



*Caring for our Town*

c/o Friends Meeting House · 1 Paynes Park · Hitchin · Hertfordshire · SG5 1EH

[www.hitчинforum.org.uk](http://www.hitчинforum.org.uk)

# Newsletter

## Nov/Dec 2008

### Events:

#### November

Farmers Market—Tues 25

#### December

Craft Market—Sat 6

Councillors Surgery—Sat 6

British Schools Christmas Fair—Sat 6

Christmas Tree lights switch-on—Fri 28 at 6pm

Hitchin Markets Christmas Gala—Sunday 14

Rotary carols—Wed 14, Market Place at 8pm

British Schools Christmas Party—Sat 20

Farmers Market—Tuesday 23

### Inside this issue:

Back in the USA	2
Churchgate concerns	2
North Herts College—the future	3
No call for a Hitchin Town Council	3
British School Christmas Events	4
Protecting our green spaces	4
Have you renewed?	4

## Changes to the Forum

At the recent AGM the new Steering Group was elected:

Michael Ransom (President)

David Borner

Jeremy Burrowes

Maureen Carroll

Paul Clark

Ellie Clarke

Ann Heymans

Chris Honey

Leslie Mustoe

Rosemary Read

Alan Stephenson

Following Ellie Clarke's resignation as Secretary, the Steering Group has agreed that expecting anyone to become a similar "one person encyclopedia" for all local matters is impossible. The post of Secretary has not been filled, but many of

the tasks Ellie performed have been re-allocated as follows:

**Chris Honey** will lead on planning and town centre issues, **David Borner** will cover transport matters, **Jeremy Burrowes** will continue to look after the website, and **Rosemary Read** takes responsibility for the newsletter.

Members who need to contact the Forum should either use the email link from the website or write to us at the Friends Meeting House address, and the enquiry will be forwarded to the most appropriate member of the Steering Group. We're sorry if this makes things difficult,

but as you will appreciate, Ellie is an impossible act to follow and we're doing our best to keep the show on the road!

### GOOD NEWS ON THE MARKET

The AGM had a very up-beat report from John Haykin on the progress since Hitchin Markets Ltd took over, and their plans for the future. They are already doing more, reducing the overheads and making more money. The ideas for future developments are sensible and should further enhance both the range of stalls and the overall look of the market. Proof, if any were needed, that Hitchin can do very well when allowed to decide its own destiny. More power to their elbows!

## Now they want our green field as well!

Having put up with new blocks of flats on every available 'brownfield' site, we are now threatened with our green spaces being used for development. Benslow field, which the Girls' School does not use but the public does, is under serious threat if the rumour that Herts. County Council is thinking of

asking NHDC to approve change of use of the field so part can be sold to pay for a sports centre for the Girls' School. And this in a week when research shows that exercise in open, undeveloped land with natural vegetation could have greater psychological and physiological benefits than exercise

elsewhere! More information can be found at [www.benslow.org.uk/BenslowField.pdf](http://www.benslow.org.uk/BenslowField.pdf). NOW is the time to write, stating your reasons for retaining the field as it is, to NHDC'S Planning Control Department at Gernon Road, copy to your local councillors. For more ammunition, see page 4.

## Back in the USA by Judi Billing

On 24<sup>th</sup> October David and I left for the USA, after months of planning, considerable excitement and a tiny bit of trepidation to work in three cities for the Campaign for Change to elect Barack Obama as President.

We were overwhelmingly welcomed in Atlanta, Miami and New York by people of all races and ages who were genuinely astonished that we felt their election was of vital importance to the whole world.

We worked in some of the most diverse communities it is possible to imagine: In the Auburn Avenue area of Atlanta where Martin Luther King grew up and preached in the Ebenezer Baptist Church; in Little Havana in Miami which is virtually a Hispanic

enclave where we also met Hillary Clinton, and on election night itself in Union Square in New York with the most diverse group of passionate young people you could possibly imagine. Well into the night people took to the streets, chanted and laughed and cried all over the USA and I didn't see a single report the next day of any trouble or civil disturbance, just an enormous outpouring of passion and joy.

We also have a huge range of communities within our own small market town, including Poles, Italians, Black Caribbean, Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi. We also have an increasing population of people from a variety of mixed heritages, for whom in the US the

election of Barack Obama has been of the utmost significance in terms of aspiration and hope.

Lots of people and organisations in Hitchin are passionate too, about a range of issues to do with the town, its history, its preservation and its conservation.

But some of what we do and get excited about as local groups and politicians is clearly not reaching all of our communities from different backgrounds and particularly young people.

Can we seize this moment of international excitement, hope and aspiration to widen our conversations in Hitchin as well?

***“Lots of people and organisations in Hitchin are passionate too, about a range of issues to do with the town”***



## Churchgate concerns

***“it maks sense to reassure Hammersmatch that their refurbishment proposal will not be in vain”***

Hammersmatch's proposals for the refurbishment of Churchgate have recently been reported, and these have received a generally favourable reception from all the campaigning societies and been accepted by NHDC. However, Hammersmatch have been excluded from the bidding process for the re-development of Churchgate, and is making a claim against NHDC.

There are four shortlisted prospective developers for the site, all of whom, according to Keep Hitchin Special, give cause for concern.

NHDC has indicated that car

park charges associated with the development would be controlled by the developer. This not only reduces the revenue collected by the Council but also appears to threaten the future existence of some car parking.

The public will not be consulted until the successful tenderer produces a schematic development proposal and a planning application in 2010. The question 'What happens if the public resoundingly oppose this proposal?' has not been answered. The process is already 8 months behind the original scheduled plan, and the credit crunch has al-

ready been cited as a reason for development slowdowns.

