

HITCHIN FORUM

Caring for our Town

NEWSLETTER

July 2010 No. 101

FORUM MEMBERS' MEETING: CHURCHGATE

Speaker: Charles Vyvyan,
New Business Director of
Simons. There will be an
opportunity for ques-
tions.

Wednesday 22 Septem-
ber, 7.30 pm, in Church
House, Churchyard.

THE NEXT TOWN TALK

Tuesday 13 July at
6.30pm
at the Gurdwara in
Wilbury Way, Hitchin

Inside this issue:

THE TRIANGLE COMMUNITY GARDEN	2
ISSUE GROUP REPORTS	2
CHURCHGATE NOTES	2
YOUR COMMENTS ON CHURCHGATE	3
CAMPAIGN UPDATES	3
SMALL GRANT AWARDS	4
BOOK REVIEW	4
MYTH-UNDERSTANDINGS ABOUT PLANNING	4

CHURCHGATE: THE FORUM'S ROLE

One of our aims is: *to provide a forum for public discussion of ideas and problems; to encourage developments which retain the town's special character and take account of residents' interests and wishes.*

How should we put this into effect in the context of the current debate about Simons proposals for redevelopment of Churchgate?

At the Town Centre Group meeting on 14 June, members had ample opportunity to state their views, and these have now been collated for submission. The views of some members who saw the exhibition early on have been submitted separately.

This is a once-in-a-generation opportunity for serious investment in Hitchin. Clearly there needs to be a lot more work done by Simons on their 'concept', taking on board what residents have said so far. I believe we need to ensure that we remain part of a constructive dialogue. It could be that ultimately it will prove impossible to find a way in which both Simons' and residents' requirements are met, or the state of the economy may eventually kill the project. But in order to retain our credibility we need to engage positively in the discussion. Compromises will be needed, and we should identify the areas where we believe no compromise is possible, and those where it is.

We have here a potential opportunity to rejuvenate an important part of the town, and secure the market's future for years to come. It was rightly pointed out at the Town Centre group meeting that there is no provision for community space, and demolition of the current Churchgate would remove the Subzero Club for teenagers at a stroke. That is just one issue that should be non-negotiable. However, there is a fear that if we are too intransigent in our demands we could be condemning Hitchin to years on the sidelines.

Editor

SOME FACTS

THE VIEW OF ST MARY'S CHURCH

In 1923 it would have been impossible to see the church from street level anywhere in Queen Street, as there were houses continuously between Biggin Lane and Portmill Lane. When they were demolished and the new St Mary's Square riverside was built in 1930, plans were drawn up for shops on the north, east and south sides of the square, in the same style as Hermitage Road. That never happened and eventually the market moved there in 1973.

If you walk from Portmill Lane along Queen Street to Biggin Lane in summer, only parts of the church can be seen at the Portmill Lane end. The view of the church opens up at the bottom of Hollow Lane, and by the time you reach Biggin Lane the view is obscured by the public toilets and market stalls. The best view is from the south east corner of the St Mary's Square car park, opposite the Bricklayers' Arms. From here the south and east aspects of the church would be nicely framed by mature trees, if it weren't for the huge willow.

MARKET SQUARE

Some 15 years ago there was uproar at the suggestion that the then car park in the square should be removed. Businesses would lose trade and there would be nowhere to park. A county councillor lost his seat over the issue. This same Market Square is now a vibrant community space, especially on Saturdays, and one of the reasons given for not moving the market there is that this space will be lost. We don't often like change, but history indicates that we are not always right!

