

# **Barmouth Publicity Association**

## **Chairman's Report**

### **Online Annual General Meeting**

#### **2021**

"The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there". This quote from LP Hartley's 1953 novel 'The Go Between' has never seemed more relevant. March 2020 seems at once to be not that long ago and yet also to belong to another world. When we met last year at the Min y Mor Hotel for our 2020 AGM there was a feeling of optimism after what had been a challenging 2019. We had printed a record number of town guides and were looking forward to a busy year. Talk of a virus was muted and no one really believed that within 3 weeks we would be locked down and the world would be facing its biggest crisis since the Second World War.

The last year has been, without risk of hyperbole, the most difficult that any of us can remember. The sheer speed with which everything imploded last March took almost all of us by surprise. For those of us in the accommodation trade we were just beginning to welcome the initial batch of spring visitors and we found ourselves in a rapidly changing environment of advice and regulation but all too soon we were all in the same boat as shops, cafes, restaurants and tourist attractions –all forced to close as the UK went into total lock-down. That initial lock-down was a shock but the weather was so good that despite the financial hit to businesses it almost felt like a holiday, and the general feeling was that it was a short-term thing. Indeed when restrictions were lifted visitors returned in droves and Barmouth enjoyed one of its busiest summers for a long time. Businesses quickly adapted to the socially distanced way of operating and it felt as if, even with this 'new normal', we might weather the storm relatively unscathed. Looking back from where we are today that optimism seems hopelessly naive of course because as autumn progressed we went into a Welsh 'firebreak' which was followed by 'Lock-down 2' in England and then a third Lockdown across all 4 home nations and businesses in all sectors in Barmouth began to struggle. As I write this report the news is more optimistic. The vaccination programme is exceeding all expectations, infection rates are dropping rapidly and the UK government has published a 'roadmap' for the route out of lockdown and restrictions in England. Here in Wales we are still waiting for that sort of clarity. Realistically however there will be no swift return to 'normal'. Social distancing will be with us for some time and even if we can reduce Covid infections to a level that we can 'live with' we may find that some things have changed for ever. And tourism may find itself changed more than most.

One of the big issues that the last year has thrown into stark relief has been the tensions within communities that depend heavily on tourism. These tensions are not unique to Barmouth or Wales and have been seen equally in the 'hotspots' of England, but they have been stoked by social media and even by bodies that really should know better such as Gwynedd County Council. At last year's AGM I quoted Gwynedd's own figures showing that tourism generated nearly £1 billion annually for the county, (a figure that was predicted to grow significantly), employed over 15,000 residents and generated around £8,000 for every man woman and child in the county. It is, after the local authority, the largest source of employment and the only 'industry' that this part of Wales has. The

difference it makes can be seen clearly in a place like Barmouth. Prior to moving here I lived in a village in Wiltshire. We had a population considerably larger than Barmouth's 2,500 but we had just 2 pubs (one of which closed), and 5 shops. To put that into context Barmouth has over 60 shops and 45 places that serve food or drink, including 6 pubs. We are fortunate to have these services in our town to use but the only reason we have such a wide choice is because of the visitors who spend their money here. The local population alone simply could not support such a vast number of businesses. However it can be hard for people whose livelihoods and income do not depend upon those visitors to see this fundamental truth and when faced with a highly transmissible virus it is perhaps understandable that communities draw in upon themselves and throw up the barricades, metaphorically and in some instances literally. Here in Barmouth those barricades started rising before the government stepped in, and the level of vitriol, stoked by fear, took me by surprise. Some of that hatred was directed at my wife and I personally and it was difficult to deal with, revealing as it did a side of Barmouth's 'community' that was much darker than we had ever seen. Sadly that side has re-appeared from time to time over the past year making me wonder what we can do to better share our hopes and ambitions for Barmouth

The purpose of the BPA is to support its members, those very businesses that bring income and employment to the community, and so we have (cautiously sometimes) continued to stick our head above the parapet throughout the last year, taking opportunities to promote Barmouth wherever we have been offered them and seeking to combat misinformation whenever we have seen it being promoted. Engaging with our local community to explain the benefits of tourism is perhaps more important now than at any stage in our recent history. It is unfortunate to say the least that Gwynedd Council, amongst others, chose the middle of a pandemic to aggressively pursue a crusade against 'second homes'. In itself this may not be a bad thing as homes that are simply used for a handful of weeks a year are clearly something of a luxury and it's hard to argue that they do anything other than remove housing stock from the local market. Gwynedd however have, (possibly deliberately) chosen to conflate 'second homes' with Furnished Holiday Lets (FHLs). The latter are legitimate businesses, providing self-catering accommodation for visitors and generating significant income for local communities. Contrary to the narrative often spun the majority of these properties are owned by Gwynedd residents but the language of debate has been highly charged, a great deal of misleading claims have been made and as a result passions have been stirred. This has caused immense difficulties for some of our members and we have been contacted by more of them this year than at any time in our memory, asking for guidance and help. In a time when our key industry, tourism, has taken such a hit and communities have been left silent and deprived of their main source of income we have been unable to stay silent and so have engaged repeatedly to try to restore some balance to the debate. We have engaged in obvious ways through the pages of the Cambrian News and assorted online forums, but there has also been significant work going on 'behind the scenes' as we have worked with MWT Cymru and North Wales Tourism who have in turn been working with the Welsh Government. We have been approached on several occasions by the media and I have done interviews for BBC radio and television and commented in the Cambrian News. Meanwhile our Administrator, Heather, has spent many hours analysing data and collecting accurate information with which to create a more positive narrative of the benefits tourism brings to this part of Wales. We now have a great deal of accurate data and as a result a very good understanding of the accommodation sector in particular. This

work is likely to be ongoing, given that there are moves afoot to 'rebalance' tourism in north Wales and it is increasingly important that a strong case is put for growing this sector and generating more employment and more income for local people.

