

HITCHIN FORUM

Caring for our Town

NEWSLETTER

July/August 2015 No. 130

Chairman's Piece

I am suffering from "Festivitis", an annual affliction induced by the dozens of events organized in July, my senses soaked by the creative minds of others. The story at the Market Theatre of Annie Tomlin, a single Hitchin mother in 1907, rejected by her family, spurned by the workhouse mistress and with nowhere to turn, evoked the most wrenching emotions. The workhouse has gone but Home-Start, an excellent service that supports families with young children, and Hitchin Partnership, which supports and counsels school children, provide vital help today and need financial support.

Our core business is focussed more on a vulnerable environment, where buildings, green spaces and paths can be damaged. This is not just about the fabric, but also to ensure that we have a town we can enjoy and places to meet, walk and play, and that decisions that affect our daily lives are made in a fair and open way.

The Town Hall remains a matter of concern. The community protest about proposals five years ago led to Hitchin Initiative setting up HTH Ltd to promote the community's interest in retaining the Town Hall. Whilst this has been achieved, the unfortunate and irreconcilable disputes have led to HTH Ltd effectively withdrawing. The HTH directors and trustees worked hard, identified potential funding and a sustainable business plan, and their push to include numbers 14 & 15 Brand Street should lead to a better facility. Ownership of those properties and the financial implications of NHDC taking over are yet to be resolved. We can only hope that NHDC do manage to provide what is wanted – an attractive and usable community facility.

Dispute is a word that can also be applied to Top Field. The Charity Commission, overworked and understaffed, has sent out a mixed message which both protagonists have used to support their stances. We have not had responses from the Commission or Hitchin Cow Commoners and remain amazed that the Commoners should have taken such a leap without a wider consultation at the start. They could enlarge their membership to help avoid a similar miscue in the future.

Elsewhere Bill Sellicks has led an initiative to improve our footpaths which he reported to the Hitchin Committee recently and which is summarized below. Green spaces are vital in any town and the improvements at Oughtonhead Common are to be enjoyed. The splendid play areas at Ransoms Rec, Purwell and other sites are well used. The make-over of Bancroft Rec is still at the planning stage, and we look forward to consultations on that. A smaller and inspiring site, a treasured space, is the Triangle Community Garden in Ransoms Rec. Its 15th anniversary was recently celebrated with the creation of a wonderful mosaic centrepiece - well worth seeing.

Read on, and do let us know what you think about the newsletter, and about the town. Our next members' meeting is on Monday September 14th, which provides a forum to share our thoughts and concerns.

Mike Clarke, Chairman

newsletter@hitchinform.org.uk

Founded 1992

Chairman: Mike Clarke

Member of: Hitchin Initiative
Campaign to Protect Rural England

Planning & Transport Matters

1. Local Plan: New Housing Figures and New Local Jobs

North Herts District Council has been co-operating with Stevenage Borough Council to produce a joint assessment of housing need. For North Herts the headline figure is 14,400 homes needed between 2011 and 2031 (with the Luton need for 2,100 on top of this). Members will remember that, as part of the Hitchin Town Action Group (HTAG), we responded in February 2015 to the earlier Preferred Options Report by suggesting that a 10,700 housing figure would be in line with government guidance, meet affordable housing need and be realistically deliverable.

The new report responds to the latest government figures, and is significantly more rigorous than the earlier version in producing a basic housing need of 13,100 homes. Having discussed with the other Hitchin organisations, we have concluded that we must accept that figure, however reluctantly - and with the provisos that Green Belt constraints still need to be taken into account, as well as the realism of the building rates involved.

However, the report goes on to suggest that a further uplift of 10% is required to respond to

2. Hitchin Station Access Consultation

Hertfordshire County Council recently consulted on proposals to remodel the junction of Walsworth Road and Station Approach at the entrance to Hitchin station. The last two attempts to improve traffic circulation to the station forecourt did not tackle this junction. The main changes this time would be to widen a small section of Station Approach and put in traffic lights.

