

High Wych and Allens Green in the best kept village competition



Walking through the centre of High Wych you cannot help but notice the appalling amount of litter. Gutters overflow with rotting leaves; dog mess fouls the pavements; crisp packets, drink cans, fast food packaging and cigarette packets are everywhere. Well, it wasn't always thus. Between 1957 and 1970 High Wych was in the forefront of the best kept village competition. Allens Green scored in the early eighties. The contest was organised by The Hertfordshire Society, later known as CPRE (Campaign to Protect Rural England – The Hertfordshire Society). High Wych won it three times outright: in 1958, 1959 and 1965. In 1970 we were joint winner in our group with Barley. In 1960, 1963, 1966 and 1969 we were runners up. Allens Green, who took part separately, were runners up three times and did in fact win in 1983. By way of comparison: Much Hadham won 7 times, Ickleford 5 times.



The 1958 award ceremony – Just look at those crowds!

Taking part in the best kept village competition was no sinecure. The Parish Council minutes of the day told me that in 1959 no less than 58 people were involved. Many organisations did their bit: the girl guides and brownies, the cubs and scouts, the school children, the church and the women's institute. The businesses of the village, Helmer & Dyer, the Village Stores and Dixon's Garage contributed. Judging was harsh but fair. A form for prospective participants warned against untidy hedges, uncut and badly cut grass on verges, the green and in the church yard, chalk marks, paper and sweet packets, below standard allotments, out of date advertisements at village shops, too flamboyant painting and above all a lack of communal effort. From the reports it is obvious that High Wych passed those tests with flying colours.

Winning the contest was an occasion of great pride for our village and there was certainly no lack of communal effort! The 1958 and 1959 award ceremonies were presided over the Hon. David Bowes Lyon, then the Lord Lieutenant of Hertfordshire, Lord Brockett, the chairman of Hertfordshire Society and of course local dignitaries such as HWPC chairman Len Helmer head master Alfred Mabey and Charles Wentworth Stanley then living at the Grange. Those last three had in fact been leading lights in the preceding campaign. John Walters, the vicar, was there of course as were the Egerton family, then residing at the Manor of Groves. Mr. J.F. Buxton, the High Sheriff of Hertfordshire was there with his wife. The Buxtons used to live at the Manor of Groves prior to the Egertons. The events were also widely reported in the local press.



The 1959 ceremony



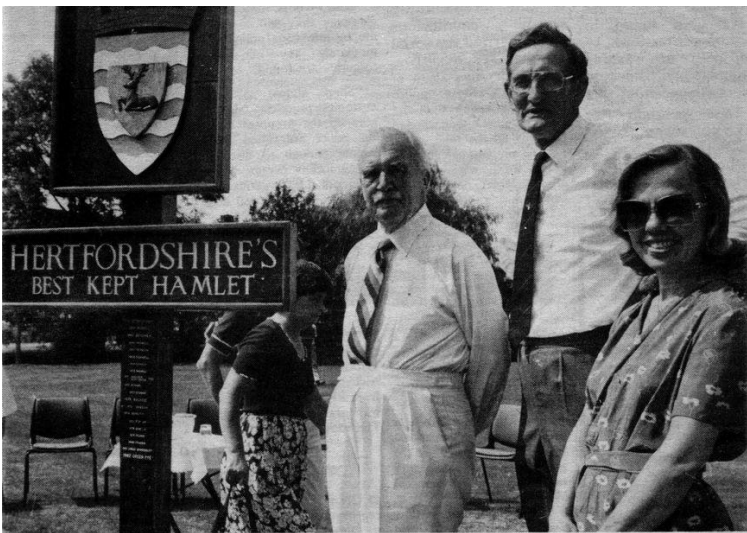
The village turns out in force for the 1965 ceremony

Initially contestants in the competition were ranked in two groups and High Wych was ranked as a “large village”. From 1963 it was reclassified as “small” and a hamlet section was added in which Allens Green took part.

The best kept village contest should be seen in the light of the “Keep Britain Tidy Campaign” which was started in 1954 from within The National Federation of Women’s Institutes and wanted to tackle the increasing litter problem. As highlighted in the beginning of this article this problem is as acute today as it was 60 years ago. The main problem of course being one of educating ourselves into being responsible: don’t drop litter in the first place.

After a while though, the initial enthusiasm must have worn off. In the late sixties the Parish Council minutes already speak of difficulties getting a co-ordinator and getting enough volunteers. It also seems that on at least one occasion one of the village organisations had been committed to do the co-ordination before this had been properly discussed in its own ranks. Why should we go and pick up litter, the argument went, when this is what we pay our rates for.

In 1983 Allens Green, under the stewardship of John Tulloch, won the best kept village competition in the hamlet category. It was of course an occasion of great pride. Sir George Burns, who had by then succeeded David Bowes Lyon as Lord Lieutenant of Hertfordshire came down for the occasion. Allens green had already been runner up in the preceding year. In 1984 Allens green was runner up again.



The Hertfordshire Mercury and Herts & Essex Observer report on Allens Green winning best kept village in 1983. Note George Burns and John Tulloch in picture on the right.

Memories have faded; whilst the ceremonies are well remembered the actual cleaning operations which must have taken many volunteers many hours are forgotten. The best kept village competition is no more. There was some criticism. "The contest encouraged open spaces in a village to be clipped to death", some said. A 1993 article in the Independent spoke of "incoming townies, AGA louts, imposing suburban values on rural areas." Failure to recruit enough volunteers might have been a more important factor in the decrease in popularity of the event. From 2000 onwards CPRE Hertfordshire ran a "village of the year" competition. In 2013 the "Rural Living Awards" were started. These aim to "highlight efforts made by groups or individuals to improve life and enhance the environment in Hertfordshire's villages and its countryside".

Meanwhile litter remains a problem. Maybe I exaggerated a bit in my opening paragraph. Still, we can well be envious of the community spirit so common in the sixties and seventies. But is calling on volunteers the right way to solve the problem? Perhaps they should not be the first port of call. Some may disagree. The first rule to take into account is of course: do not drop litter in the first place! It is also important to remain vigilant. From personal experience I do know that contacting the district council and telling them about particular black spots definitely does help. So please, don't just moan: do something!

Thanks this time go to Jo Simson of CPRE Hertfordshire, Rachel Mabey, Ian Tulloch, Joy Tulloch, Michael Sykes, Eric Willison, the Hertfordshire Mercury and the Herts and Essex Observer. Information was also found in Wikipedia and at HALS. Meanwhile the High Wych History Project still needs your personal contributions, memories, stories and photographs as well as your criticism, positive or negative. Get in touch!! Contact me at: theo@vandebilt.co.uk or phone me at 01279 725468