THE NEXT TOWN CENTRE GROUP MEETING

9 August at 7.30pm in the Lucas
Room, Town Hall, Brand Street

THE TRIANGLE COMMUNITY GARDEN

This year the Triangle Community Garden celebrates its tenth birthday. Tucked away in a secluded corner of Ransom's Recreation Ground, off Grove Road, the garden has evolved over the years from a patch of nettles and an idea, to a magical haven of colour, scent, tranquility and biodiversity. But there's much more to the Triangle Garden than what you can see when you wander through. A host of thriving projects are at work bringing horticulture and traditional crafts alive on Hitchin's doorstep:

- 'Growing Ability' is a social and therapeutic horticulture project for adults with learning disabilities, run in partnership with the Letchworth-based Growing People Programme. The learning disabled adults involved spend half a day a week at the garden and its allotment, enjoying the benefits of working with plants, and each other, in a relaxed supportive setting.

- The Garden also hosts monthly volunteer sessions where people can take part in garden-related activities ranging from weeding and watering, to mosaic making and willow weaving. Plus a Friday afternoon chill session of gentle pottering.

- A new programme of craft, horticulture and sustainable living workshops is taking off, with successful hedgerow basketry and permaculture courses running this year. These will soon have a new venue in the form of Ransom's Pavilion, now under renovation, half of which will become a workshop/classroom for community use.

The Triangle Garden Talk has now become a regular fixture on the Hitchin Festival calendar - previous speakers include Christine Walkden and Bob Flowerdew.

Created and cultivated by local people of all ages and abilities, the Triangle Garden was established to provide a thriving green resource for the benefit and enjoyment of all. Ten years on and it is doing just that, thanks to all those who have contributed to its continuing evolution.

Alys Fowler's Edible Garden, Monday 5 July 7.30pm Woodside Hall. To find out more visit www.trianglegarden.org



ISSUE GROUPS REPORTS

Arts - The idea of a river walkway is being pursued, and we have decided to walk the route. If you would like to join in, meet us at the bridge in Bridge Street at 10am on Tuesday August 3rd. Bring your wellies or waterproof sandals, as some of the walk may become a paddle!



Youth - The major concern of youth leaders is over continued funding in the current economic climate.
Sport - The tennis club is having difficulty getting their lease renewed so they are unable to re-surface the courts or rebuild their pavilion. The lack of action on consultation about the re-vamping of Bancroft Recreation ground is the most likely cause.

Green - not a lot has happened following the Transition Towns meeting because of other pressing business. A directory of local produce and plans for garden swaps are two projects in the pipeline.

Planning - Activity in most areas has ceased, largely because the new coalition government has yet to decide what to do about regional planning.

Transport - Work on the Hitchin Urban Transport Plan has been held up for some time while Hertfordshire Highways and their consultants waited for clarification on housing and road schemes around Luton and Stevenage. With the change of government and lack of finance it seems much less likely that any of these schemes will go ahead in the near term. The plan now appears to be to complete the HUTP by the end of 2010, with consultation in the autumn. With any luck there may be more emphasis on improvements within Hitchin (resurfacing, pedestrians, cyclists etc.) now that "strategic" matters, i.e. a Hitchin southern bypass, are likely to be kicked into the long grass.

Consultants were going to look at

increasing the capacity of the Grove Road and Cadwell Lane traffic light junction in order to get yet more traffic into the industrial area. A relief road from Stotfold Road would obviously be preferable for Hitchin residents.

CHURCHGATE NOTES

We understand that the variance between Simons' concept drawings and the NHDC Planning Brief will be one of the main agenda items at the next Liaison Forum meeting on 28 July. This follows the presentation at the first Churchgate Liaison Forum meeting of the Hitchin Society's paper detailing this issue. The other main topic will be the location of the market. It is believed that this will be substantially revised following discussions with Hitchin Markets Ltd—and the many objections raised by members of the public. **The next Liaison Forum meeting is on Wednesday 28 July at 7.30pm in Church House, with a "town talk" type session from 6.30pm, when residents will have an opportunity to address the Liaison Forum members.**

SOME OF YOUR COMMENTS ON THE CHURCHGATE PROPOSALS

“Opening up of the river bank and new bridges improves the area”.

“The entrance from the marketplace - between the Rose & Crown and Nationwide - will create quite an interesting Gateway, and means the new development should not over-dominate the square.”

