

WITNEY ANNUAL TOWN MEETING 2024

REPORT TO THE ANNUAL TOWN MEETING FROM THE MAYOR

Cllr Owen Collins

I have been privileged to serve as Mayor of my hometown for the 2023-24 Council year, and even though I have grown up, and lived the majority of my life, in Witney, one of the most exciting aspects of the past year has been the opportunity to meet people and organisations, and see great swathes of brilliant work, that I would otherwise never have crossed paths with.

This includes some of our fantastic local businesses, such as Moshon Data, a provider of Automated Driver Assistance Systems, which celebrated its 10th anniversary in 2023 and which has been genuinely leading the world in their market, all from a warehouse on Station Lane; Cloudkubed, experts in the digital transformation industry, who will officially open its brand new premises later this month; or The Crafty Pint, the latest terrific addition to Witney's magnificent pantheon of pubs.

When taking up the chain, I said that I wanted to represent Witney in its entirety, regardless of age, faith, ethnicity, ability, gender identity, or political persuasion. I hope that this commitment has been felt across the town, and looking back over the year it certainly feels like I have been lucky enough to meet members of our community from across every spectrum.

I was delighted to pay several visits to various facilities that support the more senior people of our town, from Millers Grange care home to Witney Community Support Service, which also does such wonderful work supporting those with dementia, and disabilities both learning and physical. Through these visits I have also got to know not just the staff and service users, but also many members of Witney's excellent Rotary Club, who have supported this, and many other great causes, across our town. A superb example of a service which supports our community, and receives support *from* the community in return.

At the other end of the age range, I've greatly enjoyed meeting children from many of our local primary schools, fielding some of the trickiest questions any councillor will ever face ("what happens if people don't like you – can they get rid of you?" being a particularly memorable one) and talking to the sixth form students at Henry Box on the vital importance of engaging in voting from the earliest opportunity, especially in this election year. At Christmas, I was also thrilled to attend the Wood Green School Christmas concert, and get a window into the jaw-dropping talent that the young people of Witney hold.

Suitably, for a town of blanket making heritage, Witney in 2024 is a beautifully woven mix of many different creeds and cultures. In July, I attended a joyful celebration of Eid organised by local resident Abdul Mubin on Springfield Oval, and was deeply moved to see the whole

neighbourhood come together to mark this holy day together – many, I am sure, for the first time. I was privileged to join members of Witney Congregational Church for the induction of their new minister, Reverend Brian Doyle, and of course I have greatly enjoyed working closely with Reverend Toby Wright, on such truly special events as the celebration of the 75th anniversary of the NHS in July, the Civic and Golden Gallopers services in September, the town's Remembrance Sunday commemorations in November, and the annual Mayor's carol service at Christmas. These events are made even more precious to me in hindsight, with the knowledge they were Toby's last as Rector of Witney. I'm sure I speak for all of us when I wish Toby, Sally and their family the very best of luck on their move to the beautiful city of Wells – Witney will miss them terribly.

Returning to the theme of annual events, I've had a ball sharing in so many of the wonderful events that make our town unique, such as helping to open Witney Pride, alongside the Deputy Mayor Cllr Georgia Meadows, and the Chair of WODC Cllr Andrew Coles; cutting the ribbon to officially open Witney in Pink, the now-legendary day of colour and fundraising organised by Jeanne Chattoe, and shaking buckets all day with our inimitable town crier Jean; and dancing through the sun and the rain throughout the glorious spectacle of Witney Music Festival, a jewel in Witney's crown that I am so proud that we partner, as the Town Council. To see the streets of Witney full and buzzing over that June weekend was an absolute joy, and to see people of all ages, from across our town and beyond, coming together in a celebration of music and culture.

That distinct cultural combination has continued indoors throughout the year, and I've greatly enjoyed exhibitions from Buttercross Quilters and Witney Photo Group, as well as plays and pantomimes from Witney Dramatic Society and Buttercross Theatre Productions, including catching the eye of the voluptuous Dame Edna Bucket...!

As Mayor, one (eventually) becomes used to being the focal point that comes with being First Citizen, but the obvious reality is that none of the above would've been possible without so many hundreds of people, from those true community champions that have organised so many exceptional events throughout the year, to the indefatigable team of officers at the Town Hall and Corn Exchange that have spent another year working tirelessly for the people of Witney. I would also like to thank my predecessor, Liz Duncan, for always being on hand with advice and wisdom, my Deputy, Georgia, for filling in for me at the drop of a hat on many an occasion, and my fellow Councillors, for their support throughout the year. Most of all, I would like to finish by thanking the people of Witney for their kindness, welcome and support throughout the year, for never failing to make me smile, inspire me, or take me by surprise, in the town I am prouder to call home than ever before.