

**The Othona Community Annual General Meeting
17th September 2011 at St Andrews Church, Waterloo.**

Present: approximately 70 members and friends of the Community

MINUTES

1. **Opening Prayer, welcome, opening remarks:** Sheila Maxey, chair of trustees, welcomed everyone to the meeting. Apologies were received from Lesley Stevas, Vera Higginson, Julie Walker, Edmund Booth, Graham Cox, Sue Whorton, Jacky Clarke, Jean Wyatt, Steve Barnes, Ann Potts, Pat Price-Tomes, Jan De Vulder, Margaret Lydamore, Martin and Roxanne Gingell, Clare Stone, Stephen and Valerie Ashcroft, Sue Fairweather, Mario and Eleanor Mannoukas, Portia, Aurora and Jacob Froggatt, Paul, Tina and Mike Seckleman, Peter Baird, Kym Winter, Roger Noble, Janet Dewick, Carole Atkins. Sheila gave special apologies from Tony Jaques.
2. **Sheila lit a candle in the Circle of Friends to open the meeting.** The meeting was punctuated at intervals by the singing of the Taize chant 'Ubi caritas et amor, ubi caritas, Deus ibi est'.

Sheila also reminded the meeting of the Guidelines for the 2010 and Beyond Process: * Be present * Communicate with respect * Keep the good of the whole of Othona at the forefront of your mind and heart.

Jan Marshall read a piece on the history and ethos of Othona from the Perpetual Full Circle.

3. **Business Meeting.** The minutes were agreed and signed.
 - The Trustees en bloc proposed the re-election of Steve Mortimer as Treasurer, seconded by Steve James, Ruth Bull as Community Secretary, seconded by Cathrin Jones and Tiffin Green as Auditors, seconded by Brenda Motley.. The meeting voted in favour of all three.
 - Sheila reported that the Annual Report and Accounts had been approved by the Trustees. There was support from the floor for this document to be signed and sent to the Charity Commissioners. It has been placed on the website.
 - Elections. Ruth reported on the outcome of the election process. There was no ballot required. BB members are Elizabeth Sayers, Julie Walker, Harry Titley, Carole Atkins, Jan De Vulder and Lindy Brett. Bradwell has Chris Jones, Rosie Sinden-Evans, Dave Bull, Ann Froggatt, Jonney Aldridge and Linda Clover.
 - Update on the Sale of the Farm. Rupert Bragg, as finance trustee, reported that the sale of the farm had been completed and the proceeds had now been invested, generating more income for the community. Questions from the floor included the level of interest expected - £40,000: what the farm rent had been - £23,000: who are the investment Brokers – Epworth Financial Management who grew out of the Methodist Church and are ethical investors: what are their fees – 1.8-2% from all parties involved. Are bed nights up at both centres - yes.
 - Sheila drew attention to the membership report printed on the back of the Agenda.
 - Sheila expressed special thanks to members without whose work 'behind the scenes' Othona would not function as it does – Stephen Mortimer, (Treasurer), Ruth & Paul Gilman (Full Circle editors), Christine Cox (membership secretary) and Julian Clover for his work on Othona's insurance. She also expressed special thanks to Phil Melling who had had to resign from the Trustees due to ill health and pressure of work. He will be greatly missed. Sheila also thanked the rest of the Trustees for their work.

4. **Centre Reports:** Monica King from Burton Bradstock and Gail Dell from Bradwell treated us to photo presentations of the year at the centres
5. **Report on the Summer of Discussion.** Sheila took us back to the beginning of the 2010 and Beyond process and explained exactly how the BB collaborative Group proposal had come about within that framework. She reported on the results of the consultation and the feedback which had been received and explained the next steps which would lead to decisions in January 2012 about the way forward. Sheila's speech is appended at Appendix 1.
6. **Open Space.** Fran Jones led a session called Open Space where questions were posed by members from the floor and discussion groups were formed around them. The discussions were recorded by those asking the question. Notes from those groups are appended at Appendix 2.
7. **Worship:** Sheila brought together some symbols of the community from both centres – the Bradwell bell, The Burton Bradstock Gong, the Circle of Friends used at both centres and the Cross of Nails from Coventry Cathedral which was gifted to Norman Motley. Using these as a focus we offered prayers for the wider world and for Othona. This was followed by singing 'Ubi caritas' once more and by joining hands for the saying of the Grace together.

