

Annual Parish Meeting — Welsh Newton Parish

held at Welsh Newton Village Hall, Welsh Newton, HR2 8QX

on Thursday 8th May 2025 at 7.00pm

Minutes

Chair:

Councillor Sue Parkinson, Chair of Welsh Newton and Llanrothal Group Parish Council (WNLGPC)

Electors of Welsh Newton Parish present (8, including the Chair and Clerk):

Councillor Lissy Tomlinson, WNLGPC, attending also as Village Hall Committee member

Matthew Hall, Churchwarden, St Mary's Church, Welsh Newton

Laura Jane Ward, Welsh Newton Village Hall Committee

Jane Ward, Welsh Newton Village Hall Committee

Graham Brookes

William Cohu, Co-founder, Buckholt Bryngaer CIC [arrived during item 3]

In attendance:

Andrée Mitchell, Clerk to WNLGPC

Also present:

Councillor Julie Francis, WNLGPC

Councillor Keith Simmons, WNLGPC

Councillor Martin Barter, WNLGPC

The meeting was opened at 19:05 and closed at 20:22.

1. Welcome

Councillor Parkinson welcomed everyone to the Annual Parish Meeting for Welsh Newton Parish.

2. To approve the minutes of the Annual Parish Meeting held 30th May 2024

The minutes of the Annual Parish Meeting held on 30th May 2024 were approved and duly signed by the Chair, dated 8th May 2025.

3. Report of activities past and future by local groups

(a) St Mary's Church, Welsh Newton — Matthew Hall, Churchwarden

Matthew Hall told the meeting that St Mary's was one of six churches in the Wye Brooks Benefice, alongside Goodrich, Llangrove, Llanrothal, Llangarron and Marstow, all sharing a single vicar, Reverend Ben Bentham, who took the second Sunday service each month. Reverend Penny Powdrill from Monmouth covered the fourth Sunday.

The church had developed a lay leadership model involving six licensed lay worship leaders. On the first Sunday of each month they ran an informal service comprising Christian meditation, breakfast and Bible study. The third Sunday followed the same format outdoors around the fire pit, which had begun attracting families with young children. The Diocese had identified St Mary's as a model for rural church sustainability, with active congregations taking ownership rather than relying solely on a vicar.

Reverend Bentham was due to retire in July 2025 and an interregnum would follow.

Reverend Mark Melliush, a recently joined congregation member who had previously led a large London parish, was expected to cover second Sundays during that period.

Councillor Francis, also attending as Churches Conservation Trust representative for Llanrothal's St John the Baptist Church, raised the importance of maintaining links between the two churches and asked whether the Saints' Day service at Llanrothal could continue during the interregnum. She and Mr Hall agreed to exchange contact details and discuss this. It was noted that Llanrothal churchyard had become overgrown following the departure of the previous groundskeeper and loss of access to a mower.

Mr Hall told the meeting that the church had applied for a grant to create a seating area with planting around the fire pit inside the churchgate. A longer-term aspiration was to install toilet and kitchen facilities, estimated at around £200,000; Mr Hall hoped a committee could be formed to begin working towards this. The church website was maintained regularly by a member of the congregation.

Councillor Parkinson said she particularly valued the wildflower planting in Welsh Newton churchyard and felt the balance being struck between grave tending and conservation was working well.

(b) Welsh Newton Village Hall — Councillor Lissy Tomlinson and Laura Jane Ward, with contributions from Jane Ward

Councillor Tomlinson and Laura Jane Ward reported on behalf of the Village Hall Committee. During the year the bar area had been refitted, new folding tables purchased and a community survey carried out, which received around 90 responses.

Events during the year included a Big Breakfast, Quiz Night and a wreath-making evening with mulled wine. The Christmas Fair had to be cancelled due to a named storm. The hall had been used for a range of community and private bookings, including several days by the Buckholt Bryngaer festival.

Regular whist drives — on Monday evenings, every third Wednesday (military whist), a second Wednesday and a last or third Friday — were bringing in approximately £400 to £600 per month, providing a reliable income stream.

Jane Ward reported that heating was the hall's most significant problem, being costly and ineffective and limiting its use particularly in winter. A grant application for heating improvements had been unsuccessful, partly because there had not been enough time to obtain quotes before the closing date. The hall had since joined Herefordshire's DOTS network and would now receive notification of future grant opportunities by email. Jane Ward held the premises licence; all alcohol served at the hall had to go through the licence, and she personally owned and supplied the stock, returning all profit to the hall. The committee was exploring ideas for future income and community use, including a pop-up café, a pop-up pub and inviting a mobile catering outlet to use the car park on Saturday evenings. Longer-term aspirations included a small meeting room extension and improved roof insulation, both dependent on securing funding.