Being asked to comment on issues is part and parcel of being Chairman. External organisations naturally look for a point of contact within a community and whilst I cannot, and do not, speak for Barmouth as a whole I am sometimes asked for my personal comments and it is also my role sometimes to speak on behalf of our members. Generally speaking this has been easy given that the message during lockdown has been a consistent 'we need visitors to survive, but only when it's safe for them to return'. But some issues have been more challenging. An application to open an 'adult boutique' caused a stir on Facebook when the plans were made public. I was asked to comment and should probably have politely refused, but maybe foolishly I commented in a personal capacity to say that from a business perspective I had no objections, although I would much prefer a nice deli or fishmongers. Shortly afterwards I found I was being misquoted in the Cambrian as having 'welcomed' the application and needless to say another storm was created. Although the Cambrian subsequently published a correction the damage was done. Lesson duly learn. Sometimes it is better to politely decline...

At last year's AGM we launched the 2020 Town Guide and announced that we had printed record numbers of it, given that we had had to do a second print run in 2019. At the time of course we fully expected to be able to distribute all 25,000 copies. Needless to say, given that we have spent much of the last year locked down in one way or another, the vast majority of these have sadly had to be taken to the recycling centre. We did debate simply using them for this year but decided that we really needed to produce something new, something that was able to reflect the different world we find ourselves in. Given however that most of you have had a very difficult year and finances are probably somewhat stretched, to say the least, we realised that we could not ask you to pay for advertising. The BPA is a not-for-profit organisation and the only income we generally receive is from advertising however we decided that we should raid our reserves and were extremely grateful when Barmouth Town Council offered to pay for the printing costs of a new Town Guide for 2021 provided we offered free advertising to all existing advertisers. We have been very happy to accept this offer and we are delighted to say that the new edition is being delivered to us this week ready, we hope, for the return of the first visitors as restrictions are gradually relaxed. We have printed fewer copies but we very much hope that as more people are vaccinated and restrictions are gradually removed we will see a bumper year of 'staycationing' visitors. If we run out of guides this year we will actually be quite pleased!

Because of your support over the last few years we have also been able to promote Barmouth via the Room Browsers produced by MWT Cymru and North Wales Tourism (NWT). With a combined print run of nearly 30,000 these browsers are fantastic ways of reaching potential visitors as they go into hotel and guest house rooms, into self-catering properties and caravans, and each are read multiple times by people already in north and mid Wales looking for ideas for days out. Because of the pandemic MWT are not producing a new issue for 2021 but retaining the 2020 edition. NWT have decided to print a new issue for 2021 however given the fact that we are not going to receive much advertising revenue ourselves this year we have decided we cannot justify the expense. Hopefully we will be in a better situation for 2022.

The Barmouth-Wales official website and the Barmouth-Wales Facebook page continue to be very successful. The former has good SEO rankings and continues to attract national advertising, however given the constantly changing internet environment we have concluded that it is time for a re-design, so work is in hand to give it a new look which will hopefully be ready to launch before the summer. My thanks to Heather for overseeing the website and keeping it updated. She has spent many an hour this last year keeping an up-to-date record of which shops, restaurants, cafes, etc were open and what services they were offering – a never-ending task it seemed at times given how the restrictions on trade kept changing. The result however has been a comprehensive list of businesses within Barmouth that has provided a valuable resource for both locals and visitors (when allowed) alike. Our Facebook page meanwhile simply goes from strength to strength. In last year's report I said it had nearly 9,000 followers. It now has over 15,000, a huge increase in a single year and testament to Trevor Parry's hard work in maintaining it. Such a large following gives us a real 'shop window' to generate interest in Barmouth and keep people interested, even when they have been unable to travel.

Our committee has obviously found meeting this year somewhat difficult however they continued to work online and I am grateful to all of them for their contributions and support. I am especially grateful however to David Clay, who after 51 years has decided that it is time to step back from the BPA committee. His experience, knowledge and good humour has been invaluable over the years and our loss will be the local golf courses' gain.

Overall this has been a difficult year, one in which we have been unable to deliver everything that we had intended. But looking back I can see that we have been able to be true to our constitutional objectives, promoting and furthering the interests of Barmouth to current and potential visitors and residents, standing up for our members and the town and making sure our voice is heard in debates at local, regional and national levels. Thank you for your continued support. It's a bit of cliché to say 'without you we would be nothing', but it's true. And we are very grateful.