

### The competitive streak of Northiam

In Northiam Parish Magazine, September 2021, the Conservation Society reported that a metal plaque concerning the 1966 Best Kept Village competition had been found in a garden in the village. The plaque is about 10cm by 8cm and has a definite curve, rather than being flat, as if originally attached to something round.

It was assumed that Northiam had won this competition, however this turned out not to be the case.



The winner, for East Sussex, in 1966 was Warminglid which received a wrought iron Sussex emblem sign on a "stout oak post". The post had a plaque on which the name of the village was inscribed. If anyone visits Warminglid, near Haywards Heath, now considered in West Sussex, it would be good to know whether the 1966 sign, post and plaque still exist - if so, please take photos. Warminglid has been a serial winner of the Best Kept Village competition over the years.

Second prize in East Sussex, a 10-guinea cheque and a certificate, was awarded to Forest Row.

The competition in Sussex was run by the Sussex Rural Community Council, aided by the *Kent & Sussex Courier*. In 1966, the newspaper decided to award its own prizes to their favourites in the competition - Northiam and Forest Row. It was said that the "standard of entry was so high that the judges had to make three visits to a number of villages in order to reach a final decision". The prize received by Northiam was a "handsome wrought iron litter basket". Perhaps Northiam was a close runner-up in the main competition - or perhaps the judges felt the village needed a litter bin!

Surprisingly, Northiam's entry into the Best Kept Village competition and the result were not reported in the parish magazine. Nor has any information yet come to light regarding where this 1966 litter bin was placed. However, it seems very likely that the curved plaque found recently was attached to it.

Although residents may have been down-hearted at the 1966 result, recent research shows that Northiamers should be proud of the role the village played in the very beginning of the competition - in fact, before it was even given that title.

Rural Community Councils were set up by volunteers in the aftermath of the First World War to promote, support and advise rural industries and communities. The Sussex Rural Community Council, established in 1931, now called Action in Rural Sussex, is based in Lewes. Its remit is to promote the interests of rural communities and campaign for a living, working countryside. In fact, a "Housing Needs Survey" produced by the organisation, with a covering letter from our own Parish Council, dropped into our letter boxes very recently.

By the 1950s, more services than ever before, such as health, social and financial support, were provided by central government. Sussex Rural Community Council was keen to know what effect the extension of the statutory services was having on village life, especially on volunteer organisations which supported their local communities. In 1954, as part of their investigation, the Council held the "Most Active Village" competition, with separate East and West Sussex categories.

In October 1954, Northiam won the first-ever Most Active Village competition for East Sussex. Graffham, near Petworth, won the West Sussex section and promptly challenged Northiam to a "penalty shootout" to determine the main Sussex winner! Did Northiam rise to the challenge? If so, what was the result? The runners up in East Sussex were Hartfield, Rushlake Green and Sedlescombe, which all got a certificates of merit.

The first prizes were either £5 cheques or incised plaques. Both Graffham and Northiam chose the plaques, which were of carved Sussex oak. Northiam's was displayed proudly in the Women's Institute Hall, behind Hayes farm, which was a social hub of the village. Crime struck in December 1956 when the plaque was stolen from the Hall, despite being "in a frame and wired to the wall". Appeals for its return proved fruitless and by 1957 a replica was put in its place. Can anyone now shed light on what happened to the original?

The Most Active Village competition was really part of survey which allowed local government to target their services and resources. It was not meant to be a regular competition. However, in 1958 it was rebranded as the Best Kept Village competition, focusing on tidiness and appearance (especially litter) rather than community activities. The Sussex Rural Community Council still ran it, but with support from local newspapers. The East and West Sussex competitions were divided into large and small village categories based on population (over/under 700 residents, raised later to 1,000 residents).

In 1962, Northiam won the East Sussex large village category, with Hartfield winning the small village section. Northiam Parish Council spent the £25 prize money on a wooden bench which was placed under the Elizabeth oak on the village green and the Best Kept Village certificate was displayed in the Post Office. The *Kent & Sussex Courier* also awarded Northiam one of its ubiquitous "handsome wrought iron litter baskets" which apparently was placed outside Thornton House, Dixter Road, opposite the Post Office and Edwards Stores.

After 1962, Northiam never again won the competition, but was awarded several Certificates of Merit. These are displayed in the Parish Office, along with the replica 1954 Most Active Village plaque of carved oak.