

HITCHIN FORUM

Caring for our Town

NEWSLETTER

July/August 2014 No. 124

Chairman's Piece

Have you walked along Gypsy Lane? Starting at Wymondley Road, it takes you alongside the Purwell Ninesprings Nature Reserve. If you continue to Purwell Recreation Ground, go through Purwell Meadows, and on through to Walsworth Common, there is a good experience waiting for you! The first part along the road to Great Wymondley is not great, but the County Council officers are aware and seem keen to make the footway between the railway and Gypsy Lane safer. Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust have nurtured the nature reserve with the help of local volunteers, to create ponds with viewing platforms, whilst water voles cruise the more remote waterways. The recreation ground has a superb play area, created by NHDC and its partners, alongside the football pitches. The Meadows were bought by the Council in 1982 with help from the World Wildlife Fund and the Countryside Commission, providing a green haven and pasture for cattle.

Walsworth Common is now the focus for improvement. A recent walk around the site was arranged by Countryside Management Service and NHDC. Work has already begun to improve the river. The bridge over the river needs to be replaced, and ideas on improving the rest of the area are developing. We look forward to hearing about the next steps.

Another walk to contemplate is that around the 'Priory' fields, south of Priory Way bypass, on July 27th. Hitchin Town Action Group is organising this, to show what would be lost if one of the largest housing options in NHDC's latest *Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment* is pursued. Houses are needed, but what may be lost in certain locations needs to be carefully considered.

The Town Hall has been a site of continuing concern. First the concrete wall on the stage. Next the stacking of building materials on the sprung floor. Lately the desecration of the foyer - forget about the listed building (does that just mean it's listed to have pipes and cabling chucked in next to those funny curvy plaster bits?), don't worry about the planning permission, that can wait till later. It is difficult to understand how the project is being conducted in a way which seems to ignore the concerns of all who want to see the retention of a well used and cherished town building.

As we go to press, the result of the Lottery bid for Bancroft Recreation Ground is not known. Whatever the outcome, we hope there will be a continuing dialogue between local people, councillors and council officers over the coming months to consider what is best for the town.

Meanwhile sweeter music emerges from Hitchin Festival – and the opportunity to tune up the muscles, at FitFest, Hitchin's first fitness festival, on Bancroft Recreation Ground, July 19th. Have fun.

Mike Clarke, Chairman

newsletter@hitchinform.org.uk

Founded 1992

Chairman: Mike Clarke

Member of: Hitchin Initiative
Campaign to Protect Rural England
Historic Towns Forum

Kindly leave the stage . . .

Concerns have mounted recently over works being carried out on Hitchin Town Hall without listed building consent and which are damaging to the fabric of this Grade II Listed Building. Members of Hitchin Forum's Steering Group who have attended briefing meetings for community groups consider the issues:

The story of the permanent (it was meant to be temporary) wall across the stage in the Mountford Hall has been public knowledge for some time, as have been concerns about work in the foyer and the Lucas Room. The architects responsible for the work have belatedly submitted a planning application for listed building consent for these works. It is alarming that in reply to the question on the application form, "*Has the work already started without planning permission?*", their response is "*No!*"

Despite this, work has already begun on installing mechanical equipment on the block wall recently constructed across the stage which was to be a reversible 'stud' wall, thus making the stage permanently unusable; installing intrusive pipe work in the foyer which has ruined the original cornice; ripping up tongued and grooved floorboards of the Lucas Room, rendering them unusable; running electrical conduits along the entire length of the west wall of the Mountford Hall beneath the cornice.

All this work has been carried out without the consent or knowledge of Hitchin Town Hall Ltd, who are the Council's partners in the project and who are responsible for eventually running the refurbished Town Hall. In terms of planning legislation, it is also totally unacceptable; the *Planning (Listed Building and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 (LBCA Act)* states: "*It is a criminal offence to carry out work which needs*

listed building consent without obtaining it beforehand".

The *Design and Access Statement* submitted as part of the application is substandard to the point of being incomprehensible in places, using terms such as "*athletic radiator*", "*talked to be farmed*", "*surface mounted roots*" and "*Soviet local system*". This demonstrates a worrying lack of care in its preparation and it is clearly not fit for purpose.

At the last "Town Talk" which precedes the Hitchin Committee meeting, we asked that Councillors see the work for themselves and report back to us. During the Committee meeting itself, NHDC's Project Manager seemed surprised at the request, stating that he, the architect, the contractor and the sub-contractor had all agreed to the manner in which the work had been done.

The application has now been called in for committee determination and English Heritage has been alerted. In the meantime, there has been no question of halting work pending a proper evaluation and the contractors are pressing on. However, answers are required to some searching questions regarding both the quality of NHDC's project management of this very complex project on a Listed Building and the quality of oversight by the Council's Project Board.

Ellie Clarke, John Keene

Diary Dates

Tuesday 22 July: **Town Talk** - 6.30pm; **Hitchin Committee** 7.30pm, Westmill Community Centre
Open discussion between public and councillors, followed by consideration of officer reports and debate by Hitchin Councillors.