The question of the hall's ownership came up. The site had been donated to the village in approximately the 1930s or 1940s and belonged to the parish, though the deeds were difficult to trace. The suggestion was made that the name 'Welsh Newton Village Hall' might in future be broadened to better reflect the wider parish community.

The meeting noted the potential role of Public Works Loan Board borrowing and the forthcoming Neighbourhood Development Plan review in addressing the hall's longer-term needs. There was a positive discussion about the benefits of closer working between WNLGPC, the village hall and the churches for the community as a whole.

(c) Buckholt Bryngaer CIC — William Cohu, Co-founder [arrived during the meeting]

William Cohu arrived during the meeting and the Chair invited him to speak. Buckholt Bryngaer CIC was co-founded by Mr Cohu and Tessa Steel, whose family owned Buckholt Wood north of Monmouth. Now in its third year, the organisation used the wood as a base for community activities, working particularly with young people, carers and refugees.

The organisation had received a grant for the previous year to support a larger programme of activities and had held two mini-festivals of cultural performances during the year. Capacity for events had been kept at around 40 attendees.

Mr Cohu drew particular attention to the archaeological work at the site. Community excavations, carried out in partnership with Cadw — which designates the hillfort as a Scheduled National Monument — had revealed what was now considered a nationally important Neolithic site, attracting interest from a number of academic institutions. A public talk by the lead archaeologist was taking place the following Sunday as the concluding event of a Mayfest festival, and a small number of tickets were still available. A community shelter had been built in the wood and Mr Cohu said it could be made available for parish events — such as an Easter egg hunt or outdoor services — subject to discussion with the CIC's insurers. The organisation was active on Facebook and Instagram.

Mr Cohu acknowledged that sustaining the work at its current scale on an almost entirely voluntary basis was challenging and said the organisation was considering its future direction. Councillor Parkinson thanked Mr Cohu and noted the festival had been well managed with minimal impact on local roads.

Note: Councillor Parkinson delivered the Annual Report (agenda item 4) before the Buckholt Bryngaer presentation. It is recorded below under item 4 in accordance with the agenda.

4. Annual Report — Councillor Sue Parkinson, Chair

Councillor Parkinson gave the following Annual Report:

Personnel

The past year had been quite turbulent for WNLGPC, with considerable changes in personnel. Andrée Mitchell had joined as Clerk in April 2024, never having been a Parish Clerk before, and had had a baptism of fire. The Council was immensely grateful for her time, patience and advice over the year.

WNLGPC started the year with two vacancies and at one point was down to just three councillors — Councillor Parkinson, Councillor Barter and Councillor Simmons — plus the

Clerk. The Council was very sorry to lose the experience and wisdom of its Chairman, Councillor Craig Bligh, who resigned in November 2024 after approximately 17 years on the Council; his loss was felt keenly. Councillor Debbie Clark also left in December 2024, and her local knowledge had been highly valued. Both were thanked for everything they had contributed.

Fortunately, three new councillors had since been welcomed: Councillor Julie Francis representing Llanrothal, Councillor Ed Walker representing Welsh Newton Parish, and Councillor Lissy Tomlinson also representing Welsh Newton Parish. Councillor Walker was unable to attend this evening as his wife was unwell. Councillor Parkinson had been Chair since December 2024, with Councillor Barter as Vice Chair. WNLGPC thanked all fellow councillors and the Clerk for their patience and support. One Welsh Newton Parish seat remained vacant and expressions of interest from Welsh Newton electors were welcomed.

Councillor Parkinson paid tribute to Ward Councillor Elissa Swinglehurst, who had previously held a parish council seat. Now Deputy Leader of Herefordshire Council and portfolio holder for Environment — which included planning — Councillor Swinglehurst always responded promptly to queries, followed up energetically, attended meetings when she could and produced regular ward reports, which WNLGPC commended to parishioners.

Grants and Lengthsman

WNLGPC had successfully applied for funding under Herefordshire Council's Lengthsman Grant Scheme, which was set to continue for a further two years and had been a real success. Grants had been received for drainage work — maintaining ditches and clearing grips to prevent highway flooding. A grant had also been received for Public Rights of Way, which the Council planned to use to replace stiles with gates on the footpath between Welsh Newton and Welsh Newton Common, improving accessibility. That work was expected to be completed within two months. Total grants received during the financial year came to £19,276.

WNLGPC thanked its Lengthsman, Terry Griffiths, for another year of excellent service maintaining the drainage network and carrying out vegetation management. The Clerk had taken on the Parish Footpaths Officer role, with Councillor Tomlinson assisting; both had recently completed the induction training provided by Herefordshire Council. The Council also recorded its thanks to Mr Griffiths for his voluntary work at the War Memorial and for donating and planting Peace Roses there — a particularly fitting tribute on that VE Day.

