

Restoring the Main Street Verges, 2016-19

by Robert Brech, Chairman of Alne Parish Council



Complaints about the state of the Main Street verges go back nearly fifty years in the Parish Council minutes. They were originally the ancient village greens and while the Enclosure Acts at the beginning of the 19th century moved ownership of part of the verges into householders' front gardens, ownership of the remainder was less clear until North Yorkshire Highways told us categorically that the remaining verges belong to them. The ornamental almond trees bordering the street were planted early in 1954 by the community to celebrate the coronation in the previous year and they have gradually been replaced by flowering cherries over the years.

The verges have deteriorated significantly in recent years as wider and heavier agricultural vehicles encroach onto the grass. The roadway then extends beyond the drains which become blocked with soil, causing large puddles to form as the process repeats itself.

In 2016, Alne Parish Council decided that enough was enough, the cherry trees themselves were in danger, and that we needed to have a clear project to restore the verges. A public meeting was called in May, 2016 at which the problem and potential solutions were discussed. The meeting had been widely advertised on notice boards, in the Parish Newsletter and on the village website so there was a good turnout. After a presentation and discussion, the proposals were put to a vote and there was a very substantial majority in favour of using granite setts (rather than kerbs) to provide a hard border to the damaged verges, and being prepared to pay for the project through an increased parish precept over five years at an estimated rate of £40 per annum for a Band D house.

Quotes were obtained from a number of NYCC-approved contractors but Highways subsequently became keen to partake in the project themselves through their standard contractors. A deal was reached where the grass on both sides of Main Street would be kerbed with granite setts back to the line of the gullies at a fixed cost to the parish of £54,011 with NYCC picking up the planning costs, any VAT liability, any necessary drain and gulley works, the carriageway reinstatement costs and, most importantly, any contingencies or over-runs.

To finance the upfront cost of the project, the Parish Council applied for a £50,000 loan from the Public Works Loan Board and a number of forms and queries went back and forth to Mr Khan in Marsham Street in London prior to his requesting the Secretary of State for Communities to grant the Parish Council such a loan. The PWLB requested a further survey to ensure that the community was behind the scheme; this was carried out through the village website in April, 2017 and again resulted in an overwhelming majority in favour.

Work started on 23-Oct-2017 at the eastern arm of the village and proceeded slowly with a lot of interruptions due to rain, frost, the failure of traffic lights, the failure of the floor saw, the reluctance of Highways to close the road, and the restrictive hours faced by the contractors who were also doubling as gritter drivers.

By the time of the fortnight's break for Christmas and New Year, the eastern arm had been largely dug and concreted and new setts had been laid on the southern side of the road from the Alne sign to Alne Croft.

Start of the work after New Year was delayed by NYCC Street Works insisting on the H&S measures of a doubling of the safety balustrades on the northern side of the eastern arm of Main St and the putting of a temporary tarmac surface on top of the temporary stone surface on the southern side.

Digging out of the southern side of the western arm started on 08-Jan-2018 and concrete was poured on 15-Jan-2018. Meanwhile, pointing of the eastern arm started on 10-Jan-2018 and, at long last, it seemed that some progress was being made.

But by the time this was all done we were back into the frosty weather when concrete couldn't be poured and the gang were back on gritting duties!

Finally on 22-Jan-2018, we had a week of much warmer weather – but the contractors were out of hours on Monday, there was an emergency elsewhere on Tuesday, it poured with rain on Wednesday, requiring the sucking-out vehicle and it was not until Thursday that work could seriously re-start. A

better week then followed, although there was never a gang throughout the day, and by the end of January the southern side of the western arm had been kerbed.



Another frosty week then ensued at the beginning of February but good progress was nevertheless maintained in this week and the next, and the western arm setts on both sides of the road were finally completed, pointed, earthed and ready for tarmac by 20-Feb-2018 (see photo alongside).

But the following week, the so-called *Beast from the East* was upon us (see photo below) and it wasn't until 07-Mar-2018 that contractors finally reappeared.

