

Newsletter

July/Aug 2009 No. 97

TOWN TALK DATES FOR 2009:

JULY 28TH

SEPTEMBER 22ND

NOVEMBER 17TH

The consultation period for revision to the Conservation Area ends on 4 September

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We will no longer be using the Friends' Meeting House as the Forum address, so please note the new address and telephone number above

SPECIAL GENERAL MEETING REPORT

At the Special General Meeting held on 18th May, the following officers were elected:

Chairman: Gerry Sugars

Vice-Chairman: Leslie Mustoe

Secretary: Rosemary Read

The other members of the Steering Group remain:

Jeremy Burrows—treasurer

Maureen Carroll—

Membership Secretary

David Borner

Wendy Bowker

Paul Clark

Ellie Clarke

Ann Heymans

Chris Honey

Michael Ransom

Alan Stephenson

The Chairman's Forward Plan.

MORE MEMBERS!

The Forum is a members' organisation and the more people that belong, the more influence it will have. Remember that Forum members can be Individuals or Organisations, so let's have lots of new members please!! Speak to friends and neighbours. Membership forms are available from the Membership Secretary, so just ask for some and sign up all your friends, associates and neighbours, as well as anyone you know who has Hitchin at heart.

Do you know of any local groups that are not affiliated

to the Forum? They can exchange information, plans etc. with other organisations. We need the Forum to be a vibrant, active organisation with lots of diverse members. Particularly, young people and ethnic minorities are currently seriously under-represented - we need them and their input.

Remember, we want positive organisations as well as negative ones. For example: local action committees; parking action groups; housing action committees; "the xxx Action Group to plant more cherry trees"; allotment societies; music groups; book clubs; gardening clubs; stamp collecting clubs; cycling clubs; bee keeping societies; walking groups; minority interest groups; volunteer groups; carers groups; Friends of.....; all sorts of Special Interest groups and so on.... The more that join, the more everyone will benefit from the group energy and shared knowledge and experience. The list is endless....

LOCAL AREA GROUPS

We see these Groups as a key element in the way forward for the Forum as the focus of local interest and development. We currently have a Town Centre Area Group. What others can we have? Westmill? St Ippolyts? Poets' Estate? etc.....Let's have your ideas please.



Gerry Sugars

Gerry has lived and worked in Hitchin for the last 15 years and lives with Ann Dugdale in a late Georgian/early Victorian cottage close to the town centre; having spent the last 35 years in the pharmaceutical industry, he now runs a small company making natural animal healthcare products mainly for horses; Ann also works in the pharmaceutical industry in Cambridge; they have two Scotties and one horse (shortly to be two horses!); the horse(s) have competed fairly seriously at Affiliated Dressage and Affiliated Show Jumping with reasonable success - for example they came third in one competition at Hickstead a couple of weeks ago out of a field on 82; Gerry has two grown up sons, one is an IT manager in Oxford and the other is a photographer/video director-producer in London.

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HITCHIN IN TRANSITION?



Many communities are transferring from high to low energy consumption and ridding themselves of the oil-addicted lifestyles we have today by using more of the earth's renewable resources than its finite capital.

Transition towns or communities adopt and implement plans to mitigate the effects of Climate Change and Peak Oil by reducing their carbon dioxide emissions.

Climate Change. A dramatic increase in the level of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere continues to occur. Thus global temperatures are increasing significantly, resulting in life-affecting changes and unusual variations in the weather worldwide. Many people believe this is due to the vast increase in the world's human population and its dependence on fossil fuels.

Peak Oil. World oil discovery peaked in the 1960's. We are running out of easy-to-get cheap oil. Over 60% of the world's oil producing countries have passed their peak; the UK did so in 1999. At present consumption rates, commercially available oil will cease in 31 years. Coal and gas are also finite resources.

Because of the Climate Crisis, we should change. Because of Peak Oil, WE WILL! If we wait for governments, it'll be too little, too late; if we act as individuals, it'll be too little; but if we act as communities, it might just be enough, just in time.

So **Transition Towns** are places where communities choose to take an adventurous path of practical, enjoyable and cooperative activities in order to thrive rather

than suffer from rises in fuel prices, the cost of food and extreme weather. In a Transition Town people get more local and adopt a more sustainable lifestyle. There is already clear evidence of this in Hitchin with its status as a fair-trade town which has recently adopted a BID initiative, so why not continue down the transition path?

To find out more look at www.transitiontowns.org

To help Hitchin to become a Transition Town, contact Chris Honey on 01462 441843, chrishoney_design@yahoo.co.uk



CAN WE PROTECT BENSLOW FIELD?