This concluded the meeting which was followed by bring and share refreshments and conversation.

(Signed)

(Date)

Appendix 1

The 2011 Annual General Meeting of the Othona Community 17 September The text of a presentation made by Sheila Maxey, Chair of Trustees, on the *Othona 2010: taking stock and moving forward* process and, in particular, on the Community-wide consultation on a proposal from the Burton Bradstock Collaborative Group entitled *Evolving Othona*.

Firstly, a big thank you for all the responses – such a marvellous indication that the Othona Community is alive and kicking.

I want to put this summer discussion/consultation in its proper context – as part of, and only part of, the process the trustees initiated in 2009 called *Othona 2010: taking stock and moving forward*. So let me take you through this process which has involved all the members to some extent and a small number to a much greater extent. The Trustees have made every attempt to make it a transparent process through articles in *Full Circle*, through email reports after trustees' meetings and through inviting not only the wardens but also the chairs of the centre committees to all trustee meetings. However, it is still worth reminding ourselves of the various stages along the way.

Where did the *Othona 2010: taking stock and moving forward* process come from?

- **Summer 2009** – the Trustees became convinced that some clarity about our shared purpose plus good, loving relationships right across the whole Community were the bottom line without which Othona would not, in the long term, survive. So we engaged Sharon Usher, a professional facilitator with long community experience, to help us from time to time to see if we still had a shared purpose, and to help us see, accept and begin to untangle the web of mistaken assumptions and past hurts which creep into any system, any community. Sharon attended the 2009 AGM.
- **Christmas 2009/New Year 2010** Sharon offered us all some questions for contemplation:
 1. What is Othona's unique purpose in the 21st century?
 2. Whom does Othona serve?(still a good question as some people seem to think it is only here to serve its members)
 3. How would things be if all were well with Othona? (a question to help us dream)

January 2010 – an intense weekend at BB facilitated by Sharon, with 6 representatives from each centre, the Community Secretary and all the Trustees. We began by agreeing the following guidelines for our engagement with one another – and we have tried to follow them ever since.

1. **Be present** – stay with difficult issues and don't walk away from them.
2. **Communicate with respect** – using 'I' statements and listening especially carefully to views with which you do not agree. (A few of this summer's responses quoted, unhelpfully, what 'a friend' or 'other people' said about the other centre when the writer had no personal experience to relate)
3. **Keep the good of the whole of Othona at the front of your heart and mind.** (An example of this in this summer's responses was the one from a BB person who supported the proposal provided Bradwell was happy with it.)

During the honest talking of that weekend, some from BB wanted the question of separation of the two centres to be openly on the agenda and not just 'the elephant in the room'. However, at that point, the Trustees ruled that we were first committing the Community to a period of exploration of how to move forward together and that the trustees would not consider putting separation on the agenda before January 2012. (this has been a living process and timetables and expectations have had to be regularly reviewed and sometimes changed)

The main outcomes of that weekend were that the centres clearly needed/wanted different things from the Trustees: BB wanted more autonomy and Bradwell wanted more support.

The Trustees committed themselves to trying to be more flexible and find ways of moving away from a one-size fits all way of working.

* **June 2010** - the BB Collaborative Group was set up as part of this new way of working. It consisted of 4 trustees and 4 BB people, including the Warden and its remit was to undertake strategic planning for BB. It was thought, at the time, that the group might, in the first instance, major on the distinctive BB incarnation of Othona's mission, marketing, staffing levels, building improvements and funding options. In fact the group spent some time on the place of Christianity in BB's life and mission.

