

Mayor's of Malmesbury's Newsletter

April 2026

We all knew Malmesbury is a tremendous place to live, and thanks to the Sunday Times everyone now knows it's the Best Place to Live in the South West. This has been featured by the media extensively, including ITV News South West, BBC Wiltshire, and local and national press. While some of the criteria for the accolade, such as transport links and house prices, are not within our gift, the busy High Street, the rich and diverse range of social activities, groups and clubs, the strength of community and general friendliness of Malmesbury have been applauded both in the Sunday Times' article and other reports. I think this reflects very well indeed on all the people that make an effort to support others, individually or as part of a group, whether as a volunteer, in commerce, in local government and administration, or in hospitality. I hope the lucky few that appeared on TV, radio or in print enjoyed their moment of fame, and I know there were many more who could have conveyed why Malmesbury is best, had they had an opportunity. Following on shortly after this success was the news that The Three Cups has been voted Best Pub in the region by members of the Campaign for Real Ale. Congratulations!

I mentioned at the end of my last newsletter that Malmesbury Town Council, together with St. Paul Malmesbury Without Parish Council, the Malmesbury League of Friends, Malmesbury River Valleys Trust, and Malmesbury Civic Trust had agreed the purchase of the land around Daniel's Well. At the time of writing, the legal work to complete the transfer continues, and the Council has begun work to have the damage around the clapper bridge repaired, together with other urgent priorities. In the longer term it is intended to increase biodiversity of the plants and animals on the land, and improve access throughout the year. It is intended to form a new team of volunteers to help manage the area once the purchase is complete.

I have been pleased to see the progress of the Malmesbury Community Park project in recent months. This will provide a skate park and a pump track in part of the White Lion Park recreation area, and ultimately a multi-use games area too. Malmesbury Town Council is working with Malmesbury Community Park, which is a registered charity. Following an invitation to tender, we hosted site visits by companies interested in the work, and since then their bids have been assessed and preferred contractors identified. This is a really exciting project that will provide first-class facilities for young people in Malmesbury. There are still many steps to complete before building begins, including getting planning consent and further consultation with potential users and residents. I hope you will find this project as worthy of your support as I do.

I explained in my autumn newsletter that there is a link between Fitjar in Norway and Malmesbury, because King Håkon the Good of Norway was fostered as a child in King Athelstan's court. We have now made a formal Friendship Agreement with Fitjar Municipality, which should promote academic, cultural and tourist links between Malmesbury and Fitjar. Håkon is buried in Fitjar, and Athelstan chose to be buried in Malmesbury because of his links to St Aldhelm, one of the first Abbots of the Abbey. Since discovering the basic facts of this connection during the walk to Kingston upon Thames to celebrate the 1100th anniversary of King Athelstan's coronation last year, much more information has emerged. Håkon is celebrated for pioneering the introduction of Christianity in Norway, and also for introducing basic concepts of justice, both of which he learned in Athelstan's court. He defeated his older brother, Eric Bloodaxe, politically, and then won 3 battles against Eric's sons before being killed in a fourth. His mother, Tora Mosterstong, was from a nearby settlement where she is commemorated in an annual award for independent women. Athelstan is a well known as Queen Victoria or King Henry VIII in Norway, with every child being taught King Håkon's story. It seems that the history of Anglo-Saxons and Vikings is much more complex than most of us realised.



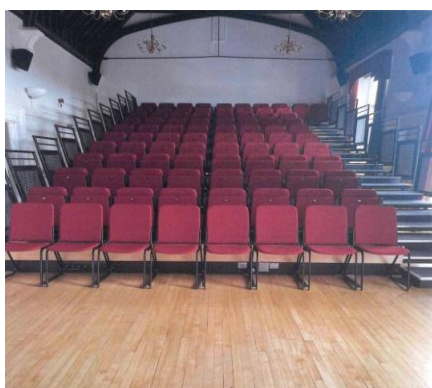
Signing Friendship Agreement with Fitjar

