Chairman Review 2021 AGM

In preparation for this report, I took the opportunity to read again my report for the 2020 AGM.

It seems a lifetime ago.

As we left 2020’s AGM just a year ago with financial concerns ringing in our ears, we had little idea how much those challenges were going to be thrown into focus by a crisis which not only threatened to change all our lives but also, at one point, give a considerable concern for the very future of the club itself.

Our groundsman concerns were allayed by Steve Chiverton taking on the role of groundsman contractor, costs for which we intended to recover from matchday subs, but almost immediately we had worries about the state of the ground after the devastation left by the football. As we tried to arrange a meeting with the Council to resolve this, national events overtook us.

The first lockdown led to a series of committee meetings - which became core senior management, as restrictions prevented full meetings – at which an action plan was drawn up in an effort to mitigate the potential devastating effect the loss of income, due to having no cricket or bar, would have on the club.

With the prospect of no annual subscriptions, match fees, bar takings and the loss of our main fundraising events, let alone no cricket, no stone was left unturned in an effort to try to ensure that there was a club still in existence when cricket started again. Initially those plans centred on getting to the point where we could guarantee survival to May 2021.

Suspending Sky, obtaining a rent rebate from the Council, changing the heating system settings all made a massive difference, and the club will always be grateful to those members who did take out an annual membership even though there appeared at the time to be no prospect of cricket. As we are also grateful to Steve Chiverton who worked unpaid on the ground until we could start playing cricket again (with assistance from a few helpers, thank you, you know who you are. We could never have made it through and been able to play cricket without all these efforts.

Whilst we wrestled with these problems, we were also trying to resolve issues regarding the ground itself, which had been badly damaged during the winter due to the football. The grounds team found it increasingly frustrating that the Council seemed unconcerned about the condition of the ground, which we considered not fit for Southern League Cricket. There were concerns that we could be suspended for having an unsafe ground at one point.

Financially the situation seemed uncertain with John checking and applying for any and every grant he could think of, the pressure suddenly eased when we were able to obtain the £10k business rate grant from New Forest District Council and a series of other grants of varying sizes which John was able to apply for, mean that we go into 2021 with as strong a bank balance as we have ever had. We should not be misled by this. We still have a number of outgoings and with a full season of cricket (in the normal sense as we know it) still uncertain we have to ensure that we have enough in the bank to tide us over until 2022 before we make any decisions on what to do with these extra reserves.

One of the small things we can do is to repay those who supported us last year by waiving full annual subs for any member who paid in full last season. They will be asked to pay associate member only.

We have also been able to use some of the funds to purchase a bowling machine, because the opportunity was too good to pass by. We hope everyone is able to make use of it, a booking system similar to that for nets last year will be used.

We have also taken the decision to give free annual subscription to colts. The junior section has been of paramount importance to us over the years and, with every club Chairman in Hampshire and the New Forest desperately wondering what effect a year away will have on youth numbers next year, it seems a good idea to try to attract as many colts as we can by whatever means we can, this being one way.

As the summer slipped by with no seeming prospect of cricket happening, the team worked tirelessly behind the scenes, not only to seek grant funding, but to also work out how we would be able to operate in an ever-changing environment and prepare the wicket and ground to be ready at a week’s notice if required.

If anyone wants to ask Sue what was happening in terms of communication with the Leagues, County and ECB then they are welcome to, although I am not sure exactly how she will couch her response! The emails were ceaseless!

I also took part in a series of Chairman’s meetings via the web and whilst now is not the time to go into detail I can assure everyone that other clubs were having the same problems as we were and nearly every Chairman was incredibly frustrated with the ECB’s handling of matters at grassroots level.

Whilst I shared the frustrations with the ECB it is only right that I take the opportunity to thank Hampshire Cricket for the support and help they gave, not just to Hythe & Dibden, but also all the clubs in Hampshire. Their support and advice was invaluable. It is also good to know that Hythe And Dibden Cricket Club is well regarded at County level.

The announcement that cricket was to return was met initially with a sigh of relief, then furrowed brows as we tried to work out how to operate with no changing rooms, a one-way system and a host of other measures which we had to set in place.

We, as a club, are once again indebted to Dawn Bowman who put together all our procedures and documentation, with Sue Froggett checking and amending as necessary until we felt we had something that works. It has to be said that for a whole variety of reasons implementing those procedures and ensuring compliance was every bit as stressful as the months leading up to playing cricket again were! Thanks to Dawn and Mike for all they did to keep the bar open!

Cricket, in the end, seemed to be almost a sideshow, it was great to see everyone playing again and enjoying themselves, albeit in a very strange atmosphere. Whilst the cricket was not played for promotion or relegation it was competitive and there were some fine individual performances. Special mention here to Ben Holbrook who, as an Under 13, was playing first team cricket in the SPL and more than justifying Tom’s decision to pick him.

At the tail end of the season, we were finally able to have a meeting with the Council regarding the ground. We set out our concerns and whilst the Council were sympathetic, I think it is safe to say that they were unable to give us what we wanted, in particular a location for a net facility and more control over whether or when football is played. Frustrating as that is, we must continue to try to maintain a good relationship with the Council, it is easy for us to look at what we want and what they cannot give us and think they are being unreasonable whilst forgetting or discounting that they have actually helped us get to where we are now. At some point we were always going to run into what I would term a ‘glass ceiling’ in terms of what assistance they can give us and maybe, in 2020 we reached that. We will continue to work away to promote our cause with them in the hope that our increasing profile will enable us to make things happen to better ourselves.

As we head towards the 2021 season we are in a financially strong position, but we must not relax our guard and lose sight of the most important thing – that Hythe & Dibden Cricket Club continues to function.

The club should take note, and thank, the efforts of the Committee, all of whom have done all they can to ensure that the club survived 2020, in particular Sue Froggett for her wise counsel and support, Dawn Bowman for her organising, Mike Bowman for his ceaseless work on the bar and to John Stovell, who was a revelation in gaining funding from sources we never even dreamt of before, it is possible to argue – and I would argue – that John is the single biggest reason we have not only a strong financial position but also the club itself after what has been the most taxing of years.

At time of writing, we still have no idea when cricket will start again, or what form it will take, all we know is that we have learned that we can adapt and be flexible and meet the demands that will be made of us.

As is now usual for me, a desperate plea to anyone who is willing to help out on match days with scoring, teas (if they are allowed again!) and helping with the bar – All of which would help the team tremendously.

A final note (you will all be relieved to read), 2021 will be my last year as Chairman. I believe we have come a long way in the last few years, and it is time for someone with fresh energy and a new outlook, to take us further. I will stand down at the next AGM but stay on to support whoever takes on the role in whatever capacity they want, and I can.

I already know that they will be supported by the best committee it is possible to have.