



Just three of the nice "Pigs of Alresford" — Paul Greenwood (left) shakes the hand of the incoming "Chairpig" Phil Voce (right) with founder member Peter Harwood looking on

The things they get up to at Alresford

By Lesley Drew

The Pigs of Alresford are not related to the Hampshire Hog. In fact they don't even have four legs because they are human.

Alresfordians of course know about their Pigs but ask any of them for some precise details and they are vague on the subject. "They do good things. They help people. Don't know who they are exactly. The dentist was one and so was one of the bank managers." Whilst the activities of the Alresford Pigs Association are not secret, indeed many of them are very public, membership is by invitation and the names of individuals who have been aided by the Pigs are never disclosed. The known beneficiaries of the Pigs are those charitable groups in the town who publicly acknowledge the generous help they receive.

It all began in January 1974. At that time and indeed as it still remains today, Alresford was a place rich in voluntary organisations offering clubs and societies covering a wide range of interests for its inhabitants. It was and still is, impressively rich in charitable work, not only supporting well-known national charities but also others within its own immediate locality. There is a thriving Community Centre, a Community Care Group, the self-help Giles Group for people with disabilities, the Alresford Mini Bus Service, among many others.

In 1974 a small group of local businessmen and professionals met in the Ship Public House at Bishop's Sutton. The majority of them were migrants to the town from other parts of the country. They felt privileged to be part of such a lovely place as Alresford and keen to make a contribution to their adopted community. In social terms they were

comfortably well off but were aware that this was not necessarily the case for everyone living in the area. Over a few pints the idea of forming a new group for the purpose of providing fun and financial help for the community and those less fortunate than themselves, was born. It was to be a men only dining club meeting monthly in various hostelrys and membership would be limited to about 30. They also proposed that the group should be unique to Alresford, not linked to any other organisation or bogged down by rules and regulations.

One man, full of enthusiasm, told his secretary of the plans. Her stinging response, "You are nothing but male chauvinist pigs", provided the new group with its name. Initially this created some confusion with pig breeders and farmers telephoning to ask if they could join! As a fund raising organisation, the Pigs had to forego much of their wish to be totally free of paperwork and formality. In order to open a bank account they had to provide a Constitution and appoint officers. Initially, the man in charge was referred to as "Big Pig", but with the passing of the years he is now acknowledged as the Chairman.

An early "fun thing" for residents was a Barn Dance, the first held at Grove Farm, Medstead. Socially it was a huge success and also proved to be one of the best ways to raise a very large sum of money. Beneficiaries of that event were the residents of Tichborne Down House Hospital, a former workhouse, which gave long term care for men with mental disabilities but now closed. The Barn Dance was repeated for very many years, always on the last Saturday in June and mostly at Pinglestone Farm, Old Alresford. Residents within a

And by night . . .



West Street (Photograph: Brian Champion Studios)

considerable radius of Alresford and Old Alresford accepted that sleep would not be possible until the early hours. Many decided if you could not beat them, join them for the thundering festivity. After all, the Pigs, mainly in the thirties to forties age group were the young of the 1960's and knew how to make things swing.

In 1975 the National Children's Home at Old Alresford, also now closed, was the recipient of the Pigs fund raising efforts. They had a visit from Father Christmas and received such items as a climbing frame and a freezer to improve the quality of the children's lives.

That Christmas season also saw Pigs clambering up ladders and over the Georgian facades of premises in East Street, West Street and Broad Street, to erect lighted Christmas trees on shops, offices and private homes. The trees number well over a hundred these days and are a big attraction of Alresford each December. They and the lights are provided by the town's Chamber of Trade and Commerce and the Pigs have a contract from the Chamber to place the trees. The payment for doing so goes to their charity fund. If ever you want to see an Alresford Pig in action, try the last Saturday morning in November but don't distract him, they are not all comfortable when perched on the top of ladders!

Another seasonal activity supported by the Pigs is Alresford's "Christmas Night" when the population gathers around the big tree in Broad Street for Carol Singing. Father Christmas arrives in a manner kept secret beforehand, and all the youngest children receive gifts. This event is organised by the town's Christmas Tree Fund which formed more than 50 years ago and is supported by local traders and various other groups in the town. The first tree was donated by Jimmy White and it is the Alresford firm of White & Etherington which has generously donated the main tree ever since. Over the years the arrival of Father Christmas has been in an elegant carriage, aboard a space rocket, by helicopter, out of chimney pots and memorably, on a windy night, over the rooftops in a crane. On that occasion it was fortunate Father Christmas had a beard big enough to hide his frightened face!



The tree in Broad Street around which Alresfordians sing carols on Christmas night each year (Photograph: Brian Champion Studios)

Organising entry at the gates and parking for the Alresford Agricultural Show each September provides the Pigs with another opportunity to raise funds in support of local needs. Sponsored Duck Races on Alresford Pond is a more recent activity that has proved very successful. For their own enjoyment the Pigs hold progressive suppers, an annual Chairpig barbecue, sing carols on Christmas Eve and undertake a New Year's Day walk.

Though confidentiality is strictly maintained in respect of individuals, it is known that personal assistance has helped local families by providing domestic appliances or a much needed holiday. Meanwhile over the years local groups such as the Pinder Centre, the sheltered accommodation at Makins Court and Chiltern Court, the Alresford Mini Bus Service, Scouts and Guides, Sports Organisations and the Arlebury Park skateboard area have all received support from the Pigs.

Only one founder member, Peter Harwood, remains in the Pigs today, though contact is maintained with those ex-Pigs, the Old Boars, who still live in the area and provide much appreciated help, as do the wives of the Pigs. It is hoped, this being the 30th anniversary that many of the Old Boars will be present at the annual Christmas Dinner when the ladies (the 1970's members were less polite and used the female pig name!) will be present at the black-tie event. Over these 30 years the Alresford Pigs Association has raised in excess of £250,000 all of which has been distributed to local recipients who may have fallen outside the reach of other support agencies.

At the 30th AGM held in November, chairman Alan Greenwood and his committee handed over to a new chairman, Phil Voce and a new committee. They will be leading the Alresford Pigs Association into a fourth decade of fun and service to Alresford.

Footnote: Anyone wishing to contact The Pigs may write to The Alresford Pigs Association c/o Laurel Huse, Station Approach, Alresford, Hampshire SO24 9JH or email: thealresfordpigs@hotmail.com