Sunday 27 July: **Guided Walk around Priory Fields** - see article opposite for details

Saturday 1 August: **Hitchin Councillors' Surgery** - 10.30am - 12 noon, Hitchin Market Place

Tuesday 2 September: **Town Talk** - 6.30pm; **Hitchin Committee** - 7.30pm; Hitchin Boys School

"Priory Fields" - a blot on the landscape?

As discussed in our previous Newsletter, NHDC has produced a further study of potential housing sites following the consultations in 2013, to be used in preparing their forthcoming Draft Local Plan (search for 'SHLAA' on www.north.herts.gov.uk). The very large site for 7,000 homes south and west of the town has been reduced, but there is still a range of sites at Lucas Lane, Grays Lane and Highover Farm about which residents may wish to write to Councillors. If you want advice related to these proposals please contact us at planning@hitchinforum.org.uk.

The Planning Group and Steering Group have discussed the issues and have concluded that the site for 1,000 homes on Green Belt land at Priory Fields (between the Park Way bypass and Maydencroft) will be of most concern to Hitchin as a whole.

Working with other members of *Hitchin Town Action Group* (Hitchin Society, Hitchin Historical Society, Hitchin Initiative), Hitchin Forum is helping to raise awareness of **the need to take urgent action to persuade the District Council to exclude this site from the Draft Local Plan**. We need to act now. If we wait until the Draft Local Plan is produced later in the year it will be very difficult indeed to get the site excluded from the Plan.

There are two things that members can do to support this action:

Write to your local councillor to express concern about the possible inclusion of Priory Fields for housing development. The joint email from HTAG to Hitchin Councillors is provided on our website under *HTAG Housing* and sets out the main issues relating to the loss of a very significant area of Green Belt (also summarised in the enclosed flyer). Please use it as a basis for your own letter, and add any other concerns you have. Also on the website is a list of local Councillors with contact details. It is important that Councillors realise there is widespread concern.

Join us on the Priory Fields guided walk on 27th July so we can see the scale of the development and its potential effects. The flyer for this is available on the website and is enclosed with this copy of the Newsletter – please use it to encourage friends and neighbours to join us on the walk. If you can help to distribute it in a couple of roads near you please contact us on hitchintag@gmail.com, and we can supply you with more copies. We will meet at the footbridge by The Three Moorhens from 10.45 to allow a prompt start at 11.00. Some of the paths are uneven, although there are no stiles on the proposed route. Participants are advised that they take part in this event entirely at their own risk. **Adrian Gurney**



Photo courtesy of John Davies

Planning Matters

Sunpower

Do you trust Green Energy when they claim their electricity is clean solar renewable power gathered from 93 million miles away? You need no better proof than their latest proposal for a solar park opposite Wymondley electricity sub-station. This application is a request to NHDC to establish whether an environmental impact assessment is required as part of a future planning application for photovoltaic panels on a 51.3 acre site. It is environmentally well considered, with additional planting which incorporates biodiversity enhancement, to screen neighbours' views. I say all power to them!

Chris Honey

Greased up!

Our objection to an application for Change of Use at 2 Churchyard from retail to restaurant - a burger bar - was not accepted by NHDC Planning. We think they slipped up there! Now we hear that an alcohol licence has been applied for. So, unless this is defeated, you can expect well oiled consumers of basted bites lubricating this hallowed area.

Chris Honey

Luton Airport

The proposed expansion of Luton Airport is now set to go ahead. Here Hitchin Forum member, Bill Sellicks, exposes some worrying implications:

Have you noticed that more flights seem to pass over Hitchin recently? As we know, the sadly depressing news is that the airport developments will go ahead, but whether changes in flight paths are associated with the development is unclear at present.

On the 29th May I attended a LADACAN meeting in Breachwood Green where a very disturbing aspect of the planning process was discussed at some length, namely the failure to include in the planning conditions a key noise mitigation measure. This had been offered previously by the airport and committed them to reducing the noise level for night flights. It was Luton Borough Council (LBC) who omitted this from the application documents, not the airport.

The airport's Noise and Track Sub-Committee (NTSC) and London Luton Airport Consultative Committee (LLACC) (members of which represent LADACAN and other groups) are still scrutinising the noise mitigation measures, and these might therefore be modified to include the previously promised commitment to reduce the night time noise limit to 80dBA by Jan 2015. LBC's Planning Committee members will be required to sign-off on any change to the application approved on 20th December 2013.

Judging by the tone/mood of that meeting, they may be reluctant to acquiesce to any modifications. LADACAN's Andrew Lambourne therefore requested that those present write to Development Control Committee members to urge the reinstatement of the measure. Accordingly, I have drafted a letter from Hitchin Forum which will be sent to all Committee members prior to the meeting (for which we have no date at present).

In addition to this, we were urged to complain about noisy flights, and this is where individual Hitchin Forum members can help by completing the noise complaint form available online. It was also suggested that the complaint should be copied to our local MP since some concern was expressed that complaints were simply ignored and possibly not even logged.

The online complaint form is at <http://www.london-luton.co.uk/en/noisecomplaint/> and Peter Lilley's email is: feedback@peterlilley.co.uk. Please do complain and encourage others to take the trouble to do so, since multiple complaints from different people carry more weight than those from a single complainant.