

Mayor of Malmesbury Newsletter – Autumn 2025
From Councillor Stephen James, Mayor of Malmesbury



Shortly after I moved to Malmesbury I remember someone telling me that they never went away during the summer as there was so much going on in Malmesbury. The busy programme of events provides compelling reasons to stay here and welcome visitors. The great majority of these events are planned, organised and run by volunteers, and we all owe them our thanks for all they do.

The Mayor is invited to many events, sometimes too many to be able to attend them all. In the last few months I've taken part in Ivana Kupala, the ancient Ukrainian summer festival, and also held a Civic reception to mark the anniversary of Ukrainian independence, both opportunities to show our support for Ukraine and the Ukrainian people in our community. Malmesbury Stands with Ukraine continues to remind us all of the need to help Ukraine resist Putin's aggression, and provide what support we can, particularly to the city of Cherkasy as we enter the second year of our partnership with them. I was very sorry not to be able to accept a recent invitation to visit Cherkasy.



Ukraine Independence Evening

This summer Malmesbury Community Fridge celebrated its 3rd anniversary. This organisation has now saved over 10 tons of food from going into landfill by making it available from the fridge and freezer in the Town Hall. The food that is left over is used as animal feed, so nothing is wasted. I have also visited the Malmesbury and District Foodbank, and been able to see how efficiently they provide support for people in crisis. The Foodbank is supported by an experienced caseworker from Citizens Advice, so that timely help to overcome financial and other difficulties is provided along with the food. I'm proud to be raising funds for the Foodbank and helping the volunteers support disadvantaged and vulnerable people.

Just before the end of the summer term I saw St Joseph's Catholic Primary School performance of Joseph and the Amazing Technicolour Dreamcoat in the Abbey. To my surprise this included all 17 songs of the original, in full, a remarkable achievement by the children. Debbie Cambray-Smith had done a tremendous job of preparing the cast, which included every member of the school. If the thought of watching a school production without one of your own children in it fills you with dread, you should have seen this. The children's enthusiasm was conspicuous and I'm sure it will have been a boost for their confidence, and something they can remember with pride.

At the start of the autumn term I visited St Joseph's with our MP, Dr Roz Savage. We saw the smart new pre-school rooms and had a chance to talk to children and staff. They were about to start learning about democracy and I hope meeting their MP helped them with this.

HEALS runs a programme of summer activities for young people during the school holidays. The activities are designed to create opportunities and enable young people to learn new things, make new friendships and have exciting and challenging experiences. This year it even combined archery with cooking over an open fire! I was delighted to reward the achievements of these young people at an awards ceremony in the cloister gardens.

I was surprised to learn that Malmesbury Community Choir has 70 members. Almost all of them were singing at the musical tea that they held for the town in September. They filled the largest room in the Town Hall in both senses: beautiful singing, and all seats taken!

Like me, many of you will have missed WOMAD this summer, as it's moved away from Charlton Park. Some of us were able to ease the disappointment at NoWoMadness, a great evening of live music in the Town Hall. Another event put on by volunteers.

The idea of Town Twinning is to promote international friendship, in order to broaden cultural, recreational, educational, religious and commercial links, whilst providing people with new opportunities for learning, friendship and travel. Malmesbury's twin towns are Niebüll and Bad Hersfeld in Germany, and Gien in France. We also have partnerships with Malmesbury in South Africa and Chertkasy in Ukraine. Twin towns usually visit each other in alternate years, and this summer we were visited by a group from Gien, while a group from Malmesbury visited Niebüll. The visits provide an opportunity to get to know people and understand where they live in a way that holidays or work trips rarely achieve. Our relationship with Bad Hersfeld is a little different, being based on the story of Lull, a monk who trained in Malmesbury in the

eighth century, and then was one of the first Christian missionaries in Germany. He re-founded the abbey in Bad Hersfeld and is buried there. The town now holds an annual festival in his honour, and a small delegation from Malmesbury take part. This year I was pleased to welcome a group from Bad Hersfeld, and some of them took part in the Carnival Procession. We have also enjoyed a fantastic performance by the GBO Old Timer Big Band from Bad Hersfeld, who played a varied programme of jazz, swing and pop in the Abbey (and Happy Birthday to You for Ray Sanderson, who has visited Bad Hersfeld every year since the partnership began). The band members are all former pupils of the school in Bad Hersfeld, and only come together four times a year to play. I was delighted to see them here.



Bad Hersfeld Twinning

Malmesbury History Society met to celebrate their 10th Anniversary recently. They are a group of (mostly) amateur historians that do original research and present it to the group, and the anniversary evening gave an overview of their work. Clearly they have done a great deal to increase the sum of knowledge about the past of our town. The work of the members demonstrates that there is something important in every century of Malmesbury's past, it's not all about Athelstan, Anglo-Saxons and monks.

Once again the High Street Plus Art Gallery has provided an opportunity for local artists to show and sell their work through the shop windows of the town. This also brings in visitors, and once again there were several people who were here as it opened, keen to get in first as the event opened. Final figures are not in yet but I congratulate the organisers for another successful year.

I was pleased to open Alltype Builder's Merchant, in half of the shop formerly occupied by Knees. This had been vacant for 2 years, and it's really good that such a prominent space on the High Street is once again open and trading. Jags Bhullar has run a similar business in Uxbridge for several years, and this is his first venture outside that area. Bertie Bs has now moved from the Cross Hayes to the other half of the shop. Also we now have a wine merchant, with the Malmesbury Wine Company further down the High Street. I wish all these businesses the best of luck, and encourage you to use them. We will only keep the High Street shops in business if we buy things from them.

