

# SOCIETY MEETINGS

March

## "CONFESSIONS OF A DEVELOPER"

A talk by John Walker - Reported by Jack Woolford

**A**lthough both national and local government had been denying it for fifteen years, there is indeed, at the start of the 21st century, a housing crisis, said John Walker. With the average price at £160,000 across the UK, first time buyers cannot afford their own homes. What in 1972 had cost him £15,750 now cost £225,000. What on earth was going on? It was a complicated matter and anyone trying to deal with it finished up making it worse. The main drives in the housing market were: the desire to own a home; the ability to finance the purchase; the cost and availability of money; house prices; and supply and demand. It was not the number of houses available that mattered, but houses of the right type in the right place at the right price. Of these the only constant was the desire to own, to be independent of government and greedy landlords. In the second half of the 20th century it had been the best possible investment. As for ability to purchase, lending institutions had "shed loads" of money at historically low interest rates. Inflation had been - but was no longer - a problem with house prices. As to supply and demand, the demand was constant but the supply side had become very difficult. In the 1950s under Harold Macmillan, the building of 300,000 new houses a year was commonplace but now the number of

new homes was a little over 100,000. What has gone wrong?

The biggest single problem is Planning! The Planning System regulates the supply of land with planning permission. There are four tiers: National (policy guidelines); Regional (where, when, and how many), County (where, when, and how many), District and Parish. In addition there are huge numbers of statutory consultees and so-called "stakeholders" who must be consulted. This is a lengthy and complicated process which may be dubbed "the jungle of opinions". There is then what Sir Humphrey calls the "Political Dimension" which tends to screw up everything, as we see in "Yes Minister". Then at the end of all this is the Appeals System. Applicants who are turned down have a right of appeal to the Secretary of State either by written representations or Public Inquiry, which can take up to 12 months. But that is not the end of it. If the applicant feels that the Secretary of State (through his Inspectorate) has misdirected himself or has erred in law, he can ask for a judicial review involving thousands of people - civil servants, planners, lawyers, surveyors, valuers, architects, engineers, experts of many disciplines, from landscape consultants to acoustic experts and many more in between. The picture that emerges is one of Byzantine



complexity. It took eight years to build five houses in Ulcombe.

The government has recently realised the problem and seems to have decided that it is on the supply side, that if they put a lot of land on the market with planning permission prices will be stabilized. As this is too late they need a big and quick solution.

*"Yes Minister"*

*"Oh dear, yes, I see we seem to have a problem here. Well now, Humphrey, what are we going to do?"*

*Well, minister, fortunately we've got the answer for you. We need an extra 330,000 new houses in Kent. Luckily we can put 300,000 in the Thames gateway and 80,000 in Ashford.*

*Oh good!*

*Yes, minister, just sign this order and leave the rest to Bernard and his team"*

John Prescott has said this is government policy and whoever wins the election in May, this is what is going to happen. Planners, engineers and architects have to allocate the land, work up the details, assess the infrastructure, cater for sustainability and *do the detailed design*... In the past so as to control costs detailed design was left to the house builders who had standard home types. Design rather than "sustainability" (whatever that might mean) is the criterion of success. After all the discussions, arguments and disagreements, houses did *somehow* get built. What was most important was how they looked.

John Walker concluded with a sequence of slides illustrating his own developments and was suitably and heartily applauded.

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## "MY DOVER"

**A talk by Cllr David Hannent - Reported by Jack Woolford**

David was born in a house in Buckland Avenue fifty nine years ago and by the time he was seventeen had lived in no less than six streets, the best of which was Castle Avenue. After schooling at St Mary's, St Martin's and Dover Grammar he spent seven years at college in London, at what is now the University of East London, and returned to Dover and worked for the District Council on such things as the Multi-Storey Car Park, Brook House, the Sports Centre and Friars Way before becoming Project Manager at the Whitfield offices.

In 1984 he set up as a Project Manager and Chartered Surveyor in Castle Street and variously worked with

