

Sherston Parish Council
July 2008

Sherston Old School

DECISION TIME

The generous offer, made in June, of donations totalling £340,000 from the Eleanor Barton Trust and the Sam Thompson Fund has given a tremendous impetus to the project. Within the next few weeks the parish council will be making a decision on whether to take the next step – buy the building.

Throughout, the parish council has been anxious to consult as fully as possible with all residents on such an important and far reaching development. To date there have been two public meetings as well as leaflets and press releases providing up to date information on the scheme's progress. There will now be a further and final round of consultation which will take two forms.

Firstly on Friday 25th July between 3pm and 8pm and on Saturday 26th July between 9am and 1pm there will be a public exhibition of the project in the village hall. Members of the project team will be present throughout to answer questions. The exhibition will then be transferred to the parish church for the following week to give everyone an opportunity to view it. Please note however the exhibition will not be manned in the church so if you have specific questions please come along to the hall on the 25th and 26th of July. If you cannot see the exhibition at all the information it contains will be available on the council's website www.sherston.org.uk

Secondly over the weekend of Saturday 26th and Sunday 27th July all residents who are registered electors will receive a form asking whether they support the project. Details will be given about returning the form but there will be a deadline of Monday 4th August at 12 noon.

With the results of the survey to hand, council will make its decision whether to buy the building at a special meeting to be held at the British Schoolroom Cliff Road on Thursday 7th August at 7.30pm. All are welcome to attend that meeting.

Please note that you can still make comments about the project or ask questions by contacting the clerk to the project Lynda Fleming on 01666 840839 or email lsnfleming@yahoo.co.uk. You can also use the response form on the web site www.sherston.org.uk

LATEST DEVELOPMENTS

WILTSHIRE COUNCIL- A recent meeting with county council officers has confirmed the new unitary authority's interest in taking space in the old school for use as a satellite office. Here residents would be able to access all the new council's services rather than having to travel into either Chippenham or Trowbridge. The office would also offer accommodation to other agencies such as the Citizen's Advice Bureau, Age Concern, etc. This facility will be of tremendous benefit to residents. Furthermore not only will Wiltshire Council pay rent but it will also offer finance towards the conversion costs for its office space.

NORTH WILTSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL – An application for a grant of £50,000 has been submitted and a decision is expected soon.

RURAL RENAISSANCE FUND- The project team expects that £50,000 will be made available specifically to help meet professional costs in the project.

PLANNING GAIN – A sum of £8,000 has been allocated to the project following the granting of planning permission for two social housing units in Easton Square (opposite the junction with Gaston Lane)

POSSIBLE USES – As well as Sherston Post Office Stores, Sherston Wine, and Wiltshire Council becoming tenants (subject to legal agreements) there is also strong interest in the proposed mezzanine floors above the school hall and classrooms for use as serviced offices. Ideas continue to flow in for other uses of the remaining parts of the building including a dentist, physiotherapist, gym, and, very recently, tourist accommodation. It is clear that as the project develops so does the level of interest from prospective tenants.

GOVERNANCE –The building will be owned and managed by a Company Limited by Guarantee not the parish council. The company will be run on a not for profit basis and, if possible, registered as a charity. All

residents will be encouraged to become members of the company. The parish council will borrow £500,000 from the Public Works Loan Board (PWLB) and loan it to the company. The parish council will retain special rights including a mortgage over all the assets of the company, allowing it to call in its loan, and the rights to approve the design, block or force a sale of the premises and to veto board appointments.

ALLOTMENTS – It is worth repeating that the funding of £340,000 from the two trusts is absolutely dependent on there being no development of the allotment site in Knockdown Road for housing within the next 20 years. The parish council will be entering into a new 20 year lease with the county council so as to safeguard the allotments for that period. The old school project, if it proceeds, therefore also has the advantage of protecting the allotments and eliminating their development for housing for the foreseeable future. Without the project the allotments are vulnerable to development.

COUNCIL TAX – When this project was originally envisaged it was proposed that the council precept be raised for up to three years to meet the initial repayments of the PWLB loan. At the first public meeting in May 2007 residents appeared willing to accept this but by the second meeting in May of this year that position, for some, had changed.

Council has recognised this and has now built into its projections a contingency allowance of £75,000 to cover the loan repayments in the early years. The contingency allowance will, as far as possible, continue to be held as a buffer to repay the loan should there be any temporary shortfall in income. This will give time to consider to what extent any remedial action needs to be taken to prevent any additional burden being placed on the council tax payer, who remains the ultimate guarantor of the PWLB loan.

The Parish Council does not therefore intend to raise the precept, i.e. the Council tax, in order to fund this project. Essentially residents will benefit from a £1 million asset, providing increased and additional services together with employment opportunities, at no extra cost to them.

FUNDING UPDATE- The project needs to raise £1.1 million in total to include the £450,000 purchase price, £575,000 in estimated conversion costs and fees and the £75,000 contingency allowance to cover initial loan repayments and any temporary shortfall in income.

To date some £840,000 has been raised (made up by the PWLB loan and funding from the two trusts) and the project team is confident that the balance can be raised from a number of sources including NWDC, the Rural Renaissance Fund, the Heritage Lottery Fund, private donations and fundraising. A group, the Friends of Sherston Old School, is in the process being formed and already has some innovative ideas for fundraising events.

BENEFITS OF THE PROJECT IN A NUTSHELL

Ensures the future of an historic and important building for the benefit of the community at no cost to residents by way of increased council tax.

Enables the village hall to remain operating without any constraints caused by the old school being used for housing and secures the hall field for the community.

Provides the best opportunity for the long term viability of the post office and stores.

Provides residents with an access point for all services of Wiltshire Council, the new unitary authority as well as other agencies.

Provides an opportunity for other services for the parish as well as employment.

Ensures a living heart in the centre of the village.

WHAT IF THE PROJECT DOESN'T PROCEED?

The old school remains empty and deteriorating for perhaps another three years or more thus blighting the High Street.

Increased likelihood of the old school being eventually converted to housing thus endangering the future viability of the village hall by having late night functions restricted.

Post Office and Stores likely to be under increased threat of closure due to restrictions on space.

No satellite office for Wiltshire Council or additional services offered – a major benefit for residents lost.

No additional employment opportunities created.

No guarantee that the allotments will be secure and free from the threat of being developed for housing.

DECISION TIME IS HERE. PLEASE USE THE FORTHCOMING EXHIBITION AND SURVEY TO MAKE YOUR VIEWS HEARD. THE OPPORTUNITY FOR THE COMMUNITY TO BUY THE OLD SCHOOL WILL NOT BE REPEATED – IT'S NOW OR NEVER.