



NEWSLETTER

January-February 2017 No. 139

Vice-Chairman's Piece

2016 Highlights

Early hopes of a suitably restrained **Churchgate** redevelopment proposal from Hammersmatch were dashed when it became clear that building flats over the existing structure would not be feasible. NHDC considered buying out the lease, and may still do so. Although we have objected, the next local plan may end up including another attempt at a large-scale redevelopment including St. Mary's Square.

A second **Air Quality Management Area** has now been declared, covering the vicinity of the Paynes Park roundabout. The first AQMA in Stevenage Road has been totally ineffective at producing any improvement in air quality. Will the second be any different?

A year ago, we hoped that the **Town Hall and Museum** would soon be open. While the Town Hall has opened, the dispute between NHDC and Hitchin Town Hall Ltd. remains unresolved and the museum closed to the public. NHDC's attempt to buy 14 and 15 Brand Street (the museum entrance) from HTHL's creditors with a bargain basement offer backfired when Hitchin Town Hall Finance Ltd. bought the debt instead. We can only hope that agreement can be reached on a purchase price acceptable to all parties which allows the museum entrance to be used and the museum finally to open.

It would be nice to think that NHDC will learn lessons from recent failures, such as the collapse of the Churchgate redevelopment attempt and the Town Hall/Museum debacle. Unfortunately, the Council's "**Task and Finish Group**" tended to find that everybody else involved was at fault. For a more balanced view, perhaps councils should not be allowed to mark their own homework in this way. See Mike Clarke's article on page 2.

Our biggest activity of 2016 was commenting on NHDC's proposed **Submission Local Plan**. We are keen for a plan to be put in place to prevent a planning free-for-all, with NHDC unable to resist speculative applications. However there remain questions, one of which is that the plan does not answer adequately how to deal with the extra traffic generated by the new housing. Will there really be any shift to sustainable transport, and can a few junction modifications really make any worthwhile difference? Our article on page 5 about HCC's "Transport Vision 2050" gives some insight into why this seems to defeat our planners.

Litter remains a major problem in our town and, regrettably, much of the UK. Litter-picking and "bininstallations" show that Hitchin residents care and are prepared to do something about the problem, but sadly it persists. What is to be done?

While there seems to be much to fret about, there have been positive developments as well. **Footpath improvements** and **Greenspace Action Plans** are generally welcome. Reading the well thought out Oughtonhead Common GAP is a reminder that we have some delightful countryside nearby, and how important it is to take care of it when there is so much pressure for extra development.

David Borner

Our Website and the Wider World

One thing that really needed to be sorted a few years ago was our website. Fortunately, we found a friendly web designer who could do the technical stuff and made it much easier to load and change content. This made it, I think, an attractive site. Four years on we have had a minor upgrade, but I always wonder if we could do better.

The website is a place to compile documents and background information for the various issues and campaigns that we get involved in, and to make that accessible to all. The content does need updating regularly, and any comments on that, and other aspects of the site, are welcome. I wonder who uses the site? Google analytics gives some figures – over 6000 people looked at the site last year, viewing almost 14000 pages, about the same as the previous year. Most popular was the Welcome page, followed by the Butts Close Car Park item and Hitchin's History. How much people read and learn from this is not measured – so feedback from you would be lovely.

We also have some social media activity (or antisocial if we count the Trump and the Trolls). On Twitter we have over 1300 followers. Many seem to be businesses which may just be advertising their existence, but it seems a quick and useful route to publicize our business – reports on developments and town plans. It also provides information on what is happening in town (and much else). Facebook is more difficult for me as I don't use it personally. The Forum posts news on it, which probably reaches another audience, and it has been an occasional source of local information and contact. We had hoped that some aficionado would leap forward and take this on, but such has not happened. Is this something you, or a member you know, might be prepared to take on?

You will have noticed several pleas to make comments – do you use these platforms? Could they have different style or content? What else can you say or suggest? **Do let me know.**

Mike Clarke (email: website@hitchinforum.org.uk)

Task & Finish - the sequel

I have previously commented on NHDC's Task & Finish Group examination of the Council's 'larger projects'. The first meeting of this subgroup of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee that I attended was about Churchgate. I thought that was a poor show – the rules appeared to have been bent with no external input. The offer of public participation was withdrawn, so we sat silently by whilst officers presented their accounts, which despite much accurate detail, omitted various issues and glossed over the public outrage at the way the project had been conducted. Not much learning for them or the community.

The next meeting I attended was on January 10th and was intended to examine the Hitchin Swim Centre and Letchworth Leisure Centre projects. I had no particular axe to grind, but was interested in the process. We were informed about the meeting on the previous Friday, and helpfully could read the reports that had been prepared for it. On the day before, we were informed that the Chairman would allow public presentations, of 3 minutes each. At the end of the meeting the Chairman did invite the three members of the public who attended to speak, but stressed that we should not talk about past events, only about the future. I may have misunderstood, but it seemed that the main dynamic, to look at what had happened and learn from that, was being blocked in case officers (or maybe councillors) were criticized. A more open learning spirit would seem good.

