

Stephen Clackson's Letter from School Place

—connecting with constituents of the North Isles ward.

The 31st July marked the actual 50th anniversary of the enactment of the *Orkney County Council Act 1974* (on which Howie Firth gave a talk back in February, see [Issue 134](#)). Curiously, it came into force after the first elections to the County Council's successor, Orkney Islands Council (see [Issue 136](#) and [Issue 137](#)). I was disappointed to see that neither of these significant Orkney "Milestones" featured in the Kirkwall Flower Arrangement Club's 50th Flower Festival at St Magnus' Cathedral. It would have been interesting to have seen what sort of displays they would have inspired! The 1974 Act remains in force to this day, and it is hoped its provisions might provide the precedent that OIC needs to exert some control over the imminent wind-energy bonanza and to set up a structure that will lead to the developments benefiting everybody in Orkney. Below is a parable I wrote, as a cautionary tale, 19 years ago, back in 2005 (originally for the newspaper *Orkney Today*, hence the title).

THE VILLAGE AND THE GOLDMINE — A parable for Orkney today

by Stephen Clackson

Once upon a time there was a beautiful village with a fine village green – the envy of the district. On the edge of the green was an inn which thronged throughout the year with all the visitors that came from far and wide to admire the village.

One day an important-looking man arrived at the inn and asked to see the village elders. They met him that very evening at the inn.

"I am a prospector," said the man. "I would like to construct a goldmine on your village green. As you will know, gold is essential for the economy, and with my goldmine your village will be making an important contribution to the nation's prosperity."

"We would all be extremely proud," declared one of the elders, "to know that our village was contributing to the prosperity of the nation." Another of the elders had some doubts: "I don't want to sound selfish," he said hesitantly, "but will the goldmine actually benefit the village in any way?"

"Of course!" boomed the prospector. "If the nation becomes more prosperous then we all benefit. However," he announced, looking the elder in the eye, "I can also offer employment to some of the villagers, as I shall need labourers to dig the mine." The elders nodded sagely and looked pleased with themselves.

The prospector ordered a round of drinks, and they all signed the charter he had prepared.

The goldmine was soon finished, and carts arrived every day from a distant town to carry the gold away to the bullion market. In the inn, the labourers who had dug the mine played cribbage and dominoes to stretch out the time it took to drink the little ale they could now afford. They were the only customers. The mine had spoiled the green, and nobody came to admire the village any longer.

One day a stranger arrived at the inn. "We don't get many visitors these days," said the innkeeper. "Trade is bad in the village at the moment," he continued, "and we have trouble making ends meet." The stranger looked puzzled. "But isn't that a goldmine outside?" he asked. "Aye," replied the innkeeper, nodding towards the charter on display on the wall. "We're right proud that our village is contributing its bit towards the prosperity of the nation – and the mine created jobs for these labourers here when it was being built."

The stranger read the charter carefully. "Did none of you realise how valuable gold is?" he questioned. "That prospector must have been sharp – somehow he managed to convince your elders to sign the whole lot over to him! If the village owned the mine, all that gold would be yours to sell, not his. You'd all be rich by now – and the nation would be prospering just as much. Instead, your elders allowed this prospector to walk in, destroy the asset that brought trade to the village and seize for himself another that none of you appreciated the true value of."

The innkeeper looked out of the window. Suddenly he saw the goldmine in a whole new light. The stranger was saying nothing they could not have worked out for themselves. But for the village, it was now too late.

It has been a strange summer, if you can call it summer. I don't normally indulge in eschatology, but with 77 whales beaching on Sanday (the letter numbers of the word CHRIST add up to 77), our bees behaving bizarrely, and 3 times 3 consecutive days without eggs from our poultry, I must admit to scouring the *Book of Revelation* in case these events were a portent of the end of days. Whereas the somewhat cryptic verse 1 of chapter 13, "And I stood upon the sand of the sea, and saw a beast rise up out of the sea, having seven heads and ten horns, and upon his horns ten crowns, and upon his heads the name of blasphemy," could feasibly be interpreted as a pod of whales coming ashore, there is no mention of either bees or poultry.

Speaking of poultry, the Clackson family did fairly well at the Sanday Show this year, winning the trophies for both *Best Duck/Drake* and *Best Goose/Gander*. I understand that one of our poultry rivals is planning to attend, prior to the next Sanday Show, a course at an "escuela taurina" in Spain, although that's in connexion with one of his exhibits of the bovine variety.

I finished off the recess and started the new School Place term by getting out to some of the other North Isles: North Ronaldsay to attend a transport meeting, and Stronsay and Shapinsay to be present at their respective community council meetings. At School Place, I attended a confidential members' briefing, I was at the Air and Ferry Services Consultative Forum meetings, and I undertook a very interesting whole day of site visits to sport and leisure facilities on the Mainland.

Drop-in events have been arranged as part of the public consultation on the draft *Orkney Islands Regional Marine Plan*. Two are remaining to be held in the North Isles: 24th Sep (11 am – 7 pm) at Heilsa Fjold, Sanday; and 3rd Oct (11 am – 6.30 pm) at The Höfn, Westray. If you are in town on 19th Sep between 2 & 7 pm, you can attend the event at the Pickaquoy Centre. You can also see the *Plan* online at orkney.gov.uk/marine-plan-consultation and, if you wish, submit a consultation response there.

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Letter from School Place is also
available on-line at clackson.info

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