

Change in Days and Decades and Centuries

Sir Peter Bottomley MP

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One of my local heroes is Ed Miller, best known as a leading member of the Ferring History Group and the Ferring Conservation group. By good fortune we had been colleagues in the Department of Employment in the mid-1980s when I took over responsibility for equal opportunities and the youth career services from Alan Clark MP who is remembered more for his diaries than for his ministerial achievements.

Another minister, Peter Morrison, said he could brief me on the personal politics of each senior civil servant. I declined to listen. If it showed in their work I would know; if it did not, I would not need to know.

Ed for years led the constituency Labour party. He and I still demonstrate that people in alternative political groupings can cooperate in campaigns for the public good in our communities and in our nation. My friend Tom Wye has done the same in so many of his endeavours in Worthing.

Ferring, borrowing Ed's words, has an accessible beach without the noise and nuisance of a shoreline road. The Goring/Ferring Gap and the Kingston/East Preston Gap have not changed much. Many parts of the village are hardly altered; others have been developed, too often when a national planning inspector has overruled rational decisions by Arun District Council. I reproduce Ed's concluding words.

'What also survived the Century was an undoubted community spirit and the feeling of living in a village, despite the 'suburban' connection with Worthing. There were over 40 local societies in Ferring in 2000. The Village Hall was as busy as ever, Ferring Amateur Dramatic Society still as strongly supported as it was in the 1930s. Ferring had over 1,000 residents enrolled in its Conservation Group, founded in 1988.

'But it was not just in the village institutions that the community spirit was felt. It was in the everyday civility of its residents – a village where people say, "Good Morning" to complete strangers as they pass in the street (streets without pavements or street lights), patience at the railway level crossing, with good neighbours and friendly shopkeepers. It was still at the end of the Century a very pleasant place to live, and one which many non-residents loved to visit.'

With the current days' debates, votes and consequences, let us share the determination to keep our whole country a good place to live, to work and to visit. On Tuesday with others I had a friendly frank discussion face to face with Prime Minister Johnson. I gave him my views clearly.

Because the party whip has apparently been withdrawn from Ken Clarke MP, Father of the Commons as the MP with the longest continuous service, I become the father of the parliamentary Conservative MPs. It is a title without a role and it is cheerfully not an acknowledged position.

My first Commons elections were in Woolwich West during the 1970s. Three weeks after the 1975 referendum confirmed that the UK would remain in the European Common Market, thousands of pro and anti people came to help me reduce Harold Wilson's slender Labour majority. During the referendum campaign the best pro speech was by Margaret Thatcher. Times change.

What does not change are the responsibilities we share. I try to avoid a running commentary on views expressed by people who disagree with me and I try to zip my lips when others are provocative or rude or extreme. The Archbishop of Canterbury has said the more recent referendum result needs to be respected and that we must do something about reuniting the country.

I share the fear that a no-deal Brexit could impact most seriously on the poorest and most vulnerable. That would be a failure of community?