



EAST GRINSTEAD TOWN COUNCIL

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EAST GRINSTEAD TOWN COUNCIL

ANNUAL TOWN MEETING

**Minutes of the Annual Town Meeting held at 6pm
on Tuesday 25th March 2025 in the Meridian Hall, East Court**

Present:

Cllr S Ody (Town Mayor)
Cllr J Belsey* (Deputy Town Mayor)
Cllr S Barnett
Cllr M Belsey*
Cllr H Farren
Cllr L Gibbs
Cllr I Gibson**
Cllr E Godwin
Cllr T Hughes
Cllr J Mockford*
Cllr A Peacock*
Cllr C Pond
Cllr S Reeves
Cllr R Whittaker"

*Town & District Councillor

**Town, District & County Councillor

District:

Cllr L Farren
Cllr D Sweatman

District & County:

Cllr J Dabell
Cllr J Russell

In attendance:

Mrs S Heynes (Town Clerk)

26 Members of Public

1 Welcome from the Mayor

Cllr Ody opened the meeting and welcomed all to the 2025 Annual Town Meeting.

This year there were two guest speakers; Jon Beardmore from the Bluebell Railway would talk about Railway 200 and plans to celebrate 200 years of modern railway, followed by the inspirational James Cooper who would talk about his incredible marathon challenge last year.

Finally there would be an open forum to ask questions regarding any town matters.

2 To confirm the minutes of the 2024 Annual Town Council Meeting

It was resolved to approve the minutes of the meeting held on 26th March 2024.

3 Mayor's Update and Business Plan

Cllr Ody expressed his thanks to Councillors for their work over the last year on both committee and community matters. He also thanked the team at East Court and the Library for their hard work, and welcomed the new Town Clerk Sam Heynes to her first Annual Town Meeting in East Grinstead.

A presentation of the newly formed business plan outlining Council objectives for the coming 2 years was made, followed by a short update on Devolution (attached).

Further updates regarding immediate Council priorities was provided:

- **Banking** – With the imminent loss of High Street banking facilities in the town, Cash Access UK had been in contact to advise they were looking at opening a banking hub in East Grinstead. This would take an estimated 12 months to launch, more details would be shared as and when available
- **Mount Noddy** – Council had agreed to purchase and install columbaria at Mount Noddy cemetery to extend our ashes interment provision by several years, whilst we continued to explore further options for future burial provision within the town.
- **Bee Friendly** – The Council was applying to become a Bee Friendly town. This criteria for this was actively working to protect and promote pollinators, like bees, through initiatives that supported their habitats and food sources by encouraging habitat creation and preservation, planting bee friendly plants and encouraging community engagement.
- **Queens Road Cemetery** had been a tricky project over the years, becoming impossible to manage due to the terrain and restricted access to the site. Thinking laterally, Council had agreed to partition the lower section and arrange to have goats installed on the plot to reduce the level of vegetation in the cemetery.
The safety of the upper section would be investigated as the boundary wall had become increasingly unsafe over the years. Once resolved, options to make this an accessible peaceful green space within the town for people to sit and enjoy their quiet surroundings would be explored.
- **Youth Club** provision was going from strength to strength. Currently 2 groups meet on alternate weeks but plans were being explored to expand the club to those aged thirteen plus.
- **Outdoor Services** – Extensive maintenance work at East Court had been undertaken by the Outdoor Services team, including jet washing all the paved areas and walls, repainting the railings, re-sealing chimneys and roof areas where necessary, painting window frames and sheds and sanding and repointing the pillars of East Court.
- **Poppies** – 199 handmade poppies have been created by the team, one to commemorate each name listed on the War Memorial. These would be

displayed during this year's VE Day celebrations and around the War Memorial for Remembrance Sunday in November.

- **Railway 200** - a railway themed display would be installed within the town this summer, created by our exceptional handyman.