The report from all the T&F Group's meetings will be presented at the Council's Overview & Scrutiny Committee on March 21st. At some date after that the conduct of the Town Hall & Museum project is due to be discussed. We are on the edge of our seats.

Information about these groups does appear on the NHDC website, and the very helpful Scrutiny Officer can provide information as and when available.

Mike Clarke

Pub Quiz

Q. What common factor unites the following planning applications: The Orchard & Anvil, The Conservative Club, The Sailor Boy, The Windmill, The Sir John Barleycorn, The Nightingale, The Radcliffe?

A. They are all subject to change of use/redevelopment with many objections received.

Q. Which application is the odd one out?

A. The Conservative Club changed into a Wetherspoons pub/restaurant. The others, having been public houses, relate to change to domestic use with one including a shop.

Q. With the exception of the Wetherspoons application, why were these applications objected to?

A. Mainly because of the loss of a public amenity (drinking/eating establishments). Some pubs were considered community assets with an important role in the historic street scene, and some objections related to the density or appearance of the proposed development, especially those in a conservation area.

OK quiz over, here is a bit more about alcohol abstention in our town and a nearby village.

There were three attempts to replace **The Orchard & Anvil**. Two were refused because of the overwhelming volume and height of the proposals. Finally, in January 2013 the application for four 3 bed dwellings with 8 car parking places was approved. Well, it has reduced the antisocial behaviour in that area.

The Sailor Boy application received many objections not only about the loss of a local pub but also about traffic access and the residential units to the rear of the proposed shop. After some amendments, the shop alterations were granted in February 2015 and the nine 1 bed flats approved in July 2015. This despite Hitchin Forum's concerns regarding the personal safety and security of future residents due to the rear access, and the bland frontage resulting from the extension of the existing building.

The Windmill in Charlton is more contentious. A retrospective planning application to retain a previously added porch and side extension for domestic use was refused in May 2016. Despite a huge petition the pub remains closed and the applicant has filed an appeal to retain the alterations.

The Sir John Barleycorn application proposed a detached 4 bed house in the car park, in addition to a side extension to provide two 3 bed flats. After an outcry about the size of the detached house, general over development and lack of sufficient on-site parking the application was withdrawn. The second proposal reduced this to two 2 bed flats and two one bed dwellings. This was granted in June 2016.

The Nightingale proposal delivered a respectful extension of the existing building plus a detached two storey building to the rear, together providing twelve 2 bed flats. Hitchin Forum's planning group felt some of the rooms were too small and that the site was over developed leaving no room for car parking on the site. However, after a reduction in the building volume, this was granted in June 2016.

Which leaves **The Radcliffe!** I last counted 165 objections to the owner's proposal to demolish this visual asset in a prominent location within a conservation area. It has been operating as a public house since 1885 providing a meeting space for community groups and fundraisers. The poor design quality of the proposed development in no way justifies the loss of such a landmark building. Fortunately, this application has been withdrawn. Perhaps the operators are having second thoughts about their business plan and will find a way of keeping it open successfully.

Alcoholic conclusion. It seems some applicants have one drink too many when applying to change their drinking house.

Chris Honey

Butts Close - what's been happening?

"Just keep an eye out for any issues that might be relevant", said Ellie Clarke.

That was nearly four years ago, when she asked if I would join a new group together with four other people¹, and re-form the Friends of Butts Close, started many years before by the late John Jarvis under the umbrella of Hitchin Forum. No problem, I thought. I might even do a newsletter, perhaps once or twice a year if there was enough of any interest to put in it. Then she brought out a massive archive of papers. Stuart (heroically) said he'd scan them so we'd all have access...

And guess what? Parking, parking, parking...

In 1991, 1994, 2001, 2003 and in 2004 Butts Close becomes the focus of Council Officers' solutions to the issue of more parking spaces for users of the Swimming Centre - and subsequently the Archers Fitness Centre - and opposition to this becomes the focus of residents' concerns about the effects upon this venerable – and vulnerable – green space, part of which is common land. Fortunately, Councillors listen to these concerns. But each time a new development is built – the new Hitchin Swimming Centre in 1991, Archers' Fitness Centre in 2000, and the Dance/Fitness Studios in 2014 – the call once again is for part of Butts Close to be sacrificed for cars.

However, this time, in 2016, it's a bit different. The Commons Act of 2006 has strengthened the protection of common land, and Council Officers have had to submit an application to central government's Planning Inspectorate for consent to build a road on Butts Close. The proposed road would lead from the existing car park down the Close along the west side of the Swimming Centre/Archers complex, to provide vehicle access to an additional car park next to the Dance/Fitness Studios.

The kindest thing to say about the Council's submission is that it was very brief. It appeared to meet few of the Inspectorate's recommendations or guidelines, was in parts factually inaccurate, was based upon unsubstantiated need, and it failed to request additional consent for essential elements of the proposed development, notably fencing and floodlighting.

