

HITCHIN FORUM

Caring for our Town

NEWSLETTER

January 2010 No. 99

IMPORTANT MEETINGS

THE NEXT TOWN TALK

Tuesday 9th March at
6.15pm
at the Roman Catholic
Church Hall, Nightin-
gale Road, Hitchin

THE NEXT TOWN CENTRE GROUP MEETING

Monday 15 March

*At 7.30pm in the Lucas
Room, Hitchin Town Hall*

All welcome

HITCHIN TOWN HALL

**THURSDAY 11 FEBRUARY,
7.30pm at Hitchin Town Hall**

The Full Council meets to decide the fate of our Town Hall and Museum. They have to choose between two options: (a) the proposals already put forward by NHDC as discussed at their 3 December 2009 meeting, and (b) alternative plans currently being worked up by Hitchin Initiative and their consultants, with the support of community groups including Hitchin Forum.

CHURCHGATE

**MONDAY 22 FEBRUARY,
7.30pm at Hitchin Town Hall**

The Scrutiny Committee and the Hitchin Area Committee will meet to consider the views of Cabinet put forward at their meeting on 16 February, and to make recommendations to Full Council in relation to the tender for the Churchgate contract.

The final decision will be made by Full Council on 25 February.

See page 2 for further details

SCRAP METAL LORRIES ON HITCHIN'S ROADS

Hearing at County Hall on 16 March—see page 4

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TRANSITION TOWN STATUS FOR HITCHIN?

Chris Honey is a designer who loves adventure. He is training to be a glider pilot at Dunstable, enjoys scuba diving holidays, has parachuted and sky dived for charity as well as co-organising the first Hitchin Environmental Show.

This fits in perfectly with his interest in **Transition Towns**, 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, care about each other and achieve things by having a positive attitude.

Chris says he is not an expert, but wishes to share what he has learned about the idea so far and connect with others who are interested in an adventurous Transition journey.

For more information about HITCHIN IN TRANSITION meet Chris and others in the Lucas Room Hitchin Town Hall at 7.30 pm on Monday 22 February.

Thanks to North Herts Friends of the Earth, Hitchin Forum and Hitchin Initiative

TOWN HALL AND CHURCHGATE—THE LATEST

TOWN HALL

Members who attended the Full Council meeting on 3 December will have heard the presentations given by Keith Hoskins, Town Centre Manager, and Rosemary Read, Secretary of Hitchin Forum given on behalf of the community of Hitchin. These can now be read on our website. Subsequent meetings with Hitchin Initiative's consultant from the Development Trust Association and NHDC Officers and Portfolio Holders have resulted in an agreement that an alternative proposal, which would bring the main hall into community ownership, can be considered. Hitchin Initiative is now working against the clock to produce sufficient detail for Councillors to be able to judge whether this would provide better facilities for Hitchin than their

own consultants' proposals.

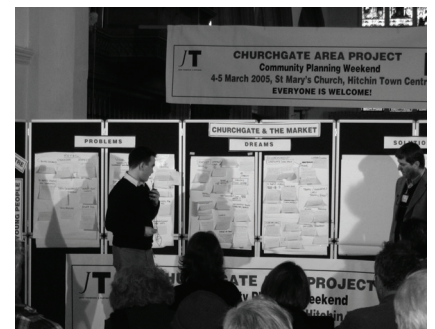
We are grateful to Councillors for allowing further discussions to take place and enabling Hitchin people a say in the future of the building—albeit at the 11th hour—and we are confident that they will give the new proposals positive consideration.

CHURCHGATE

As members will be aware, after years of consultation and tendering, there is now only one developer remaining in the frame for the redevelopment. The joint meeting on 22 February will consider the background to the scheme and governance arrangements if a contract is awarded. We understand this should include arrangements for creating a Liaison

Forum which will be of particular interest to people in Hitchin.

There will be opportunity for public participation at the start of the meeting, though the public will be excluded from any discussions with commercial sensitivity. In the meantime, given the ongoing uncertainty around the future of Churchgate, the existing leaseholder (whose redevelopment proposal was excluded at the outset) has put on hold his plans to simply refurbish the main shopping centre, an option which is looking increasingly sensible and viable.



Do you remember this event in 2005?

ISSUE GROUPS REPORTS

ARTS

This group has 'hit the ground running' and has plans to:

- contact affiliated Arts organisations and ask them how they think the Forum might help them;
- construct a list of the other Arts organisations in the town and approach them to see if they are interested in joining the Forum.

Possible projects include: publicising Arts events in the town and exploring the possibility of getting a legal graffiti wall in Hitchin.

TRANSPORT

Recent issues discussed include:

- Williams' scrap metal public enquiry;
- the Hitchin Urban Transport Plan draft consultation due in the first quarter of this year;
- work on the Bedford Road cycle path, which when completed is likely to be disappointing, due to start this year. A Google group has been set up so that group members and others can have quick and easy input into and discussion on transport issues.

