

Message from the Chairman of Kent County Council



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Last week the “missing link” of the A21 between Tonbridge and Pembury was formally opened by Tom Tugendhat, MP for Tonbridge & Malling. It was a Highways England project that would have been very welcome twenty years ago, but now it’s done. Alongside the road, at a safe distance, is a NMU (non-motorised user, if you have to know) facility, I believe funded by the County Council, and providing a 3m wide ribbon of tarmac for walkers, cyclists and horse-riders to enable safe transit from Tonbridge Station to Pembury Hospital. Congestion in the area is now much less likely so that journey times are predictable and travel safer. The problem now is that you travel smoothly all the way to Kipping’s Cross only to find yourself back on roads from the 1950’s again. When all the speeches and ceremonies were over I leapt into my Mazda to roar the length of the new road but almost immediately got a puncture.

Sunday was spent at Invicta Barracks in Maidstone celebrating the 69th birthday of the Queen’s Gurkha Engineers. Gurkhas are, of course, Nepalese and have served in the British Army since 1815. They are fully integrated into the service but are still very much their own people. There was music and dancing from the Gurkhas and the Royal Artillery band and, incongruously, Scottish tunes played on the Highland bagpipes by two Gurkhas in (I think) Black Watch tartan. The event was rounded off with a satisfyingly pungent curry. The army does look after you.

Very recently I visited the Kent Shed in Shepway. Doubtless you are aware of the Kent Sheds programme, but if not it is a very successful means of getting men, often in their later years, who are lonely and socially dislocated into the company of others to work with their hands. I met men who were making bird tables, nesting boxes and “bug boxes”. A double garden chair on wheels was shown to me. I met a man who uses the facility for a few hours’ respite from the otherwise full time care of his wife and I encountered Tony, a 91 year-old engineer who keeps the woodworking machinery in working order and appears to able to make anything in metal from scrap.

The Shed (actually a series of sheds) is located on a rural site near Acrise. The Shedders pay £200 per annum for what I estimated to be a couple of acres and behind the sheds is a vegetable garden growing maize, pumpkins, beans and potatoes tended to by half a dozen tiny Nepalese ladies. They follow their session at the Shed with an exercise class in Folkestone on Mondays and attend a sewing group on Fridays.

The Shed at Acrise is in the care of Mark Connorton from the Volunteer Centre at Folkestone, and who also has oversight of all the other Sheds in Kent. Mark told me that he has, in total, about 50 Shedders at Acrise. Although mostly elderly, younger men often attend for a time and are helped with whatever ails them, often depression or feelings of worthlessness, by being useful and social in their outlook, until, as does happen, they are able to get into paid work and move on.

Funding for the Kent Sheds Programme comes from KCC but what happens at individual sites relies in large part on the talents and self-determination of the attendees and the genius of people like Mark. I had to reflect on the possibility that if the men and women I met were not being helped by the programme, they might well remain unhappy and unwell and be taking medication. Apart from its very obvious benefits to humankind, the Kent Sheds programme must represent extremely good value for money.



Chairman, David Brazier, at the Kent Sheds Programme