“Removing all the cars and tidying them away in a multi-storey car park is attractive provided that the design is tasteful, not 'barrack like' and that access is maintained 24/7, including Sundays and Bank Holidays.”

“Realigning Churchgate with Biggin Lane could create a strong elevation to define the east side of Market Place, creates a good mix of shallow units on the north side of Church Gate and deep units on the south, and could create a strong route through the site to the new store. The Market Place elevation and the entrance between Nationwide and the Rose & Crown will need carefully design to be successful.”

“Rather than building a flagship store it may be better to use the area for the market instead which would provide a space at least equal to the existing market site. The adjacent piazza could then be more closely inte-

grated with market activities, hosting specialist markets or as additional space should the market expand. It would mean that the 'openness' of the market and the St Mary's area would be retained as would the view of St Mary's from Queen Street or Hollow Lane, which would not be the case with the proposed scheme.”

“Dressing the car-park up as a neo-classical building would be a mistake and the blank elevation facing the river will only further emphasize its disconnection with the town.”

“Not clear is the vehicle access to the Biggin residential development, parking for Sun Hotel guests and service vehicles to the Churchgate shops on the Sun Street side. The plans show an articulated lorry but it is not clear how it got there. If it came from the town square then I'm not sure it is wise to have 44 ton articulated lorries traversing the high street and round the town square, especially on market days. It may have come down Jill Grey Place and across the river and again, I'm sure the residents would have something to say about that. Some of the sketches show pedestrians strolling through the Sun Hotel courtyard and across to the new Biggin residential development with not

a car in sight. There appears to be a critical shortage of manoeuvring space for large commercial vehicles without which a modern retail centre cannot operate.”

“Community spaces like church house need enhancement if this scheme goes ahead.”

“Character: the scheme as it stands has none. A distinctly 21st century solution would be preferable. Hitchin's urban quality comes from the variety that has come from each era creating buildings that are 'of their time' - not mimicking what was done 150 years ago: the Marketplace and Tilehouse Street being the prime examples. This has been done very successfully in towns of equal and indeed greater historic merit than Hitchin. York and Cambridge come to mind.”

“We would like to see plans and drawings that give a more realistic perception of what a proposed development would be like in terms of the pedestrian experience. The above ground perspective in the current artist's drawings is deceptive.”

Many thanks to all members who have contributed views, especially our two architects.

CAMPAIGN UPDATES

THE TOWN HALL

We are continuing to put together the application for the Community Builders Fund which will be substantially finished by 30th June. In parallel with that of course is the business case that is needed by the Council so that they can make an informed decision about the two schemes that have been proposed.

It all sounds fairly simple but there are lots of unknowns:

- How will the decision on listing, expected now in mid July, affect either or both proposals?
- Will there still be grant funding available after the recent budget?
- How will budget decisions affect Council spending commitments?
- How will the position of the existing Trust affect any proposal?
- How will the timescale impact on the acquisition of the adjacent property?

All we can do is proceed on our original

basis and get our funding application in - then it's in the lap of the gods.

Keith Hoskins

CHILDRENS' PLAYGROUND SAFETY

We were surprised at the alacrity with which the Comet turned our letter into an article, and it was immediately clear from the feedback received that many parents were concerned about the changes that had been made. Part of the reason for the removal of fencing was advice from The Play Inspection Company, based on guidance from Play England, who recommend that children should not be restricted and allowed to roam free. That is fine for children who are old enough to be safe out of sight of their parents, but hardly for the under-5s. Fortunately sense has been seen and fencing has been reinstated round the

toddlers' equipment at Ransom's and Smithsons', but at the latter the fence separating the wider play area from the road has still not been replaced.

We hope that in future there might be some consultation with councillors and parents before any major changes to playgrounds are made.

BENSLOW FIELD

There is still no news about the application for registration as a Town Green. The cogs run very slowly on these matters!