4 Bluebell Railway

Jon Beardmore presented the history of the Bluebell Railway and provided background for the Railway 200 celebrations in 2025.

The Bluebell Railway remains one of the greatest heritage railways in the world being lucky to have both Edwardian and Victorian locomotives and rolling stock, alongside new engines that had been built from scratch over the years which were all running along the line today.

Lots of film projects were completed there, including Horsted Keynes being the Downton Abbey train station, and Blitz (2024 film) also heavily featured the Bluebell Railway. With three 1920s Pullman carriage shortly to be featured on an upcoming TV show, people were encouraged to go and visit this living piece of history on our doorstep.

One of the largest tourist attractions in Sussex, regularly hosting large events the Bluebell Railway welcomes volunteers from all walks of life – not everything is about running the trains. The Golden Arrow, a dining service for both lunch or evening meals, also runs regularly from Sheffield Park, however they would be willing to explore options of running this service from East Grinstead instead if this was more convenient for local residents, so please do get in touch if you would be interested in this.

This year would be the 200 year anniversary of the opening of the Stockton to Derby railway line, the first passenger railway. This changed the world, as without public railways we would not have had the industrial revolution; even standardised time was introduced through the timing of train services around the world.

This was an opportunity to include the community in celebrating this incredible anniversary, with large school engagement throughout the summer months, free train travel tickets being donated as well as a large National Lottery grant to support the celebrations. There would be opportunities to learn about the history of the railways, future careers opportunities and railway safety. A public exhibition to celebrate the railways would be open throughout the summer holidays.

Finally, they were looking to create a digital visitors guide to explain the railway to visitors, with approx. 130k people who visit the railway annually this was a great opportunity to become a sponsor and reach a large section of the community.

Thanks and appreciation were expressed to Jon for his fascinating gallop through the history of the Bluebell Railway.

5 Freedom of the Town

Cllr Ody introduced James Cooper, who had completed 366 marathons in 2024, one every single day of the year. Done to raise awareness of mental health issues and of

the valuable service provided by the Samaritans, James's inspiring journey had started in 2014 and led to the creation of Smilinggg, whose mission was 'to build healthier and happier lives, one step and one smile at a time'.

East Grinstead wanted to honour James's achievements by awarding him the Freedom of the Town of East Grinstead. This honour was reserved for individuals who had rendered eminent services to the community, and James exemplified this through his selflessness and commitment. His journey not only raised funds but also sparked conversations about mental health, inspiring many to seek help and support.

Congratulations James Cooper, the Town Council is honoured to bestow the Freedom of the Town. May your story continue to inspire, and may your steps lead others toward hope and resilience.

6 James Cooper

James Cooper introduced himself by explaining that other than running marathons every day for a year, he was also a personal trainer, meditation teacher and mental health advocate. For the last 10 years he had been setting himself a challenge each year, with last year being the daily marathon year! His overall aim was to build healthier and happier lives one step at a time.

A few stats shared: a marathon a day was the equivalent of running from the UK to Australia! 99% of the challenge took place on the Forest and Worth Way, chosen because they are reasonably flat. Even so, James managed to cover the equivalent of 11 Mount Everest climbs. Each pair of shoes lasted roughly 500 miles.

A total of £162,028 had been raised for the Samaritans throughout the challenge – to date.

James explained how for 10 months all he could focus on was putting one step after another, he couldn't think about the future beyond that. Towards the end of 2024 he started to ponder the final run and how it wanted to approach this, and decided to run the first half of the marathon alone, with the second half inviting others to join him.

On learning of his challenge many people believed he was crazy, but some people asked why, which James shared with the room.

Why was to raise as much money as possible for the Samaritans, but also to talk about what they do, raising awareness of suicide and mental health. The initial target was to raise £703k, one pound for every person who died last year. Whilst this was not achieved, James believes setting such a high target is what drove his total funds raised so high, as he continued to push himself to raise as much as possible. Had the target been lower, he may have eased off and not achieved as much as he did.