County Councillor Derrick Ashley is working with the Forum and Highbury District Councillors to try to ensure that the field behind Pinehill Hospital, which has been used freely by local residents for many years, does not get sold off for development. One of the ways this can be done is to have it registered as a "Town Green", the town equivalent of a village green. People who have lived in the area for a long time are horrified that even part of the one green space on this side of town might become yet another building site.

You will find a letter enclosed with this Newsletter explaining what we need to achieve this. So if you have memories of events or excursions to the field, please dredge them up! If you are unable to help personally by providing a statement, perhaps you may know other people who may be able to help. The more statements we can get showing that the field is a well-used community space, and has

been for decades, the better chance we have of ensuring that future residents both in Highbury and the wider community will continue to have this lovely large green space for their enjoyment. There are apparently some people at County Hall who believe the field is little used and therefore an ideal spot to build yet more houses!

Evidence that Benslow Field is used by more than just a few dog-walkers. The snow earlier this year brought out plenty of people to toboggan safely



Special General Meeting report continued

STEERING GROUP SUB-GROUPS

We want to create small groups of knowledgeable people who can act and speak on behalf of the Forum, rather than as single individuals as at present. We see these Sub-Groups as an important element in the way forward for the Forum. Currently we have members of Steering Group responsible for Planning and for Transport. What should we have? Re-cycling and Green issues generally? Research/Intelligence? Social development issues such as housing, youth activities, etc? Arts & Theatre? Sport? Any others.....??

Do you have any particular knowledge or special skills? If so we would like to hear from you. Please contact the Secretary (450494) in the first instance.

EAST OF LUTON: NORTH HERTS DISTRICT COUNCIL'S RESPONSE

On 23rd June 2009, Cabinet authorised NHDC's response to the growth agenda for the Luton conurbation.

Luton and South Bedfordshire's core strategy is to:

- Build some 5,500 new dwellings to the east of Luton near Mangrove Green, Cockernhoe and Tea Green
- Develop a new strategic employment area east of Century Park extending towards Breachwood Green
- Make a new Luton Eastern Bypass, linking the airport and the A505, running along Lilley Bottom for part of its length
- Site a Park and Ride adjacent to the A505 and the route of a new Luton Northern Bypass connecting the M1/A6 to the A505 at Putteridgebury.

NHDC objects to this in the strongest terms on the following grounds:

- There is no clear justification for the selection of this area

east of Luton as a "preferred option".

- NHDC would suggest encouraging more development within built-up areas, aiding regeneration, and re-looking at sites in Leighton Buzzard, Caddington, Slip End and Houghton Regis, to plan for a larger number of dwellings in these locations. It also points out that by Luton and South Bed's own figures only 17,600 homes need to be built beyond the built-up limits of conurbations but they are planning for an increase of some 19,000.
- Green belt issues have been given low or even no weight in assessing the merits of the various sites. This approach is unsound as it ignores the purpose of preventing urban sprawl and the coalescence of nearby settlements. None of the other sites would lead to the loss of individual identity of villages like Mangrove Green, Cockernhoe and Tea

Green in the East of Luton plan.

- The quality of the environment has not been given due consideration. Lilley Bottom is a beautiful valley and it adjoins the Chiltern Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. It has been designated an area where "it is not considered appropriate for development to take place" by Luton and South Bed's own consultants. The relative differences in quality of environment between the different development options have not been provided.
- The implications of growth of traffic in Hitchin and rural Hertfordshire roads are ignored. Hitchin is already a well-known bottleneck and northern and eastern bypasses to Luton would only worsen this problem. A "no bypass" option has not been investigated, a critical omission since the improved Vauxhall Way may well act

as a main distributor route, linking the airport with the A505. In addition the cost of tunnelling under airport taxiways necessary for an East of Luton Bypass has not been taken into account.

NHDC urges Luton and South Beds to review its conclusions and put forward a much more sustainable distribution of development which would result in far less damage to the environment.

Hitchin Forum endorses these objections and thanks NHDC for its thorough and conclusive response.

Local Development Framework—Land Allocations Additional Suggested Sites Consultation

Following earlier consultation, there are a further 125 suggested sites for possible development. Documents are at libraries and the Council offices in Gernon Road, or a direct link from the NHDC website: www.north-herts.gov.uk

Consultation open until 14 September.

Members should applaud the potentially cost-effective nature of NHDC's approach to the Museum and Town Hall problems. We do, but at the same time we are fearful that solutions which seem very cost-effective on the surface may ultimately become yet another nail in Hitchin's coffin. As Lady Bracknell might have said: "To lose one town hall, Mr. Worthing, may be regarded as a misfortune; to lose both looks like carelessness".

MUSEHALL MUSINGS



At the Town Talk and Hitchin Committee meetings on 9th June, the Museum/Town Hall proposal was discussed at length. There continues to be a degree of wonderment in the town at the speed with which this project has hit the road, especially as no other options appear to have been considered. There is an equal degree of concern that the largest community space in the town could be lost to us for ever.

