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President's Comments to the AGM, 13th September 2010

Quinlan Terry, one of our longest serving committee members retires today and I would like to thank him and voice the Society's appreciation for his valuable contribution to our discussions. He is a most distinguished architect of great ability and, with very few others, has kept the practice of classical architecture alive and flourishing over the last forty years. We are fortunate to have a person of his calibre in an organisation part of whose work is to give views on the quality of new building and alterations in our area and so I am particularly pleased that Quinlan has agreed to be Architectural Consultant to the Society.

In a recent conversation, Quinlan remarked to me that he thought the current committee was the most effective he had known. We do have an exceptionally dedicated group of people dedicated to preserving our beautiful countryside and containing the threats which continue to arise. I welcome Will Sambrook who has experience and skills we need and will also reduce the average age! We also hope to co-opt another younger member who I believe can make a distinctive contribution to our work.

In our Chairman we have an environmental journalist and campaigner who carries considerable weight and prestige on the National and International stage. He apologises profusely for not being with us tonight. Sarah Carr is an efficient and effective Secretary and also the organiser of our summer parties. She is indispensable!

All the Committee make valuable contributions but I want to single out David Eking and Roger Drury, planning secretaries respectively for Suffolk and Essex who do much of the detailed work as well as Adam Sedgwick who has spent many hours with other groups campaigning against the threat of further high voltage pylons being strung over the AONB and the Stour valley.

Nella Probert has been a great help and support, especially to Sarah Carr and here I would like to pay a tribute to her father-in-law, Colonel Richard Probert, who represented the Bures area on the committee for many years and who died recently. He will be much missed by all who knew him.

We also benefit from having Rosemary Turner, representing CPREssex and Charles Aldous QC, chairman of our neighbouring society, The Colne Stour Countryside Association.

Roger Drury sits on the CPREssex committee and I am on the Colne Stour committee as well. This cross-fertilisation is invaluable and ensures that our campaigning is coordinated and effective.

This is also recognised in our websites, which are now interactive and will increase in importance as time goes by. However, the changes in how we operate

mean that we need to review our constitution to ensure that the Society can carry out its work most expeditiously and to this end we propose to recommend changes to the committee structure which meet modern day requirements. It should be noted that when the constitution was last reviewed, the internet, for example, did not exist!

As reported during the meeting, none of the old problems which afflict us have gone away and new ones loom.

The major cutbacks which have been flagged in public expenditure, and which will be announced in detail on 20th October, will inevitably have a big impact on the Vale.

Reductions in expenditure of 25 to 40 percent will mean changes to the way the Dedham Vale & Stour Valley Project operates. Cuts of this magnitude will mean reductions in staff and to the scope of work now undertaken. It also means that the Project will seek funding from the private sector and preparations for this will soon be put in hand.

On Thursday next, I am going to a meeting with Dr Helen Phillips, the Chief Executive of Natural England, the organisation responsible for most countryside funding including for AONB's, when the consequences of these changes will be discussed. One inevitable result will be that plans to extend the AONB towards Sudbury will have to be put on hold for three years or even more as neither the local authorities nor Natural England have resources to undertake the necessary feasibility studies. I have also been advised by Professor Jules Pretty of Essex University that now is not the time to take this initiative further.

Richard Benyon MP, the Minister responsible for AONB's at DEFRA, has accepted my invitation to visit the Vale later this year and I hope that this will be a chance to brief him on our problems and preferred solutions to some of them.

The new Coalition Government has proposed changes in planning law with more local control envisaged and while this is broadly welcome, certain parties may seek to take advantage of the situation to the detriment of the rural landscape we enjoy.

Because of spending cuts, Local Authorities will have fewer resources and smaller staffs so it means that Societies such as ours will have an enhanced role in ensuring that inappropriate developments are opposed. and there will be more work for us to do.

In many spheres volunteering will be needed. There are big challenges ahead and we shall need all the help we can get from our committee and the watchful eyes of you, our members to meet them and ensure that we hand on our beautiful corner of England to the next generation in a form as delightful and unspoiled as we know it today.