We responded on a number of points. We thought the reduction in congestion would not be very significant because congestion is only really a problem at evening peak times when the most popular fast commuter services arrive from London. There is such a surge in numbers of cars leaving at these times that no amount of traffic engineering is likely to be able to deal with it. At these times Walsworth Road and the other roads leading away from the station are also often congested, so any improvement in overall

"market signals": the suggestion is that house prices are higher than the national average in Hitchin because of a local housing shortage. The report does not recognise that high long term house values reflect substantially the desirability of the town as a place in which to live with good connections to the capital. The conclusions in the report are, therefore, based on a misleading interpretation and there is no justification for the 10% uplift in housing figures. HTAG has written to Councillor David Levett to express our concerns and we have also responded to the Stevenage consultation on their housing figures which have been based on the same report.

At the same time progress is being made in the production of an *Economic Development Strategy*. We attended a workshop to discuss priorities for the District, and stressed the potential of Hitchin's main employment area. It is important that the District is able to increase local employment to counter out-commuting and provide better work/life balance. We welcome the suggestion that North Herts may be able to consider the appointment of an Economic Development Officer.

Adrian Gurney

journey times resulting from these alterations may be modest. Traffic lights would tend to hold up traffic for the rest of the day when there is little problem, so a mini-roundabout might be a better solution overall.

The exit for cyclists needs to be improved. The current rather unnecessary pavement cycle lane comes to an end at the junction - just where it is really needed. The parking of Tesco customer and delivery vehicles in the junction also needs to be dealt with.

More fundamentally, while it may be difficult to make significant improvements to the current station entrance, there would be great benefit in improving access for pedestrians and cyclists coming from the east (St Michael's Road), so that they do not need to use the busy and unpleasant road underpass beneath the railway. This, and improved bus services, would help reduce the number of cars using the station entrance.

Dave Borner

3. Planning Applications

Careful! There's many a slip twixt . . .

Russell's Slip or Slipe, a narrow strip of enclosed land, is possibly named after Edward Russell who was a gardener or greengrocer in the late 18th century. Small houses first appeared here sometime between 1820 and 1841 occupied by skilled craftspeople.

19 Russell's Slip and 10 Moormead Close are the subject of a planning application which proposes to demolish both of them in order to erect two 5-bed detached houses and a block containing two 1-bed flats. The three buildings do not sit well in the local area, especially the two large detached houses which are totally out of keeping with the small scale cottage ambience of Russell's Slip. They will detrimentally affect the established character of the footpath by visually

Less care considered carefully.

Minsden Care Home is situated close to Russell's Slip between Wratten Road West and Wratten Close. Regretfully, Herts County Council are moving residential dementia care to Letchworth, thus public consultation is being sought prior to an application for outline planning permission for this site.

Eleven houses of different sizes and types from two to three storeys with vehicular access are proposed. This maximises the development potential whilst respecting the characteristics of the site and the surrounding area. Those on the eastern side should be moved towards the

More care consideration needed.

Hitchin Hospital opened in 1837 as a workhouse. Its diverse caring services have reduced over the years since the main building was removed and the remaining buildings have been empty for some time now. Thus the site is the subject of a planning application for 18 residences with associated vehicular access.

Whilst it is regrettable that the two Victorian buildings should be removed, it is recognised that they would only be suitable for conversion into yet more flats at a time when Hitchin has experienced a high proportion of such in recent

dominating the area as they are a discordant design, too high and generally oversized.

The present property, No. 19, is partly timber framed with brick infill. It is unique in Hitchin as it appears to be a 'squatter' cottage with a series of extensions, the first between 1841 and 1851, mixed construction materials, which possibly have come to hand, and a hedgerow containing shrubs with edible fruit. It may date prior to 1840 in which case its listing should be investigated with a view to restoration rather than removal.

This planning application is over ambitious and in some parts deficient. It should not be allowed to 'slip' through. (With thanks to Stevie Fletcher and Pauline Humphries for historical detail.)

central access road giving them longer rear gardens and enabling the three mature maples in this area to be retained along with additional planting to reduce traffic noise from Park Way. Also an extension of the new road in the form of a footpath/cycleway to Wratten Close would integrate this new development with the existing adjacent housing.

This outline planning proposal is a good guide for a future developer who should be aware that the impending Local Plan will require inclusion of a proportion of affordable housing.

developments. Retention of the buildings would also compromise the opportunity for successful housing development on the rest of the site.

The comparatively low density enables the layout to maximise useable garden space, retention of trees and provision for additional planting. Maxwell's Path would become less hemmed in and the inclusion of a pedestrian and cyclist route will help to integrate the site within the existing locality. However a proportion of affordable housing should be included in this development.