The point was made several times at both meetings that there *must* be consultation at all stages with interested local groups and the public. We were assured that this will happen through the Facilities Working Group which has now

been set up.

Keith Hoskins, Town Centre Manager, put on the table a proposal from the Initiative Directors that, should the feasibility study conclude that the Town Hall is unsuitable for conversion to a museum, they would be prepared to reconsider asset transfer. In such an event they would need the Initiative's community group members to help launch an appeal for funds to achieve this.

The Hitchin Committee made the following recommendations to Cabinet:

- To note the considerable objections raised by the Hitchin Committee, local stakeholders, Hitchin Initiative, local businesses and members of the public to the conversion of Hitchin Town Hall to a central museum for North Hertfordshire;

- To include consultation with Hitchin's civic groups and the Hitchin Committee in the proposed timetable for the feasibility study;

- To make every effort to expand and continue the use of the Town Hall as a community facility during the feasibility study;

- To discuss with all interested parties during the feasibility study on all other options as an alternative to the conversion of the Town Hall, including with Herts County Council on the future of the current Hitchin Library and Museum site.

It is to be hoped that Cabinet will take these recommendations on board. In a letter in response to the article in our last Newsletter, Tricia Gibbs, the Portfolio Holder concerned, says that Forum mem-

PROTECTING HITCHIN'S HERITAGE

NHDC wants our views on changes they are proposing to make to Hitchin's Conservation Area.

Conservation Areas were first introduced by Government in 1967 and defined as "areas of special architectural or historic interest, the character or appearance of which it is desirable to preserve or enhance". Several aspects are taken into consideration when designating a Conservation Area: its general characteristics in terms of its location and setting; its historic development and archaeology; important views and the relationship between buildings and spaces; and more specific characteristics such as qualities of buildings and open spaces and the activities that take place in them.

Conservation Areas have greater planning controls over development and demolition, advertising and work on trees. Hitchin's historic town centre was designated as such in 1969. A boundary review in 1997 removed some peripheral areas and added the Edwardian residential area around Highbury Road and The Avenue.

This current re-appraisal is more detailed and more comprehensive. As well as Listed Buildings, 'Buildings of Local Interest' (see below), 'positive buildings' and 'landmark buildings' are explained and identified. The town centre is divided into various 'character areas' and additional areas such as parts of Nun's Close and Upper Tilehouse Street are suggested as well as minor boundary changes. Other proposed additions are extensive areas of Victorian housing in and around the Triangle area, including much of the original 'Gainsford complex' of buildings in Verulam and Radcliffe Roads. In addition, 2 new Conservation Areas are proposed: one covers Hitchin Railway buildings and associated Victorian housing nearby, along with Ransom's Recreation Ground. The second includes Butts Close, Wilshere Dacre School, Victorian houses on Fishponds Road, Bedford Road and Oughtonhead Way along with the small green there.

At the same time, the 'Register of Buildings of Local Interest in Hitchin' has also been reviewed, drawing ex-

tensively on research carried out by Hitchin Historical Society. These buildings tend not to be worthy of national Listing but have interesting architectural features, local historical interest or were designed by noteworthy architects. The number of buildings on the Register has been increased from 52 to 88, and the Council's future Local Development Framework will include a policy presumption in favour of retaining these buildings.

This review is most welcome and at first reading there is a great deal to support. Hitchin Forum's Planning Group will be discussing the Conservation Area Appraisal with other organisations in the town in order to prepare a considered response. If you are interested in helping with this, please contact Ellie Clarke (431338). However, it is important that as many individuals as possible respond as well. The consultation period lasts until 4th September. Detail of how and where to see the plans are shown below.

"This review is most welcome and at first reading there is a great deal to support."

There is an exhibition as follows:

Hitchin Library: 20 July - 21 August

Hitchin Town Hall: 24 August - 4 September

Officers will be available to discuss the proposals and answer questions as follows:

Saturday 1 August: 10am - 2pm, Hitchin Library

Thursday 20 August: 3-7pm, Hitchin Library

Wednesday 2 September: 2-5pm, Hitchin Town Hall

Questionnaires will be available at the exhibition and all the material can be viewed online:

http://www.north-herts.gov.uk/index/planning/planning_control_and_conservation/the_conservation_and_heritage_team/conservation_areas/hitchin_conservation_area_review/hitchin_conservation_area_review_public_consultation.htm

. Alternatively, go to the Council's website: www.north-herts.gov.uk, click onto: 'Planning control and conservation' under 'popular pages', click onto 'The Conservation and Heritage Team', then 'Conservation areas', and finally, click onto 'Hitchin Conservation Area Review'.