September 2010 AGM the 60 members present fed into the process of taking stock and moving forward by having group discussion under the following three headings:

1. **Share a moment or encounter from the past year which captured the essence of Othona at its best for you.**
2. **What about Othona do you cherish and don't want to lose?**
3. **What is happening in the world outside that is calling for Othona to evolve and adapt.**

The fruits of the discussions were written up and shared among the Trustees.

November 2010 the trustees met at Bradwell to concentrate solely on that centre – another example of the new flexible way of working. It was a busy working weekend and a committee weekend. Sharon Usher was again asked to help us. She worked with the Trustees, the committee and the many other members present to help build up confidence and try to establish what was both needed and wanted. One result was the formation, in the new year, of a **Bradwell Staffing Group** with 4 trustees and 4 Bradwell people on it, including the Warden.

January 2011 – another intense weekend facilitated by Sharon, held at Bradwell.

The untangling of the web of misunderstandings and mistaken assumptions focussed this time on the place of Christianity and on how power is exercised and by whom. One outcome was the realisation that there was much more common ground on the place of Christianity than had been thought by some. Another outcome was that, in **April, the Bradwell Committee** had a special meeting to look at that question and also at the remit and authority of the committee in relation to both the Warden and the trustees. (It was interesting that the place of Christianity as a cause of division between the centres was not much mentioned in this summer's responses, but many respondents, especially from BB, said how important the Christian basis of Othona was for them)

* **June 2011** The BB Collaborative Group's deliberations on strategy for the future of BB had led them to consider separation or at least more autonomy than under the present constitution as a desirable way forward. The original timetable had been for the BB Collaborative Group to bring their conclusions on that (and anything else) to a meeting with the trustees on 23rd November 2011 so that the fruits of that meeting could be fed into the January 2012 weekend, when it was hoped the process would wind up with some clear decisions about the way to move forward. It now seemed a bad idea to allow the group to do detailed work on a proposal which might never get wider support. The Trustees realised the time had come to have a wide ranging Community consultation triggered by the Collaborative Group's draft proposal.

So the BB Collaborative group was asked to put their proposals, unfinished as they were, on paper for circulation to the whole Community with the summer weeks giving time for discussion at meetings or sending responses to me for passing on to the rest of the trustees. The Trustees had thought the group might put the case for several ways forward but when they met to work on their proposals they found themselves, to their surprise, agreed around the one proposal – which was then mailed to all members. Sue Fairweather set up a

Facebook page for comment or discussion. 77 people have contributed to that, mostly but by no means all, people who mainly go to Bradwell.

The Community responses

In one way, it was a really heartening experience to read the 145 responses because so many spoke of how important, healing, life-changing Othona (whether BB or Bradwell) had been and still was in their lives. It was clear that the Othona Community was doing its job and that we were not in crisis. In fact we would not be engaging in this reflective, challenging process if we were not in a good place – and therefore ready to step out into God's future.

A wonderful level of responses – 145 individual responses, plus reports from the meetings held at each centre. 30 were from people who only go to Bradwell: 65 from people who only go to BB: 50 from people who go (or have gone) to both.

The Trustees had suggested the following questions to try to get more than a bald 'for' or 'against' out of members:

1. What interests/excites you in this proposal and what benefits do you see in it?
2. Have you an alternative proposal, or a modification of this one?
3. What concerns do you have? What risks do you see?
4. What would need to happen for you to be somewhat reassured?
5. What further information would you like to see?

The numbers. If it were just a matter of for/against that particular proposal the Community would perhaps be in trouble because the total responses were 63 'for', 66 'against' and 16 'neutral'. Responses from those who only know Bradwell were 27 against and 2 for and 1 neutral. Responses from those who only know BB were 51 for, 5 against and 9 neutral. Responses from those who know both centres were 34 against, 10 for and 6 neutral. The numbers are, of course, interesting and say something, but by no means everything. For one thing many responses qualified or explained their position and so their support or their opposition was not just a simple matter. They point us beyond the initial BB Collaborative Group proposal to a range of possible good and fruitful ways forward. Remember our process is called 'taking stock and **moving forward**'

Moving forward must engage with the following issues raised in the responses.