Traffic generation is also a concern. The draft Local Plan proposes at least two more sites for housing development nearby, which together with the expansion of Samuel Lucas School and this proposal, will further increase the considerable problem affecting vehicular and pedestrian access in the area.

Our main concern however is a lack of design quality. The design of the houses appears to have been plucked from a 'fits anywhere' pattern book. They should be less derivative and

4. Churchgate

The Council's development agreement with Simons Ltd for large-scale redevelopment of Churchgate and the car parks around St Mary's Church was terminated in 2013 because Simons had not produced a planning application within the required three years. This year, the Council agreed to investigate a smaller scheme in the short term so something could happen more quickly. Discussions have been held with the leaseholder, Hammersmatch, and in July the Council agreed to grant Hammersmatch 'exclusivity' until the end of this year. This was as a result of Hammersmatch wanting some certainty from the Council before committing further resources to do the work needed to make progress.

This now means that during the next five months Hammersmatch will need to find a solution for the market and provide an updated design for it that is acceptable to the Council as its landowner; provide an updated financial appraisal on the updated design, taking account of current retail conditions; and provide

traditional. A distinctive group of more contemporary design would fit better in this location and make it easier to integrate sustainable energy sources. There are some good examples of this in Hitchin which display a creative thoughtfulness. The Council should be encouraging more sustainable and imaginative design solutions in a development of this scale.

Chris Honey

evidence of discussions regarding potential pre-lets with a cinema operator and retailers. This work has to be done at Hammersmatch's own risk and cost.

This will not be an easy task. Building a cinema would encroach on land where the market now stands. This in itself may not be a problem because the market would like to reduce in size and have some demountable stalls so it could expand and contract more organically. However, we are informed that the cinema operator wants a car park immediately adjacent, not a market. The redevelopment of the former Post Office site has reduced the options for relocating the market. This may not be a bad thing as the market traders feel their current location, in reduced form, is probably the best location for their operation. Surely, a cinema operator should accept the situation in a historic market town as any other business would when relocating, and should not be able to dictate what happens in the surrounding environs.

Ellie Clarke

Recreation & Leisure

1. Caring for Hitchin's Footpaths

The July report on the current state of Hitchin's footpaths has been sent to Nicholas Maddex, Countryside & Access officer at Hertfordshire County Council. Our volunteers have highlighted some issues of overhanging vegetation and poor surfaces, but none of major significance for HCC over the last 6 months.

Good progress has been made in addressing many of our earlier concerns in addition to responses to issues raised by other members of the public. In August, work is to begin on the hazardous road section of the HOOP between Wymondley Road rail bridge and Gypsy Lane. The path on the grass verge will be widened and its surface improved. Hopefully, a safe crossing point will be provided.

There have been notable improvements in the last few months. The surface and boundary of Braunds Alley have been upgraded and a barrier installed to prevent children running into Old Park Road where the path emerges beside the McCarthy & Stone development opposite Waitrose. A leaning and possibly unstable wall has been replaced behind the Bearton Avenue Gurdwara on footpath 13, close to Wilshere Dacre Academy. Sections of various paths have been resurfaced after we alerted Nicholas to

2. Oughtonhead Common

It was some time since I had last been for a walk at Oughtonhead. However, as I now have a yellow Labrador, Rosie, I have been rediscovering some of the lovely walks we have around here, including Wymondley Woods, the Letchworth Greenway and of course Oughtonhead Common. In recent months there has been a lot of work going on there, and I mentioned at a recent Hitchin Forum Steering Group meeting how much I had enjoyed my walk. Before I knew it, I had been persuaded to write an article for the newsletter about it!

A natural environment which is healthy actually takes careful management. Simply leaving nature to itself can result in a state of dereliction, and over many years this had started to happen at Oughtonhead, with fallen branches, blocked overgrown pathways and clogged reed beds causing stagnant water. The flow of the river Oughton itself had been blocked with various types of debris.

The work of clearing some of the wetlands and cleaning the river has restored and improved water flows, providing a better habitat for invertebrates and fish. It has also involved creating new wetland ponds and ditches that

3. Hitchin Youth Directory

A *Youth Activities Directory* for Hitchin has been compiled by local community groups who now want the public to check that it is up to date and accurate.