*Overheard in a local car park:
“I've never been to Hitchin before, but I saw it on TV the other evening, and it looked a really nice place!” - thanks to Janine Machin, BBC Look East 'Your Shout'.*

IMPORTANT INFORMATION FOR ALL MEMBER ORGANISATIONS

SMALL GRANT AWARDS

Since we established our specialist issue groups last year, one particular benefit has been the effect of bringing us closer together with our member organisations and those affiliated to the issue groups. We are thus more aware that there are some with particular financial needs and it was for this reason that the Steering Group decided Hitchin Forum could set aside a proportion of its expenditure for the purpose of awarding small grants to member or affiliated organisations that can identify a specific need or requirement.

If this is of interest to your organisation, please contact the treasurer via our website to request a simple

single A4 sized application form. Any decisions regarding applications would normally be decided at the following Steering Group meeting which are held on a quarterly basis - the next one being 2 September 2010.

This is a new venture and we shall evaluate how we proceed in response to the level of interest. We envisage grants would be in order of £50 to £200 maximum. The amounts may be small but sometimes, simply the fact that someone is willing to acknowledge support for a worthy cause is almost worth more than grant itself. Even if you are not aware yourself, please spread the word amongst your organisation as there may be others who do have a need to perhaps kick start a project or top-up other funding already received.

Jeremy Burrowes - Treasurer



Our first report from a member organisation is on page 2. We will be delighted to receive reports about the activities of other member groups for publication in the newsletter, and, indeed, letters to the Editor from members. Articles should ideally be no more than 300 words unless otherwise agreed with the Editor.

Please send articles or letters to the Secretary at the address below either by email or hard copy, giving a contact name and address and telephone number.

MYTH-UNDERSTANDINGS ABOUT THE PLANNING PROCESS—NOS. 2 & 3

2. *“Planners can and should stop the closure of city centre branches of national shops and can and should prohibit the opening of new branches”.*

Not so. Planning policy only allows the Council to control development in broadly-defined land-use categories. Thus Use Class A1 covers shops where the sale, display or service is to visiting members of the public (shops, hairdressers, etc); Class A3 covers use for the sale of food or drink for consumption on the premises; and Class B1(a) covers most offices. Planning law does not allow the Council to control the arrival or departure of particular companies who want to open or close, for example, shops, food outlets, or offices. The planning system cannot lawfully be used either to restrict competition or to preserve existing commercial interests.

3. *“I can object to a planning application on the grounds that the proposed development would have a negative impact on the value of my property”.*

Not so. A development's impact on property values is not what is called a “material consideration” when an application is assessed. Material considerations which must be considered are, of course, national, regional and local planning policies, but also the views of consultees (such as the County Council's transport officers or the Environment Agency) and factors on the ground. Objections which are non-material carry no weight when an application is assessed. Reasons for refusal must refer to policies in the Local Plan and must be defensible because an applicant has the right to appeal against refusal of permission - but an objector does not have a right of appeal against the granting of permission.

Alan Baker, Cambridge City Councillor, used with permission

BOOK REVIEW

HITCHIN THROUGH TIME, by Hugh Madgin. Amberley Publishing £12.99.

This is a fascinating collection of photographs which compare views of Old Hitchin with their counterparts today, all taken from pretty much the same viewpoint. It is interesting to see how our town has changed over the years, and somewhat depressing to see what is no longer. Brand Street is a prime example. It would have been useful to see dates on the old photos, as the text often does not make the time scales clear, and one inaccuracy spotted is the attribution of a house in Benslow Lane as the original Girton College, rather than what is now Benslow Nursing Home. That said, it is a fascinating read, particularly at a time when we are considering how Hitchin may change in the future.

Available from the Hitchin Initiative office.



The Secretary, 34 Benslow Rise, Hitchin SG4 9QY 01462 450494
Member of: Hitchin Town Centre Initiative
Historic Towns Forum
Campaign to Protect Rural England

info@hitchinform.org.uk
www.hitchinform.org.uk

President: Michael Ransom