James also explained the reason for the 3 'g's in Smilinggg. 2014-2015 was a difficult year, and being unaware of the service of the Samaritans at the time he turned to google for advice. As a result,

- G – gratitude, even in the hardest of times there is some good to find.
- G – generosity, the simple act of smiling at a stranger can make someone's day.
- Growth – have a belief that things can improve, we can always make things better.

Choosing voluntary adversity takes you to a new place to help cultivate resilience, discipline, mental fortitude and pride. If you put the work in, life is worth it.

During his challenge James explained how his whys made the lows bearable.

The lows – with a notion of enjoying the good days and enduring the bad days, the bedding in phase at the beginning led to sleepless nights worrying about coping with the challenge. One of the key lessons learned was to adapt, that not every step had to be run. Stomach bugs and colds, bad weather with awful rain and even hailstones all created difficult circumstances and some days James just didn't want to do it, but carried on with his goals in mind.

The highs – glorious sunrises, the fundraising, seeing the money increasing with new donations, but most important was the East Grinstead community. A couple of months in, every Sunday at 8am fellow walkers/runners would join for a 5k or 10k run. Jim, Chairman of EG Runners was fully supportive of his efforts and had organised run leaders to provide support. This grew and grew over the 12 months, until the final community run had over 200 people join in. For James, this meant that it mattered, providing hope and inspiration, motivation, spirit and belief. These events still continue today, an incredible legacy.

Jim joined James to explain it was obvious to him to reach out and offer whatever support they could from the running club. It was an incredible challenge, through the course of the past year Jim learned how much it meant to James to complete this, making it easier and easier to support him each month with the community turning up. The true impact of this fundraising will never be known, but the Samaritans do an incredible job and Jim feels sure this money has helped save at least one life.

The inspiration this gave to others to get up and do their runs, the positivity James's achievements has created has led to members of the running club running more than ever before.

Lessons Learned – James's 6 key lessons learned on his journey:

1. We are all capable of so much more than we imagine.
2. "And, when you want something, all the universe conspires in helping you achieve it" Paulo Coelho.
3. Putting one foot in front of the other, no matter how insignificant it seems, creates a forward motion which is progress.
4. This too shall pass – a mantra James held close to him throughout the year, remembering that nothing is permanent.
5. Sleep is a superpower; James would go to bed with a low mood, but a good night's sleep changed everything.
6. Find joy in the process, whatever that looks like for you, whether talking to squirrels or enjoying a sunrise.

One step, one mile at a time, anything is possible.

Cllr Ody thanked James for his moving account of 2024 and invited the audience to

7 Public Questions

Did you consider making one of your marathons the London marathon?

Logistically last year wasn't possible, but this year the Samaritans has given James a place and so this will enable a final push for the fundraising to be made.

What were the times for the marathons?

The times achieved for each marathon varied between just over 4 hours and just over 6 hours.

Were there plans to re-open Kingscote station?

Kingscote was open, West Hoathly station was not currently open and the buildings had been demolished. This station may re-open one day but was not a priority especially as the location was within a residential area.

How has the adjustment to not running a daily marathon been?

January 1st was awful weather, and James was so grateful not to have to go out and run that morning! Initially the publicity required created a high which lasted approx. 3 weeks, and since then there has been a few days which have felt a bit flat and weird. James was still running and doing this consistently, although he was pleased not to be running as much as a marathon every day!

Sometimes it does feel a bit empty, but for the most part it has been a positive transition back to normal life.

Were there plans to extending the branch line to Haywards Heath?

COVID had quite a large hit on passenger numbers and then the invasion of Ukraine sent fuel costs much higher. This had changed the dynamics over the past 10 years and the financial resource was not in place to complete the extension at this time.

As there were no further questions the Town Mayor thanked all for their attendance, invited everyone to stay for coffee and closed the meeting at 7.20pm.