YOUTH

A common cry amongst youngsters generally is that there is 'nothing to do' in their town; that is not the case in Hitchin. The range of activities that are laid on for our young residents, particularly for those aged 11 and above, is impressive. More than seventy separate activities spread over all seven days are on offer. These include sports, dancing, music, theatre and general chilling out in the company of other young people. Many of the activities on offer are free to participants.

At a meeting in December convened by Margaret Bracey, NHDC Community Development Officer for Hitchin, a number of the youth group leaders were present. Although they had a variety of successful events and activities to report they expressed a number of concerns, shortage of funding and shortage of volunteers to help run their groups. Whilst some activities were well-attended there was also a worry in some cases that attendances were below what might be expected. Some of the young people who would benefit from participating were difficult to reach.

A project for youngsters which has

been well received is Mill Media. In July 2009 a broadcasting studio was opened in the Westmill Community Centre and over the next two weeks more than 100 people were involved in a range of programmes including live interviews and recorded music. All the youngsters involved with Mill Media had experienced confidence building, career opportunities, show preparation, DJ duties, broadcasting and inter-personal skills. It is hoped that in 2010 the activity could be expanded to a fortnight during the Easter break and four weeks in the summer.

If these groups are to flourish and to expand they need support, both financially and in volunteer time. It is in all our interests to see that they get that support.

MEMBERSHIP

Thanks to all those who have renewed their membership. If we have not yet received your renewal, another form is enclosed, and it would be much appreciated if you would complete and return it with your subscription as soon as possible.

TALE OF A PIGEON'S TAIL

You should find enclosed with this newsletter a leaflet entitled 'A Pigeon's Tale'.

This tale tells you why and how it came to be. As a town centre resident living close to the Hiz I and my neighbours suffer daily from pigeons infiltrating our balconies and leaving their messy evidence behind - from their behinds! Over the years this problem has grown exponentially.

I have a file recording my efforts to have notices erected beside the Hiz asking the public not to feed them. It dates back to 1999. You could say I have been successful because the notices are in evidence. Unfortunately they are not effective and only recently have pigeons been added to the duck message. A picture of a fashion model featured in a November 2007 edition of the Comet feeding ducks and pigeons just twenty paces

away from the notice imploring the public not to do so, as it attracts vermin, is evidence of their failure. When I observe people spreading loaves of bread and seed over the river banks I can only conclude that they are illiterate, partially sighted or arrogantly ignoring the notice. You could say that I was being Nimby here; actually it's my front balcony which is affected, though rats have increased in my back yard because of the abundance of food left for them in the neighbourhood when the birds have had their fill. Also my front 'yard' is occupied by many other people and pigeons in the town centre - see how many buildings are netted there now - very unsightly and expensive and not sympathetic to the town's Conservation Area status. St

Mary's Church is not netted, so maintenance costs have increased dramatically with the need to clean and clear blocked pipes and gutters. There is damage to stone and brickwork through corrosion from acids created as fungus develops in the droppings.

So this is my tale - many letters to the Comet, emails to various NHDC councillors and officers, questions at councillors' surgeries and Town Talk plus meetings at the Gernon Road offices have generated some action by the Council. For example in 2008 an article entitled 'Pigeons - Poo!' in Outlook, a press release and information on the Council's web site and cooperating with me to create the Pigeon's Tale leaflet (not distributed till September 2009, over a year later), all asking the public not to feed the pigeons.

The signs have not been upgraded however, despite the promise to increase their size and to add two more on the St Mary's Square side of the river at the most popular feeding points. But with no funds available it remained a promise until Councillor Paul Clark announced that £600 could be made available from the Highbury Ward Budget!

So my tale ends with the hope that they will be installed soon and that their message is more effective. Excuse me. I have to shoo some pigeons away now before they build another nest.

Chris Honey



HITCHIN INITIATIVE AGM

This event was held recently at the Sun Hotel, and provided a very up-beat assessment of the Initiative's activities over the past year.

Following the successful launch of the BID, the Initiative now has a good number of business members from outside the town centre, as well as several community organisations and individual residents. There is now more flexibility for the organisation to get involved in wider issues - an opportunity which is being taken up with enthusiasm.

Highlights of 2009 include the successful BID and the continued success of Hitchin Markets and Hitchin Festival, and, of

course, the Christmas lights. Recently there was the welcome news that the Market has won the national association of British market authorities' 'Market of the Year 2010' Best Private Market category. A fine example of community success which may bode well for the Town Hall.

Town News has changed its appearance and some of the many issues of concern which have been discussed include Roadworks, Fair-trade, Churchgate, Parking Strategy, Conservation Area Review, Heritage Weekend, Vibrant Towns, Hertfordshire Economic Development Strategy, Transition Towns,

and many more besides.

The Town Centre Manager has visited Ipswich, Colchester and Lewes, and hosted visits from Professors from the Universities of Ulster (School for the Built Environment) and the Dept. of Urban Environment Systems, Chiba University, Japan, as well as representatives from the Indiana Chamber of Commerce. He hasn't yet been invited to Ulster, Indiana or Japan, but lives in hope!