Among the many who supported the idea of a Federation there was a wide range of understanding of what that might mean in practice. One respondent commented 'I thought that was how things were already'. Many just wanted to ease the frustrations of people they admired who ran a centre they loved.

Among those who opposed the idea of a Federation quite a number did not take seriously the various frustrations deeply felt by those who are at the heart of BB – which was a pity. However, some of those who did take them seriously offered a range of thoughtful alternative ways in which they could be tackled within one charity – some suggested within our present constitution and some believed we needed a new one. The Trustees will, of course, give these serious consideration.

The very different ways in which the two centres live out the Othona vision was seen by some as complementary and one of the good things about Othona, but by others as a reason for a looser formal connection such as a federation. And even among those who wanted us to remain as one charity, some thought the way forward was to increase the links (even suggesting compulsory time for core staff at the other centre) while others saw the way forward as accepting the reality that most visitors/members only visit one centre and that is OK.

Another issue raised was how different in practical ways can the two centres be and still be true, in the 21st century, to the Othona vision and remain within the one charity? Can each centre have its own membership list/data base? Understand membership/belonging in a quite different way? How free is each to honour 'work, worship, study and play' in its own particular way? The key seems mutual respect, which in some responses was in short supply.

There were interesting comments (and differences of opinion) in some responses about where authority lies – between the members, the Trustees, the centre committees, the wardens, the core. These flag up an important area which needs careful attention. And the situation is different in the two centres so how can one constitution deal with that?

Behind all the above is an important question about mutual respect – which, from some of the responses it is clear is missing. In fact bad personal relationships, apparently concentrated on individuals but sometimes spilling over to a kind of blanket dislike/despising/indifference/perhaps fear of the other centre – even if often covered over by distance and politeness – are the most serious matter to surface through this summer consultation process. It has also been something we have tried to work on through the January weekends. The responses had differing views on what to do about it. Some found it too painful (one calls it toxic) and felt it was the real reason for separation – and the best reason. They write that it had gone on for years and we now have to give up on trying to hold together. Some made scapegoats of particular individuals and believed if they were not there all would be fine. But others (many others) believed both separation and the casting out of particular people would be a failure of what Othona is all about – it was, after all, founded to reconcile old enemies.

Having so recently sold East Hall Farm (against the Bradwell committee's wishes) and invested the money the responses showed how raw that whole area still was. Trustees are aware of that but it is also good to have the reminder.

Not to be forgotten in all the nitty-gritty of the above, is the huge appreciation of both centres which comes through all the responses – how important they have been and are in the lives of so many people, bringing healing, giving hope, affirming value, offering acceptance and friendship.

Where do we go from here?

Throughout this process of taking stock and moving forward various groupings of people have played their part – their appropriate part. So at certain times all the members have been asked to reflect, or to discuss, or to give their views. At other times it has been groups at the two centres who have discussed or suggested ways forward. The January weekends have been and will continue to be critically important in charting the way forward. But in the end of the day, having consulted and reflected and taken professional advice when necessary, it is the Trustees' role to take constitutional decisions.

So, after this meeting, it is the Trustees who will go away with all this material, and the BB Collaborative proposal, and explore next steps – perhaps take some professional advice on the various possible constitutional changes, and on how to continue to work on healing relationships. They will meet for a day in November to work on all this – and again on an evening in early January.

Then – at the weekend at the end of January - the Trustees and representatives from each centre, with our facilitator, Sharon, will meet to take some decisions on the best ways to move forward.

There will be no further community-wide consultation as part of this process. Perhaps, in 5 years' time, when the Community again needs to take stock about how to move forward, the then Trustees will want another such consultation. I believe this was the first of its kind.