Noticeboards

All WNLGPC noticeboards had been repaired and were serviceable. There was still a plan to relocate the Llanrothal noticeboard from its current position opposite The Nunnery to somewhere more useful near Llanrothal Church.

Broadband and Storm Damage

Superfast fibre broadband had arrived at Welsh Newton Common around twelve months earlier. Although WNLGPC couldn't take credit for that, it recognised how important it was for residents, particularly those working from home. In November 2024 the service had been damaged by falling branches during named storms. The Council had supported a resident-led project to reduce the risk of that happening again through selective pruning of overhanging branches on the Common.

Highways

WNLGPC had been reporting several highway issues to Herefordshire Council throughout the year and had recently met with the Locality Steward for a site visit to try to speed things up. These included missing and damaged highway signs in Welsh Newton; flooding on the lane between Newton Lodge and Great Hall on Welsh Newton Common, where silt washing from adjacent fields was blocking the grips; and a badly damaged culvert carrying the Garn Brook under the lane between Tregate Castle and Osbaston, where the road was at risk of collapse without urgent works. Unfortunately the Locality Steward had since moved on, though his replacement was expected to be very experienced and the Council hoped these matters would now be acted upon. Longer term, WNLGPC was looking at roadside white gates at the A466 entries to Welsh Newton to remind motorists to slow down when entering a residential area. The Council had also been in recent contact with the Police Community Support Officer for the area, who had carried out speed monitoring in the parish.

Planning

Considering and commenting on planning applications remained one of WNLGPC's most important roles. During the year the Council had considered five applications — mainly for extensions, but including one for a replacement dwelling and one for a barn conversion — along with three retrospective applications for works carried out without prior planning permission.

The Government had mandated radical changes to the development framework to support house building nationally. Herefordshire's mandatory contribution was an additional 27,260 houses over a 30-year period. Herefordshire Council's previous draft planning framework had had to be abandoned and restarted to accommodate this. The earlier assurance that Welsh Newton Common would not be considered for additional

housing had consequently been set aside. With an ageing Neighbourhood Development Plan, WNLGPC was in a potentially weak position to resist inappropriate development and urged parishioners to remain vigilant. The Council intended to update its Neighbourhood Development Plan in due course but needed first to wait for the new County and National planning policy frameworks.

Communications

WNLGPC regretted not being able to publish a newsletter during the year, due to the shortage of councillors. Good progress had recently been made on commissioning a new website, which would give greater control over content and would be more colourful and interactive.

Finance

WNLGPC was pleased to have held the precept at the same level as the previous year — £88.47 per annum for a Band D property — despite increasing costs including the Clerk's National Insurance contributions.

Other Matters

Welsh Newton Common had continued to generate concern among residents, with issues including encroachment of common land into private gardens and fly-tipping affecting commoners' rights. Herefordshire Council had indicated it would favour developing a Common Management Plan to help resolve matters. Ash dieback on the Common had also been raised; Herefordshire Council's ash dieback plan made clear it was responsible for trees on unowned commons, though these were a lower priority than trees on roadsides and in schools. Two new tree officers had recently been appointed by Herefordshire Council, one with specific responsibility for ash dieback, and significant work had recently been carried out along the A466.

The problem of motorcycles using bridleways illegally had come up again during the year, with concern about conflict with horse riders. The bridleway in question crossed the county boundary, which made it harder to resolve.

In Llanrothal, concern had been raised about the purchase of meadows and Tump Wood by a commercial operator, Woodlands.co.uk, which had subdivided the land into woodland planting plots and constructed roadways without planning permission, causing damage to the woodland.

The Year Ahead

WNLGPC ended the year in a much stronger position than it had started, with almost a full complement of councillors. Looking ahead, it hoped to introduce Participatory Budgeting — inviting residents to propose community projects — and had set aside funds for this. The Council also intended to develop a Community Emergency Plan to help residents deal with flooding, severe weather, fire and other emergencies, recognising how far the parish was from emergency services.

Councillor Parkinson ended by thanking all local organisations and residents who supported WNLGPC and attended its meetings, and said she firmly believed the Council worked best when it didn't work in isolation.

5. Open discussion of parish matters

Graham Brookes responded to the Annual Report on the matter of silt washing onto the back lane from adjacent fields. He suggested that engaging directly and sensitively with the relevant farmers — and drawing their attention to the good agricultural practice requirements associated with DEFRA support payments — could be an effective way to address the problem.

Mr Brookes also updated the meeting on the Tree Preservation Order application for trees on Welsh Newton Common, which he had been leading. The application was with Herefordshire Council's planning department and a public consultation deadline of around 16 May 2025 was expected. He noted that Herefordshire Council's responsibility for ash dieback trees on the Common might help progress the removal or pruning of the most affected trees. It was noted that funding for any approved works would need to be considered.

The meeting closed at 20:22

Signed by the Chair: _____

Dated: _____