

Friends of Alzey Chair report for 2018. (Presented at AGM 21st February 2019)

Welcome to you all, especially to our new members; we are very pleased to see you here and that you are part of our group. I'm delighted to present my summary of the latest chapter in the 40 year long story of the Friends of Alzey. The clue to our story's leitmotiv is in our name – it's friendship, the motivating factor for most of us in our involvement with this group.

I'll come back to this theme after a whistle-stop tour of 2018 if I may. The tour takes a circuitous route but gets there in the end. The central event was our incoming visit at the height of summer; the sun shone and the mercury soared, so we were glad of the shade in Highgate Cemetery, a destination that initially created some scepticism but which was deemed an inspiration. The subsequent hike across Hampstead Heath past the ponds was revealing in many ways– our German friends are tough and strong, the Heath is very hilly and deceptively huge, the map on its website is pretty useless and GPS in the hands of experts (Philip and Paul) can definitely save lives! There are some excellent photos of our very successful weekend on our website, see: <http://www.friendsofalzey.com/photos.htm>. This is updated and managed most expertly by John W. Smith, whose arrival on the committee along with Harriet Gloess as membership secretary was another highlight of 2018. To my delight, Harriet entered the fray just as organisations like ours were grappling with GDPR , but she and a handful of others tackled the challenge head on, with some support from our friends in the Royston town twinning group, and the Harpenden Society. I'm proud to say that we were compliant with the new regulations by the time they came into force, which was quite a feat. Your committee's work isn't always visible, but its members and fellow officers are a dedicated, knowledgeable group and I would like to thank them publicly now. Hayley, Andy, Sheila, Jo, John, Steve, Harriet, and Rosemary who is our link with the Town Council, and our President Rosemary. We all pulled together to carry off two very successful fund-raising evenings in 2018 – our Annual Dinner in March and our Quiz in October. Our speaker this year was the Member of Parliament for Hitchin and Harpenden, another high profile figure in our recent series of speakers. In October Mr Afolami gave a fascinating guided tour of Westminster to constituents including some Friends of Alzey who were minded to join the group. He answered a question on Brexit from someone present this evening. We are all aware that opinion on Brexit is divided everywhere in the UK and this room is no exception. That should concern us less than the worry and uncertainty that is felt in Alzey about what is happening here. **We** will hold together here in Harpenden– we are friends who meet regularly (in growing numbers which is wonderful) for conversation in the homes of generous hosts, who enjoy Dinners and quizzes together , who maintain an interest in Germany into old age (and wasn't it wonderful to see Esther Duras at our summer meal after her long illness?), but over in Alzey there **are** worries about what the UK's new

direction will mean for visits here. Freedom of movement is being curtailed , so will that mean extra costs? How will our visits there be funded if their Mayor's office no longer supports the Friends of Harpenden financially? In 2014, 31 people from Alzey came to Harpenden. In 2016 it was 36; last year the group consisted of only 18 people. The committee has had no definitive answer as to why the number fell so significantly – it was probably a combination of various factors including ageing, but our hope is it was a blip and not a trend. Those who **were** here last summer were made most welcome and their Chairperson and I made another public statement that we are as enthusiastic about our partnership as ever, but I believe it really is incumbent on us to keep telling our friends how much we value the relationship. So if you are going there in September, do start nurturing that friendship as soon as you are able, and if you aren't but have friends there, why not contact them for a chat or an exchange of news? I have a letter here to the Mayor of Alzey, in both English and German saying the same – we value greatly their continued friendship and look forward very much to seeing them in September when we can enjoy not only the wine, but also the planning of their visit here in 2020. I also quote Mr Lehn from Alzey, husband of their vice Chair, Beate – he told me in a recent phone call that 'the politicians won't be able to stand between us' . I do believe he is right , but I also believe that all of us here have a part to play in making **sure** he is right. I hope you might sign this letter as you leave this evening – it will be available again for our social evening in March and then sent to Alzey.

Finally I would like to thank you all for your ongoing support and friendship.

Susan Vinther February 2019