NHDC predict that work on the site will commence between 2011 and 2012 but there is evidence that it could be at least another five years before work starts and, don't forget, we have already been eight years getting to this stage! That's five more years of uncertainty for retailers, the market, the buying public and therefore business generally in Hitchin. It makes sense to reassure Hammersmatch that their refurbishment proposal will not be in vain and that it is a wise investment.

## North Herts College—the future

We were recently invited to view a presentation of North Herts College's proposals for the redevelopment of their Hitchin site which would combine it with the Centre for the Arts in a 'state of the art' facility.

These were early concepts on which they were seeking comments. However the design process is well advanced and they hope to lodge a planning application in late November, so some major decisions have been made. These include the orientation and position of the main building to give a greater presence and a more inspiring entrance which will be accessed from St Michael's Road. It also allows a commanding view of Purwell meadows from the res-

taurant. This is achieved whilst maintaining a similar height to the present buildings by partially incorporating one level below ground. However the proposed new buildings are positioned more closely to Walsworth House (Grade II listed) with horticultural plots interspersed to supply the restaurant with fresh produce and as a reminder of the historic house's garden. Tree-lined car parking is arranged further to the south as are the all-weather pitch and other playing fields in a similar position to those at present. It remains to be seen if these appear to have an effect on the nearby Poets estate, and this will need to be looked at more closely when the detailed planning application is made avail-

able.

It is an uncompromisingly modern building consisting of three parallel interconnected spines, a large atrium and flat roof with brick and linear glazed elevations, all of which is softened by sensitive landscaping and planting. Energy saving principles, natural ventilation and rainwater recycling have been addressed, and the existing mature trees will be tended to provide better views and more natural light. It is a pity that construction details hadn't been finalised, so it wasn't clear exactly what the exterior walls will look like, but it seems that the building will be as environmentally friendly as possible, and the linking of the 3 main buildings looks

intelligent. Clever positioning on the site means that there will be full use of most existing buildings while the new ones go up. The view up the hill from Walsworth crossroads should be much more interesting than at present. There will also be an archaeology investigation after demolition and before building begins.

With full state-of-the-art facilities for sport, drama, music, catering and health & beauty, it promises to be an appropriate establishment for 21<sup>st</sup> century learning and an asset to the town and the community.

## No call for a Hitchin Town Council

A public meeting has given the "thumbs down" to the idea of a town council for Hitchin. The meeting, attended by around 70 people, and ably chaired by Morag Norgan, heard from Chris Honey about some of the ways a town council could benefit Hitchin: a more 'official' voice on matters affecting the town such as planning, a truly local focus with fundraising ability for Hitchin projects, and an opportunity to address the smaller issues that could make a real difference in restoring civic pride.

Rosemary Read then put the case against, arguing that the influence a town council could have might be more imagined than real, it could duplicate much of what the many community groups in

the town already do, and the additional cost would be unacceptable for many people. She cited the example of Letchworth as a warning of unfulfilled expectations.

John Robinson, NHDC's Strategic Director, outlined recent changes in the legislation concerning local governance and review and confirmed that nobody knows in advance what town councillors might do and the levy they might raise. He also stated that, once established, central government has made it clear that abolition would not be an option for at least eight years.

Questions to the group which had considered the case for and against a town council showed real concerns about the likely cost to

the taxpayer, and, of course, Letchworth. It was also made clear that a town council was likely in practice to have very little influence on planning decisions. On the other hand, it was pointed out that town councils had wide-ranging powers to do many things in addition to what the District Council was doing and that most town and parish councils appeared to be well-liked with some positive achievements. It became apparent, however, that there were other ways in which Hitchin people could have more control over the town's destiny, and the group will shortly be taking a preliminary look at these possibilities.

*"there are other ways in which Hitchin people could have more control over the town's destiny"*





## British Schools Christmas events

### Christmas Fair

Saturday 6<sup>th</sup> December, this year in the refurbished Lancasterian Schoolroom. All the usual stalls: gifts, tombola, crafts, books, bric-a-brac, and of course Father Christmas and a grand raffle. From 10am to 3pm. Admission is free.

### Christmas Party

Saturday 20 December, from 7 to 11 pm in Hitchin's Town Hall.

Dancing, Games, Carols and the Mummers. The Forest Band with MC Barry Goodman.

This is the 27th year of one of the best real Christmas Parties in all England.

Tickets are STILL only £10, including Supper.

Further information from Jacky Birch, The British Schools Museum, 41/42 Queen Street, Hitchin SG4 9TS. Tel: 01462 420144. (For Party tickets, Cheques should be payable to Hitchin British Schools Trust including 50p postage please - or collect from the Museum).

## Commitment to protecting our green spaces

On 8th November, the North Hertfordshire Partnership launched its Sustainable Community Strategy for 2009-2021. This is the plan for making North Hertfordshire a vibrant place to live, work and prosper. It makes interesting reading, especially the first section: 'Protecting and Enhancing the Environment', which gives as one of its objectives: "to enhance access to open space: maintain or increase the area of publicly accessible green space". We must hope that NHDC remembers this when the decision about selling off a chunk of Benslow Field is taken.

Other themes are: providing decent and affordable housing; improving travel and transport; improving the life chances of children and young people; a safe community; improving health and wellbeing; enriching the lives of our elders; increasing economic prosperity and employment; promoting life-long learning, training and skills development.

At the time of writing the final version was not available online, but copies should be available from NHDC, Gernon Road. Email [service@north-herts.gov.uk](mailto:service@north-herts.gov.uk)

### From the Membership Secretary

Thank you to the many members who have renewed their subscriptions so promptly. Another form is enclosed with this newsletter for those who have not yet renewed.