Planning buildings and development is of great interest to many, and frequently raised as a concern. Wiltshire Council's Local Plan is going through the various stages of scrutiny and review that are required before it can be adopted. Our own Malmesbury Area Neighbourhood Plan, covering Brokenborough and St Paul Malmesbury Without as well as Malmesbury, needs to be updated, but until the Wiltshire Local Plan is finalised we risk trying to shoot a moving target. This problem is further complicated by Government announcements that affect planning policy and targets. In the meantime our Neighbourhood Plan remains valid, and we can rely on the principles it contains even though some of the specifics have been achieved or are no longer pertinent.

You may have seen people in the river near the Town Bridge recently. These volunteers, organised by the Flood Working Group, have been clearing weeds and silt from the banks and riverbed. This work is not simply a case of wading in, as permissions from the Environment Agency and other authorities are required so that the natural environment is protected. This work is necessary to keep the river flowing and healthy, so that it reduces the risk of flooding, and remains an attractive feature of the town.

The Council is continuing to work with Wiltshire Council to ensure that the Riverside Community Centre continues to be available, including the indoor skatepark. The commercial aspects of this work mean that we can't report much more at the moment, but you can be certain that Malmesbury Town Council recognises the vital importance of the Riverside and is determined to preserve this valuable facility.

This year is the 80th anniversary of the end of World War II, and I was proud to host the event in Cuckingstool Mead to commemorate Victory over Japan Day on 15th August. The campaign fought by British and Commonwealth troops in Burma was described at the time as "a forgotten war, fought by a forgotten army", and it is even less understood today. By 1945 there were 365,000 British and 1.5 million Commonwealth troops in the theatre, drawn from pre-partition India, Burma, Nepal, numerous African countries, Australia, New Zealand, the Pacific

Islands, and Canada, in addition to the US forces. Overall there were approximately 220,000 allied casualties. Some made the supreme sacrifice, some endured appalling treatment as prisoners and lasting health problems afterwards, and others simply were thankful to have survived. We remember them all. I am grateful to have met Malmesbury residents with relatives that served in the Far East campaign and heard a little about them. Their stories add colour to the history, and help us understand it as individual experiences.



VJ Day Anniversary

Walking to Kingston upon Thames to link Malmesbury to the 1100th anniversary of King Athelstan's coronation seemed like a bit of an adventure when it was first mentioned. It turned out to be so much more than just a 130-mile trek. Around 50 people set off from the Cloister Gardens on the first day, and by the end of the week we had reached Wallingford, well over half way. The route visited many early medieval settlements along the River Thames, and we enjoyed seeing many churches and learning about their Saxon connections. I met many mayors and other civic leaders, and we saw and heard a variety of wildlife including kingfishers and, most improbably, a grey seal! We were generously entertained in many places, and I was able to present our hosts with a copy of David Woodman's new book *The First King of England*. We met up in Kingston with a group of cyclists that had started from Malmesbury the day before, after a memorable send-off in the Cross Hayes. Kingston's celebrations of the coronation culminated in a moving service of thanksgiving, with the sermon given by the The Very Revd Professor Sarah Foot, a leading expert on ecclesiastical history, who gave a lecture on Athelstan in Malmesbury last year. However what I enjoyed

most about the walk was the opportunity to get to know the people that joined in. We had at least one new person join the walk every day, and finished every day with at least 10 people. Long walks provide opportunities for long conversations, isolated from the background noise of daily life. “Normality” did break through occasionally, notably when I was called by the Daily Telegraph and interviewed about flags in potholes as I walked beside the Thames. I was delighted to raise over £2000 for my Mayor’s Charities, HEALS and the Malmesbury and District Foodbank, and would like to thank the donors. I must also thank all those that were involved in planning and supporting the walk, another great effort by volunteers, and the Cartmell Minibus for making it possible. We are planning a celebration of the walk in the Abbey on 26 November, a reunion for those that walked or volunteered but also a chance for those that couldn’t take part to see and hear something about it.



Arriving at Kingston



Receiving news from Norway

One unexpected development from the walk was making contact with the Mayor of Fitjar in Norway. King Haakon the Good, a son of the first king of Norway and brother of Eric Bloodaxe, had been fostered as a child in King Athelstan's court. Haakon began the conversion of Norway to Christianity and is remembered for lawmaking and good governance, based on Athelstan's teaching. He was killed in battle at Fitjar when attacked by sons of Eric, and is buried there. It's possible Malmesbury will form a partnership with Fitjar, but in any case I'm pleased to have learned of another thread in Athelstan's story.

Carnival has long been a highlight of the summer, and this year may well have broken all previous records for fundraising. This reflects a magnificent effort by the Carnival Committee and all the other volunteers that helped at events (full disclosure: I'm one of them). 2025 is likely to be remembered as the year of the wet Procession, but I hope we will also remember the great weather for Open Gardens in Abbey House Manor (thanks to Kim and Whit Hanks, The Old Bell, and all the musicians that entertained the crowds in this beautiful setting), the creative variety on display in Open Gardens (and delicious cakes), an excellent Scarecrow Trail, a thriving Petticoat Lane, the Jazz evening and the Silent Disco, the quizzes, and many other events. Carnival always needs more volunteers to help at events, and it's a great opportunity for busy people to do something for one day of the year, perhaps only for a few hours, and help spread the load more widely.

I hope this column has shone some light on some of the many volunteer-run groups in Malmesbury. The calendar can only be this busy if people support the organisers, and I encourage you to please step forward when requests go out, even just once a year.