The Initiative remains essential:

- to add value by seeking grant and project funding for Hitchin, providing business expertise and being the first

'point of call' for Hitchin;

- to continue its services to its business members, many of whom are in the wider rural area, and to the many community groups who have joined over the years;

- to expand its membership to encompass more of the community individual residents who have sought advice or project support;

to enhance its strategic role by engaging with local authorities and other statutory bodies making sure that issues which affect the well-being of the town are high on the agenda.

Hitchin Market wins the national association of British market authorities' 'Market of the Year 2010' Best Private Market category

PLANNING ISSUES

Titmore Cottages - this pair of cottages on Queen Street has been in a sorry state for some time and a cause of considerable concern. However, we are now cautiously optimistic that this is about to change. We understand from NHDC's planning department that negotiations have recently taken place with Conservation officers regarding repairs to the buildings and re-occupation for residential use, and it now seems that practical measures are being taken to that end. There are also plans for these cottages are to be included in an extended Conservation Area and added to the proposed updated Buildings of Local Interest list which will give more protection against demolition or redevelopment.

Hitchin Lawn Tennis Club - have applied for planning permission to replace their clubhouse in Bancroft Recreation Ground which was destroyed in an arson attack last autumn.

Hitchin Forum strongly supported this application for several reasons. The footprint, access, layout and proportions would be virtually unaltered so its appearance would be similar to the previous building, but with wheelchair access, improved insulation and non-combustible materials used in its construction. We urged the council to grant permission as soon as possible to enable the club to rebuild the facility for the beginning of this year's season. However, landlord's consent is also needed from the Council and as it happens, NHDC leisure officers will be carrying out a review of Bancroft Rec in 2010 in order to get a comprehensive overview of the park, its buildings and facilities. Contributions from developers towards community improvements in this area have accumulated over recent years and NHDC now has in excess of £51,000 to put to-

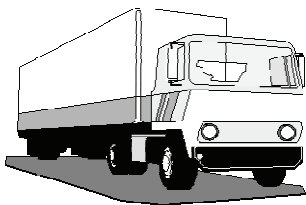
wards improving the park and its facilities. Consultation on what the public would like done in the park is due to start in May 2010 and in the meantime, leisure officers want Hitchin Lawn Tennis Club to delay rebuilding their clubhouse. However, Hitchin Councillors have given their support to the club, who need to get on with rebuilding immediately in order to function successfully, this year and in the future.

Former Bus Garage on Bridge Street - there have been several applications in recent years to demolish this building and redevelop the site into flats. Much of Hitchin's attractiveness resides in its rich stylistic mix and locally distinctive buildings. Unusual and quirky buildings such as this one contribute to interesting and characterful street frontages and, at the very least, the facade of the existing building should be retained and in any redevelopment restored. This is also a particu-

larly prominent site on a gateway to the town centre and the historic Conservation Area. We have consistently objected to redevelopment proposals here which are inappropriate (Hitchin has plenty of flats already) and 'Anytown Architecture'. We are pleased to report that to date, all redevelopment proposals have been refused planning permission. Most recently refusal has been on grounds of highway safety and poor standard of design and living conditions.



SCRAP METAL LORRIES



There is to be a hearing at County Hall on 16th March (expected to last four days) concerning the appeal by J Williams (or their successors) against an Enforcement Notice served on 22 June 2009 alleging an unauthorised change of use in character and volume from 74,500 tons of scrap per annum to 181,000 tons per annum handled at their yard in Wallace Way. This has resulted in loss of amenity for local residents, adverse impact on other businesses and a substantial increase in HGV movements by day and

night. The effect is felt over a wide area.

Written submissions can be sent to Mr Iain Leech at County Hall. More detail is available by email from: cadwell-lane.residents@hotmail.co.uk. Representations from residents on access routes to the Industrial Area would be welcome (Bedford Road/ Fishponds Road and Queen Street/Verulam Road). Pretty well ALL this traffic has to use Grove Road and Cadwell Lane which is dreadful for those residents. **All support is most welcome!**

NHDC CONSULTANCY FEES

The recent revelations in The Comet that NHDC has incurred expenditure in excess of £1.5 million on consultancy fees in 2008/9 is alarming to say the least, and we hope that Scrutiny Committee can ascertain why so much work has to go to consultants. As we know from the Churchgate saga, we don't always seem to get very good value for money.

PUBLIC RELATIONS

There has been criticism recently that the Forum has not been "high profile" enough. There is a very simple explanation: nobody on the Steering Group has the time or the skills to undertake PR to the extent that would be required in addition to the work they already have—both for the Forum and in other areas.

So if any member is able to help us with this we will be delighted to hear from you. If this interests you, please contact the Secretary.

The Secretary, 34 Benslow Rise, Hitchin SG4 9QY 01462 450494

Member of: Hitchin Town Centre Initiative
Campaign to Protect Rural England

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