Work then began on the northern side of the eastern arm. A spell of better weather ensued but work remained sporadic, this stretch only being completed just before the Easter break on 29-Mar-2018. Work to lay setts on the final stretch of the southern side of the eastern arm (which, it may be recalled, had been concreted before

Christmas) then started amid very wet conditions in the Bank Holiday week following Easter and again took place only sporadically; the setts were all finally completed on Friday 13-Apr-2018.



Following further chasing by me, Steve Plumpton, NYCC Highways, sent me an email on 18-Apr-2018 saying that the work would all be complete by 04-May-2018. Nothing happened on w/c 23-Apr-2018 and nothing happened w/c 30-Apr-2018 until the Thursday when a tarmac crew arrived without any warning, closed the western arm (much to the annoyance of the school) and laid tarmac here and on the eastern arm (using traffic lights) completing it all by the end of Friday 04-May-2018 apart from the stretch bordering the old pond, which was finally laid on Friday 11-May-2018.

The rectification work had still not started and I asked Highways for information on 15-May-2018 and followed it with a complaint on 22-May-2018. Manager Jayne Charlton emailed back the same day and said Steve Plumpton was not at work but that rectification work would re-start the following week. Topsoil was indeed delivered on Saturday 26-May-2018 but nothing further.

I emailed again on 11-Jun-2018 and 18-Jun-2018, complained to NYCC Councillor Peter Sowray on 25-Jun-2018 and got a response that same day from Jayne Charlton. She was planning to meet with the contractors on 28-Jun-2018 and after some further delays, we got an on-site meeting with Jayne Charlton on 13-Jul-2018, by which time the chamfering of the sharp edges had been done. It was agreed on 13-Jul-2018 that seeding would take place in September, that the gully work outside Hawthorn House would be investigated, that the finishing on the driveway side of the setts would be covered over the next couple of years as would the dropped kerbs on Mitchell Lane, and that the final dressing of the road would take place in 2019/20.

Over the next six weeks, I became increasingly frustrated as nothing happened and I was unable to get replies from Highways as to what was going to happen when. I eventually emailed the Chief Executive of NYCC, Richard Flinton, on 03-Sep-2018 and asked for his help. This seemed to work as I got an immediate assurance from Jayne Charlton that work would recommence in the week of 17-Sep-2018 and, sure enough, Highways' contractors arrived, sorted out the gully problem outside Hawthorn House and allegedly did the topsoil and seeding.

However, by mid-October, there was absolutely no sign of any new grass appearing anywhere. Comparison with seeding work done by a Parish Councillor and by Yorkshire Water in the same time frame (same locations, same weather) clearly indicated that the NYCC contractors had failed to do the seeding or had used old seed which hadn't taken. I wrote to Jayne Charlton, copying in Richard Flinton, on 18-Oct-2018 and advised her that the last month of the growing season had effectively been entirely wasted and requested the provision of turf in order to avoid another winter of exposed mud.

To my surprise, this request was acceded to and turf was laid in the week commencing 05-Nov-2018 by horticultural contractors DTMS Ltd. The Parish Council leaflet-dropped all houses in Main Street asking for their help in protecting the new turf and we put up a dozen small yellow signs saying "New turf, please keep off all verges", kindly supplied free of charge by Screenprint & Display Ltd. The contractors did a good job and they also seeded the remaining bare patches.

In the meantime, retired countryman David Lepper, who had recently moved to the village, masterminded a project to plant 1,500 crocus bulbs along the new verges. This took place on Sunday 21-Oct-2018 in fine sunny weather and on Saturday 27-Oct-2018 in cold rain. Fortunately most of the work had been done on the first occasion, and David used the latter work party to add another 110 crocus bulbs in the verges and a host of daffodils in the area of the old pond.

We were surprised to receive an invoice from NYCC dated 31-Oct-2018 for the full amount of £54,011. I emailed Jayne Charlton on 12-Nov-2018 asking for this to be withdrawn as the work was by no means complete but offering to propose to the Parish Council that we pay £27,011 by the year-end, with the remainder to follow as the outstanding work was completed.

On Monday 10-Dec-2018, Councillor David Willis and I had a constructive meeting with Highways (NYCC Highways Manager Jayne Charlton and NYCC Councillor Peter Sowray). They were keen that we paid the total of the outstanding invoice, £54,011 + the vat element of £10,802. They apologised for telling us originally (and erroneously) that we didn't have to pay VAT. But we can claim the VAT back which they can't.