Over the winter a dedicated group of volunteers braved the frequently wet weather to develop a detailed contribution to the Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan, or LCWIP. Wiltshire Council is developing these plans to promote cycling and walking, and make life easier for those using buggies or wheelchairs too. One obvious example of the benefits of this is journeys to and from school: if obstacles to people walking or cycling to school are removed to that they can do that safely instead of being dropped off and picked up by car, the amount of car traffic will be reduced and the students will benefit from having more active lifestyles. The group produced a detailed and well thought out response to the original draft from Wiltshire Council, which then issued a revised draft plan for public consultation. It was rather frustrating that the mechanism for making comments was unwieldy and time-consuming, but once again the volunteers stepped in, providing advice and encouragement about how to make comments. This will be an important plan as it should “unlock” funding from central Government to make improvements. We are waiting for the results of the public consultation, in the form of a revised plan, but I hope that it not only identifies “quick wins” – short-term improvements that have big benefits, but also maps out long term strategies so that new developments are properly joined up to existing infrastructure for walkers and cyclists, avoiding gaps like the one between Reeds Farm and Avenue de Gien. I am very grateful to this

group led by Keith Freegard for their work, which has been a great support to the Council's Planning and Environment Committee, and to the whole community.

Several residents have approached me about increasing the extent of roads limited to 20 mph. Narrow sections of road and narrow pavements are common in the older parts of town, and pavements become unusable for anyone pushing a buggy on a bin collection day. Elsewhere in town road widths are reduced by parked cars. There is strong evidence that 20 mph limits reduce the risks associated with these problems, but there are legal requirements for public consultation before changes can be made, with associated costs. Speed limits are the responsibility of Wiltshire Council, and funding is now available for such consultation in the financial year that has just begun. I'm not aware of any specific plans that Wiltshire Council has developed for Malmesbury, but it's important that anyone that wishes to contribute their views does so in any public consultation.

The period between Christmas and Spring is often thought to be relatively quiet, although I haven't noticed much difference, with opportunities for me to visit and support groups and organisations in the community still coming up regularly. I particularly enjoyed speaking to the annual gathering of the volunteers that support Movies@Malmesbury, partly because of the great success that our cinema within the Town Hall has grown into, but also because I am also a volunteer there myself. The numbers attending the films and theatrical productions has continued to grow every year, and this is clearly an important asset for the community. I'd like to emphasise the incredible value of the live streams of plays, ballets and operas, where the ticket price is a tiny fraction of the cost of seeing the performance in person in London, let alone the cost of travel and an overnight stay. The live performances in the evening are recorded and shown as matinees for those who prefer an afternoon show. Incidentally there are currently vacancies for both projectionists and front of house so get in touch through the Town Hall if you are interested.



Seating in our Cinema

I also had a very useful visit to the James Dyson Foundation to discuss their work and Sir James' continuing support for many things in Malmesbury. The presence of Dyson's main R&D facility, the Dyson Institute which runs the graduate apprenticeships, as well as the Foundation all contribute to the town in many ways beyond the simple (and vital) economics of being the major employer. Being located in the Best Place to Live in the South West might help Dyson recruit top talent, and we mustn't overlook how the presence of Dyson helps us have such a great town.

I am grateful for those that supported the Mayor's Charity Curry Buffet in the Rajah restaurant in March. Everyone I spoke to enjoyed themselves, with a variety of curries available to suit all tastes and dietary preferences. The staff of the Rajah worked hard to keep everything (and everyone) topped up, although (not unreasonably, in my view) drew a line when a diner asked to extend the all-you-can-eat offer with a takeaway! Thanks to the Rajah and the volunteers on the door the event raised over £1050 for the Mayor's Charities, HEALS of Malmesbury and the Malmesbury and District Foodbank.



With the Rajah Team

Those of you that keep track of civic matters will know that this is my last newsletter as my term as Mayor will end next month. It has been an outstanding experience, with so many opportunities to meet people and learn more about our community. Records show that I have had 148 extra engagements the year, over and above those that I would normally have as a member of the Council. I look forward to spending some of this time trying to restore my neglected garden! None of the work of the Mayor would be possible without the support and help of the Council Staff, my fellow councillors, and the marvellous team of volunteers that have supported my fundraising efforts for the Mayoral Charities. Any successes attributed to me are more theirs to savour, any failures are mine.



Councillor Stephen James, Mayor of Malmesbury