some to create smaller, more manageable plots.

The Trust has an income of around £600, £400 of this is spent on Public Liability Insurance. The Trustee's estimate that as things stand the Trust will run out of funds in approximately six to eight years and therefore they believe this sale is essential to the continuation of the Trust.

4. Open Forum. Sharon Junge then spoke on behalf of her father Maurice Smith. She stated that a petition against the sale containing 187 signatures had been collected.

She acknowledged that the committee members gave their time freely and it was important that they were supported, however, there were alternatives to the sale. She distributed a double side sheet of A4 detailing these; they included improving investment returns, prompt collection of rents, a regeneration scheme and fund raising ideas. The sheet also contained details of the original charities that combined to form the modern "Litcham Charities".

The Rev. Boston, a Trustee of the Litcham Charities, then told the meeting that the Trustees primary task was to alleviate poverty in

Litcham and the proposed sale will generate a much needed income of around £600 a year. This could mean, for example, that the six Litcham children who currently qualify for free school meals would each receive £75.

A question from the floor asking if all the Allotments were rented was answered by Mr. Oldfield, who stated that all but two were currently tenanted, however one plot was considered too boggy to work. In answer to a further question, he stated that the Trustees were quite happy to let allotments to people outside the village.

The Trustees were then asked how many were in favour of the sale? They replied that of the five trustees four had voted in favour and one against the sale.

Mr Wagg, a former Trustee and Parish Councillor, said it would be a grave injustice to the Parish if any allotment land was sold. There is a tremendous amount of history in Litcham, which is preserved thanks to the excellent work of the Litcham Historical Society and this land was an important part of that history. Many charities had been combined to form the Litcham Charities and he had resigned as a Trustee in protest at the introduction of means testing. He strongly advised the Trustees to reconsider their decision to sell.

Sadie Bailey, a member of the trust opposed to the sale, felt rent increases were inevitable. She asked the other trustees what would have happened if they had not received the current offer to buy allotment land? The Treasurer, Mr Piffero, replied that in the main the Trust manages to support its aims, this does not involve great sums of money, but if circumstances remained the same then the Charity could continue meeting its aims for another four to five years. However it would not be able to afford to do any redevelopment of the allotments without the funds from the proposed sale. He further pointed out that if the Trust became bankrupt the Charity Commission would dissolve it and the allotments would be lost, selling an allotment now will protect the future of the others.

There was then a discussion about the offer price, some suggesting that it would increase the value of 'The Priory' by up to £50,000 and thus £15,000 was a poor offer. The Trustees assured the meeting that the land had been properly valued and they considered the current offer fair.

A parishioner then questioned the wisdom of spending capital on the running of the allotments as this was not a sustainable policy and again

asked what would have happened if the Trust had not received an offer to buy the land, the Trustees admitted they did not know.

Discussion then centred around various aspects of the running of the Trust and its financial situation. The trustee answered the following questions from the floor:

Was the rent from the Tittlesahall Rd site fair? Answer: Yes they believed so.

Why was there a deficit in 2005/6? Answer: This was due to expenses arising from a dispute with a tenant.

There were reports of long delays before cheques were cashed? Answer: The treasurer assured the meeting that he deposited all cheques promptly.

How many defaulters are there currently? Answer: Five.

The Trustee summed up their position by stating that it was their duty to maximise the assets of the Trust for those in need in Litcham and they would fail in this if they did not proceed with the sale of this allotment.

Mr. Shaw said that for years everything had run nicely and perhaps what we needed now was a new Committee. However there had been enough hot air spouted for one evening and it was time for a vote.

After a request from the floor, four letters received by the meeting were read out:

i) Giesla Assman; a letter offering to make regular contributions towards the upkeep of allotments of this would prevent the sale.

ii) A & M Bishop: a letter apologising for their absence and opposing the sale of allotments.

iii) Mrs. Juliet Baldwin; the previous owner of 'The Priory'. A letter saying that the allotment in question was her husband's for many years, but despite her request to keep it on after his death it was given to Mr Smith at beginning of this year.

iv) Mr David Gurney; the current owner of the Priory. A letter explaining that he made the offer in the understanding that the previous owner had access to the allotment and that he wished to buy the allotment to reserve the privacy of the property. He made a firm offer of £15,000 during the summer and has agreed that Mr. Smith can

remain on the allotment as long as he can manage and tend it. He regretted that a simple offer to buy land had stirred up such emotions in the village.

A resolution was then proposed and amended to read as follows:

THIS MEETING RESOLVES THAT THE 'LITCHAM RELIEF IN NEED CHARITY'  
SHOULD NOT CONSIDER SELLING ANY PART OF THE ALLOTMENT GARDENS.

All those in favour of the resolution were then asked to raise their hands and an overwhelming majority did so in support of the resolution. One person voted against the resolution and the three members of the Litcham Charities Trust abstained. Four members of the public refrained from voting as they were not electors of the Parish.

The clerk collected a list of those present and ascertained that a total of 76 people had attended the meeting.

The Litcham electoral register current contains 471 names.

Meeting closed at approximately 9.00pm.

Prepared by John Relph, Clerk to Litcham Parish Council, October 2006.