We had a month to submit objections to the Planning Inspectorate, and a substantive submission was duly delivered². It was also sent out through the Friends of Butts Close email group, and many people have independently submitted their own strong objections. In the spirit of transparency, we also sent it to the relevant Council Officers, as well as to Hitchin's Councillors. All of the objections received by the Inspectorate will be sent to the applying Council Officer with a request for comment. A decision is expected within three months, but if the Inspector decides to make a site visit then that time would be extended. So for now we sit back and wait...

But it's worth remembering that the Council always has competing objectives, and different Officers will lead upon – and even champion – plans and actions that seem in perverse conflict. So while one Officer is promulgating a road on Butts Close to service the Council's investment in the 'commercial and competitive ... fitness industry,' another is commissioning the Butts Close Greenspace Action Plan with a vision to protect and enhance its welcoming qualities for 'recreation and biodiversity.'

I know which one I'd rather be...

Tony Riley

For Friends of Butts Close

¹ Ellie Clarke, Helen Reason, Stuart Howarth and John Keene

² Links to the Council's application and the Friends of Butts Close Objection Letter can be found on the Forum website <http://www.hitchinforum.org.uk/butts-close-car-park-plan/>

Hertfordshire County Council - Transport Vision 2050 Consultation

At the end of 2016 Hertfordshire County Council (HCC) put its "Transport Vision 2050" out to consultation. We were keen to find out what was in store and enthusiastically searched for the section on Hitchin, only to discover that our town did not warrant a mention, and that the document dealt almost exclusively with the south of the county.

Nevertheless, we did our best to respond to HCC's questionnaire. Our replies are on our website. We took the opportunity to mention the many Hitchin transport issues which have been much discussed over the years, but never dealt with.

The consultation questions whether building more roads can continue to be the answer to the county's transport needs and mentions that policies which encourage less car use may be needed. It is hard to disagree that these will be necessary, as well as more investment in the alternatives to the car. However, restrictions are likely to be unpopular, and it is not clear that simply asking the public to suggest ways their car use might be curtailed is likely to yield a great deal. HCC has its own experts, access to consultants and academic work and should be able to outline some alternative practical solutions for us all to think about.

A question about cycling left us scratching our heads. It asked whether we supported a policy to deliver a step change in cycling in larger urban areas? While we are very happy for Stevenage, St. Albans, Watford and Hemel Hempstead to be blessed with such a scheme, what about the rest of the county? Surely, such a good idea deserves to be introduced everywhere. It is all very puzzling.

NHDC responded to the consultation, and unsurprisingly many of the comments were on the same issues as ours. However, it was obvious that there has been little coordination between county and district. NHDC complains that HCC should be producing transport schemes to match the housing growth in the Submission Local Plan (SLP). HCC has meanwhile raised concerns about the impact of some of the proposed development on highways. It is clear that the local plan now being considered for submission to the government has not had the support from HCC which NHDC feels is necessary. This will come as no surprise to anyone who has read the plan and puzzled how tinkering with a few junctions was supposed to deal with current congestion and pollution as well as supporting a large growth in housing.

The two-tier system of local government does not seem to be able to cope with the challenges of producing a well thought out and consistent plan for the future that will allow more homes to be built without gridlock and more pollution. Perhaps the only way that sensible plans will ever emerge is for the whole planning exercise to be dealt with under one roof in a unitary local authority.

David Borner

History Day

Hitchin Historical Society ran its first 'History day' during Hitchin Festival in 2015. Its success has encouraged the Society to make this a biennial event, with 1st July being chosen for this year.

Hitchin Forum Members' Meeting – Monday 20th February

We have two speakers who should inspire some lively discussion:

- Keith Hoskins, Town Centre Manager, will give us an update on car parking, the state of the public realm and any other recent issues.
- Rachel Campbell will talk about recent developments in tackling litter at "Clean Up Britain."

Planning Applications Decided in 2016

NH College Centre for the Arts

An application for 85 dwellings in 6 apartment blocks and 10 houses was approved despite our concerns about the height and style being at odds with their surroundings.

Access off Pirton Road

This was to a patch of woodland near Foxholes. We suspected it was for a future housing development. It was refused for traffic access reasons.

19 Russells Slip/10 Moormead Close

This was a second application for these sites and was also refused as it did not respect the local character and due to its harmful design, scale and bulk.

Eric Moore's Bookshop

Although we were sorry to see this business close we did support the changes to convert the shop back to two residences. It was granted.

The Exchange

A proposal to add two floors was refused for the same reasons we objected, over-dominance and unsympathetic design reducing the character and quality of the area around Queen Street and Hollow Lane.

The Sir John Barleycorn, The Nightingale, The Radcliffe

See Pub Quiz (page 3) for these applications.

8 Church Yard

A large, internally illuminated sign was erected in this conservation area without planning permission and contrary to Conservation Area guidelines. We alerted NHDC Planning at the time and are still pursuing it.

Chris Honey

Diary Dates:

Monday 20th February: **Hitchin Forum Members' Meeting**

Sunday 7th May: **The Big Hitchin Spring Clean** – 10 am to 12 noon, all around the town! More details will follow in our next Newsletter. If you would like to help, please contact: litter@hitchinforum.org.uk

Saturday 1st July: **History Day** – 10 to 4pm, Church House