



THE HISTORY OF THE WILTSHIRE BEST KEPT VILLAGE COMPETITION

The *Wiltshire Branch of the Campaign to Protect Rural England* organised and ran the first Best Kept Village competition in 1959. The idea was initially proposed in 1952 by the then Secretary of the Branch, Miss Wardale but it took her seven years to persuade the then Executive Committee to run the competition.

In 1955 the *Wiltshire Gazette and Herald* approached John Betjeman to ask him to support the idea of a Best Kept Village Competition in the County. He, however, preferred to support the scheme through CPRE. The newspaper also suggested that the District Councils should become involved in the first round of judging – a suggestion that CPRE agreed to willingly. The District Councils continued in this role until they were disbanded in 2009.

Other ideas put forward included the possibility of demonstrations of folk dancing and singing taking part at the award ceremonies. In fact, on a number of occasions a winning village has arranged for its local band to perform at their ceremony. In 2011 the *Ramsbury Town Crier* played a part in their ceremony, adding a welcome festive air to the proceedings.

Initially the idea for the competition came from Gloucestershire. In 1937 their local CPRE Branch organised the Bledisloe Cup Competition to celebrate the success of village communities throughout Gloucestershire in caring for their local environment. In recognition of that fact Wiltshire CPRE invited the County Planning Officer from Gloucestershire to judge the Final Round of Wiltshire's inaugural competition.

By 1958 the Wiltshire competition was truly under way; rules had been drawn up and a marking schedule agreed. In July 1959 the first competition took place in the County.

Originally there were two categories – the Large Village Category with a population of over 600 and the Small Village Category with a population of under 600. In 1979 a new category was introduced for Medium Villages. Population requirements were then as follows:

Small Villages 1-300; Medium Villages 301–800; Large Villages 801–3000

In 2000 these changed to:

Small Villages 1–300; Medium Villages 301–1000; Large Villages 1001– 3,500

In 2014 these were modified to:

Small Villages 300 or under; Medium Villages 301 to 1000; Large Villages 1001 or over

For the first fifty years of the Competition the Branch was fortunate to have the active participation of all four District Councils in Wiltshire together with Swindon Borough Council, both throughout the competition and at the Presentation Ceremonies. In 2009 Wiltshire Council became a Unitary Council which resulted in the loss of some of the prizes awarded to winning villages. However, CPRE Wiltshire has continued to

award cash prizes for the First, Second and Third village in each category together with certificates for every village in the Second Round of the competition, while Wiltshire County has continued to present a permanent plaque to the winning village in each category. In 2014 a Newcomer's Award was included for the first time to encourage villages which have not entered for the last five years to compete. In 2015 a Merit Prize was introduced for the village that has performed consistently well in recent years but has not won a major prize in the current year.

Early in the year all Wiltshire Village Parish Councils are invited to enter the competition.

Round One involves the four Wiltshire CPRE Groups of Kennet, North Wiltshire (with Swindon), South Wiltshire and West Wiltshire. Each village is judged by members of CPRE from a different Group together with other interested volunteers. The judges follow guidelines drawn up by the Branch and the winning village from each category goes forward to the second round.

Round Two is judged by a team of two, found from CPRE members (usually from the Branch Executive or Group Committee), and/or members of staff from Wiltshire Council. They might be accompanied by one or more Wiltshire Councillors. These judges visit the four or five villages in their category in a long day of travelling throughout the County.

Presentation of awards, including the prize money and certificates takes place in late September or early October in the presence of the Lord Lieutenant of Wiltshire (the President of the Branch), the Chairman of Wiltshire CPRE, the Chairman of Wiltshire Council, the Wiltshire High Sherriff, judges, those involved in preparing the village for the competition, the Parish Council Chairman, Councillors and Clerk plus other interested parties. Wiltshire Council presents its own, permanent plaque to the winners and the CPRE wrought iron shield on an oak post is unveiled by the Lord Lieutenant in a prominent part of the village for all to see. Each of the three winning villages will keep the shield for a year.

The runners up in the second round will receive prizes and/or certificates from the Chairman of their local CPRE Group; usually at one of their Parish Council meetings. Similar arrangements are made for the Best Newcomer and the Merit Prize.

CPRE has always been loyally supported by Wiltshire Council in the running of the competition. Sponsorship is currently provided by The Hills Group (the major sponsor for the Competition) and Princeton Homes who sponsor the Laurence Kitching Award. Previous sponsors have included Smiths Gore and NFU Mutual.

In 2000 the Laurence Kitching Winner of Winners Award was introduced. As the winners from each category in the County Round are excluded from entering the Best Kept Village Competition for the next two years they are invited to compete for the Laurence Kitching Award. This is a 'head-to-head' competition with the other five villages excluded from the Best Kept Village Competition. The winner receives a shield on an oak post (to be kept for a year) and plaque and certificate commemorating their achievement.

In 2008 CPRE Wiltshire celebrated the Fiftieth Anniversary of the competition by introducing an additional round. All three winning villages together with the winner of the Laurence Kitching Award went head-to-head to decide which would receive the accolade of 'The Best Kept Village in Wiltshire' The winning village, Dinton, received a glass bowl engraved and presented by Sir Maurice Johnston, former President of the Branch from 1996 – 2004.