From their side, they were keen to finish the works including the footways and driveways as laid out in the agreed table dated 13-Jul-2018 and they had a plan which would complete this in the summer of 2019. The agreed way forward (subject to approval by Alne Parish Council) was as follows and this was approved by Alne Parish Council at its meeting the following day.

1. Alne Parish Council claim the £10,802.20 VAT back on the invoice that we have already received.
2. Highways and Alne Parish Council agree in writing on the following schedule of works to take place in the summer of 2019:
 - (a) All the footways will be repaired and resurfaced the full length of Main Street from the Village Hall to include Drinsey Nook on the north side and Pond Farm on the south side.
 - (b) Along this same length, all the existing made-up driveways to be resurfaced, from the back edge of the new setts (or existing limits where setts do not exist) to the resurfaced footways.
 - (c) The six driveways that are not currently fully made up or are seriously dilapidated will be made up and resurfaced from the back edge of the new setts to the resurfaced footways.
 - (d) The dropped kerbs in Mitchell Lane will be installed.
 - (e) The row of setts outside Ouseburn House will be repaired once the new owners are in situ.
 - (f) The pavement down Church Wind will be repaired and resurfaced.
 - (g) Any associated drainage or contingency works will be for NYCC to do.
3. Following receipt of:
 - (a) a formal confirmation from NYCC that all the above works will be carried out;
 - (b) the confirmed Programme Date for these works from Highways in the New Year;Alne Parish Council will pay the outstanding invoice for £54,011 + VAT in full.
4. Alne Parish Council will make a further contribution of £3,247.80 + VAT for the work under 2(c) above and Alne Parish Council will take responsibility for obtaining the relevant contributions from the relevant owners. This amount will be held in retention, and not be payable to NYCC until all the works in section (2) above are complete.
5. NYCC Highways confirmed it was their intention to surface-dress the length of Main Street road carriageway during the summer of 2019.
6. Alne Parish Council were concerned that once the full payment had been made against the current invoice, there was no stick or carrot for NYCC to carry out the works. Jayne Charlton and NYCC Councillor Peter Sowray confirmed that the works order has already

been raised and that that the above schedule of works can be published on the Alne Village website. The works will not be affected by any budget cuts or changes in councillors, with Councillor Sowray committing personally to oversee the timely completion of all the agreed works.

7. Alne Parish Council expressed their appreciation of the support of Councillor Sowray in providing £5,000 from his locality budget to enable the Church Wind work to be included in the above programme.

Alne Parish Council contacted the owners of the six dilapidated driveways. While three of them were keen to be included in the programme outlined above and paid up their one-sixth share, three were not keen for various reasons and remained opposed despite a fair amount of further correspondence. This was fine, the offer to be included was entirely voluntary. But tempers got heated, those who were amateur or professional lawyers got involved and after further negotiation, Highways eventually agreed to do all six driveways free of charge.

Work on the Main Street driveways and footways started on Tuesday 23-April-2019. The north side of the west arm was complete by the end of the first week and the south side of the west arm by the end of the second week. Road closures were in place during the day. The east arm was largely completed over the following two weeks and a break ensued on 18-May-2019 with just a couple of pavement sections still outstanding.

The pavement down Church Wind, which was included in the Dec-2018 agreement was largely resurfaced in the week commencing 03-June-2019 with just a small section at the Village Hall completed a couple of weeks later.

Finally, road surface patching took place in the week commencing 22-July, preparatory to final surface dressing which took place on 01-August, a day later than planned owing to heavy rain. New white lines down the road then appeared on the morning of 28-August.

The final remaining areas of pavement resurfacing outside Oak Trees, Evergreen Farm and Alne Croft took place on 28-October-2019 and the project was complete.

From the original public meeting in May-2016 to the completion of the project in Oct-2019 had taken three and a half years. A lot longer than originally anticipated but maybe shorter than we might have expected. Thanks are due to Alne Parish Council for keeping up unremitting pressure on the relevant authorities and NYCC Highways for keeping to their side of the bargain despite their costs being well above what they were originally expecting.

28-October-2019