Meanwhile, the life of Othona goes on (in many ways the much more important work of Othona) – and all of us have our part to play in that. Some of you work full time at the centres and the rest of us owe you such a lot for your dedication and love: some of us serve on committees or task teams or as trustees, and/or volunteer our labour without which Othona could not carry on. Some of us visit and take part in the programmes and all of us, I hope, promote Othona among those who have not yet discovered it and try to live the Othona kind of life in our daily living.

Sheila Maxey
17th September 2011

Appendix 2

AGM 2011: Open Space conversation notes

Why does it matter if we are two autonomous communities provide we are faithful to what we believe and the Trust Deed?

Practical reasons

Cost more:

If one crashes, the other should help

It would cost to set up two Trust Deeds

More fragile if smaller

Splitting because of differences is not the spirit of Othona

Some of us don't know what the grievances are from BB

Want more control over how they run things

"It started at Bradwell"

Differences in whether we have morning and evening services and Dedication service between two centres

Regret that combined committees stopped

If we can't be reconciled with one another how can we be a 'reconciliation community'

Are there measures which Bradwell and BB centres could take to reduce differences / increase good communication / unity?

Overall database, accounts and admin are problems not reasons for separation

There may be a way through

Misunderstanding has existed for more than sixteen years

If staff at one centre worked for a week at the other centres, in 1970s this was the rule

Need to have combined meetings. Disbanded but was pointed out that without combined meetings Othona would lose sense of community

Joint meetings have been replaced by conflict management

Have combined fellowship meetings to get to know each other

If the two centres can't get on they should split and perhaps something new can grow from them

What is "past stuff" and what is "present stuff"? We can we put the past behind us and move on?

If the Guardians are drawn from the centres won't this exacerbate divisions – How can they represent overriding "Othona DNA"

What do Burton Bradstock want to do that they can't do now? Not clear from the Report.

Do we need to limit the time people work for us or serve on committees?

There are problems that can occur – new people bring fresh ideas, fresh approaches
Time limits:
House Committees is six years and then one year off
Trustees five years
Current constitution doesn't allow for elected trustees – could be good or bad

What is wrong with the current structure that can only be fixed by separation or federation?

The sense of empowerment and self-government is necessary to attain the feeling of having fully matured. Relationship to the Trustees feels like a parental one.
We can't pretend we are a happy family when the identity of the two centres has been of diverging and will continue to do so. We need to change the structure to reflect this reality. There is a sense of being held back.
Don't see much significant difference in the centres.
What is the atmosphere? This is the key.
BB has evolved to be a distinct centre with common elements, served by people in the West Country. The sense of autonomy is already there. Collaborative Group is trying hard to find a third way.
The problem is not specific problems but having to seek approval from Trustees which is keeping BB in the psychological state of infancy.
Collaborative group could be good for Bradwell.

**How difficult is it to find Trustees with the knowledge of both centres?
How much better would it be if each centre had a locally focused governing body?**

Losing potential trustees
A lot (but how?)

If Othona us all about reconciliation what is required to overcome misunderstandings/misconceptions before reconciliation can take place? What is the lesson of South Africa, East Timor etc?

Festering a long time? Misunderstanding; not knowing what's going on at the other centre.
Healthy – productive/creative tension? Suspicious? Can we celebrate our differences?
Fear...something irrational....Pain
Money raised by each centre for itself – from central assets – Largesse.
Out in the open....combined committees...Nice
Truth
Diversity the richness – a community
A lot of taking on responsibility
Honesty, transparency, humility

Are the differences based on philosophy or personality?

Scapegoating – based on fallacy.
Kind challenge – don't have to agree
Much shared philosophy and purpose
Source of difficulty lies in history
Committees are now more separate – structure has changed – joint meetings were too painful

Voice of new  Tension between
Voice of older people

BB funded to be profitable

B funded to be at a loss ...but it hasn't always been like this

How professional do we want to be – or how community minded?

BB is seen more as exploring the edges of Christianity; B is just as open but in a less intellectual way

Scapegoating – very human tendency to load out difficulties onto one individual

Divisions are both personality and philosophy. Can rivalry be fun and friendly?

Differences of building and geography.