Hitchin Town Action Group (HTAG) is a collaboration between three community groups in Hitchin: Hitchin Forum, The Hitchin Society

and Hitchin Historical Society with support from the business community through Hitchin Initiative. HTAG was established to create closer co-operation between Hitchin groups following massive public opposition to proposals for the large scale retail redevelopment of Churchgate and the area around St Mary's Church. To date it has organised a public walk in opposition to the

problems earlier in the year. We have had some success with notifying NHDC Service Team about over-flowing bins, graffiti and stubborn debris, although response times have been variable.

More details of our activities can be found on the Forum website. If anybody would like to volunteer, you are welcome to contact me at footpaths@hitchinforum.org.uk

Bill Sellicks

enhance biodiversity for aquatic plants and creatures such as water voles and dragonflies. In addition, the volunteers have created a wheelchair-friendly boardwalk and viewing platform into the wetlands area, with a new and exciting wooden portal arch which has been carved to depict the wildlife that is typically seen on the common. There has also been a general tidying of the rest of the Common and its walkways.

The work has taken two years, the "River and Wetlands Restoration Project" being led by the Countryside Management Service with the Friends of Oughtonhead Common, and being joint-funded by North Herts District Council, Herts County Council, the Environment Agency and Natural England. A bequest was also received on behalf of the late Phil Lumley, Honorary Volunteer site warden from 2003-2011. Countryside Management Services (CMS) led the project on behalf of NHDC.

The result is a beautiful nature reserve and green space. The work can be seen at: <http://www.hertslink.org/cms/content/16532354/placestovisit/ohcwetcreatrestworks>

Andrew Wearmouth

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possible allocation of Priory Fields for housing, carried out a survey of the state of pavements and signage in the town centre and reported this to Herts County Council for action, and publicised and prepared a response to the Council's draft Local Plan published late last year.

At HTAG's inaugural workshop, the need for more activities for young people in Hitchin was also highlighted. However, during discussions with those providing services for young people in Hitchin, it became clear there were plenty of activities but nowhere was there a central information source for finding out about them. It was agreed that an up to date list of youth activities in the town would be helpful.

A lot of information about youth activities in Hitchin has been pulled together from many different sources, but we now need to know if

this is accurate, complete and up to date. Please contact us to let us know of any necessary alterations, confirm that what we have done is correct, or tell us if it is incomplete.

The draft *Directory of Youth Activities in Hitchin* is available at: www.hitchinform.org.uk and the team at HTAG can be contacted with your information at: directory@hitchinform.org.uk.

We would like a verified version ready for publication in the autumn so please contact us with any further information or alterations by mid-September. We hope then that it will be possible to find a way to keep the list up to date and easily accessible for young people and families to use when they want to explore new activities.

Ellie Clarke

STOP PRESS:

We are pleased to support the "Love Hitchin? Hate Litter!" campaign recently announced in the local press. Its organiser, Rachel Campbell, has since done a presentation to the Hitchin Committee and gained the support of Hitchin Councillors.

Why is litter such a problem in Britain, and specifically in Hitchin? Who drops it and why? We get very positive feedback from our volunteers in our Big Hitchin Tidy Ups, but are we just treating the symptoms of a wider "problem" or are people just being thoughtless when they drop litter? These are the sort of questions that need to be asked if we are going to get to the root of the issue.

We are already looking to our next *Big Hitchin Tidy Up* in the autumn. But in the meantime, to save time and energy, let's stop those who drop litter in their tracks! We encourage everyone to support Rachel's "Love Hitchin? Hate Litter!" campaign. She can be contacted via Twitter @cleanuphitchin or via email: campbellandmcivor@gmail.com.

Diary Dates

Tuesday 8 September: **Town Talk** - 6.30pm, **Hitchin Committee** - 7.30pm

Hitchin Boys School, Grammar School Walk

Regular opportunity to raise issues in informal discussion with Hitchin Councillors, followed by meeting of local councillors to discuss and decide local matters. Join us for democracy in action in Hitchin!

Monday 14 September: **Hitchin Forum Members' Meeting**

Further details will be circulated to members nearer the time, but be sure to join us for an update on what is happening in Hitchin.

ADVANCE NOTIFICATION:

Tuesday 20 October: **Hitchin Forum Annual General Meeting**

An opportunity for members to review our work over the past year and discuss priorities for the next. Please put this date in your diaries. Further details will be sent to members nearer the time.