

Chairman's Piece

Spring is here; the ducklings on the Hiz in front of St Marys prove that. What hasn't emerged yet are the revised plans for Churchgate from Simons. However, it seems that they have taken objections seriously, are talking to the market traders about what is possible and acceptable and revising the plans. Whether they will come up with something that is both economically desirable for them and makes sense for the town is still an open question. In order to present accurately the views of our members and give John Urwin, our representative on the Churchgate Liaison Forum, the confidence to challenge or support what may come out at the next CLF meeting on March 23rd do come to our members' meeting on the previous evening. We have some regrets that the two meetings are so close together but we could get no information on when and whether plans would be available for us to discuss before the CLF meeting.

Hitchin Forum's planning group met last week to discuss Churchgate and the Local Development Framework as reported in this newsletter. The group is not a closed shop so please ask to be notified if you are interested in attending such meetings. We are also in the process of revising our website and hope to maintain an up to date diary of such meetings as well as links to current items of interest. If you have thoughts about what the website should contain please email or phone Jeremy Burrowes, the secretary and website person. In revising it we want to change the photos. If you have any favourite views of Hitchin that you think would look good on the website please send them to Jeremy.

We have also revised the Hitchin Forum information leaflet – copy enclosed. Please pass it on to a friend or neighbour and encourage them to join – the more that are signed up the better. We always need more ideas, different views and support for what we do put forward. Speaking of which we are looking for someone to take up a secretarial role within the Forum – perhaps just taking minutes at Steering Group meetings, arranging venues for members meetings and assisting in the processes at the AGM. There is some flexibility in how the tasks are to be done and please contact myself or Jeremy if you are at all interested.

I hope you enjoy the sounds and sight of Spring. The winter gloom was lightened by the wonderful news about the Town Hall developments and we can only hope that this season shows some new ideas springing from the Churchgate developers and their partners in the Council.

Mike Clarke

Diary Dates

Note: the next Hitchin Committee and Town Talk will be after the May elections, date to be arranged.

Tues 22 March – Hitchin Forum members meeting to elect our President and discuss Churchgate, 7.45pm, Holy Saviour Church Hall.

Wed 23 March – Churchgate Liaison Forum, 6.30pm, Church House

Sat 2 April – Councillors Surgery, 10.30-noon, Market Place

Churchgate – yet another angle

John Urwin, Chair of Hitchin Forum’s Planning Group, delves into some of the issues of what is a very complicated matter.

Three community groups are represented on the Churchgate Liaison Forum (CLF) - Hitchin Forum, Hitchin Historical Society and the Hitchin Society. Their representatives on the CLF meet regularly to discuss issues and share ideas. Recently, they met representatives of Hammersmatch, the current leaseholder of Churchgate, to discuss their position regarding their proposed improvements to Churchgate.

Hammersmatch are currently gathering information to provide to NHDC so that the Council can approve two licences before the refurbishment work which was granted planning permission last year can begin. This refurbishment work has public support. There is a problem, however, in that NHDC have also signed a contract with Simons to provide not only an alternative update for Churchgate, but a large redevelopment scheme that goes far beyond the shopping arcade itself. This current Simons proposal has not been well received by the public.

What happens next is unclear. There is no doubt that Hammersmatch would be able to start or even finish their refurbishment scheme many months before Simons would be ready to begin their redevelopment. Simons would then have the option of buying out Hammersmatch from their lease and continuing with their unpopular and much larger scheme, but how likely is that? Simons could resort to a Compulsory Purchase Order, but it is not at all certain that this would succeed because it is unlikely to meet the legal requirements.

It must also be questioned whether Hammersmatch have the funds to proceed and whether it is worth their while. The terms of their lease are such that NHDC are taking 40% of the rent while allowing Simons to get away with only giving 10% of the rent on their larger scheme. Even worse, Simons are being given a large area of our valuable town centre land, St Mary’s Square and Portmill Lane car parks.

The Council seem to be in an awful mess. They have spent a million pounds of our money on consultants and consultations. They have signed a 250 year contract with Simons which one legal adviser has described as “a one sided option in the developer’s favour”. Worse, if Simons fail to meet the dates in their contract, council officers say “that’s no problem, we can slip the dates...”

It would appear that councillors have lost control of the employees who depend on our taxes and are meant to serve the community.

The councillors may feel that they cannot get out of this without considerable egg on their faces. Many of us might hold the view that stopping the Simons’ development is paramount and, OK, the money has been spent, but we should put it down to experience and we will not hold it against the elected members. Hammersmatch are offering an improved Churchgate, while Simons are offering three and one third Churchgates. Which is the better deal? It’s a no brainer...do we want a clone town?

Latest information from NHDC is that Simons are not ready to present revised plans, but will give a presentation at the next Churchgate Liaison Forum meeting on their discussions with interested parties like the market. Perhaps they will be able to shed some light on what is likely to happen next? **We will be discussing all these angles and more at our members meeting on Tuesday 22 March (7.45pm, Holy Saviour Church Hall) in preparation for the CLF meeting on Wednesday 23 March (6.30pm, Church House). Please attend these meetings if you can.**

Hitchin Town Hall & Museum

John Keene, Hitchin Forum's leisure issues spokesperson, reports the latest news from the Town Hall/Museum community liaison group & NHDC briefings:

Hitchin Initiative has been successful in its bid to the *Community Builders Fund* for a grant/loan of £850,000, enabling the 'Community' proposal for the Town Hall to go ahead. This will keep the main hall for community use, with the gymnasium area rebuilt to create a museum. Planning applications for the overall conversion and demolition of the shop at 14 Brand Street next to the Town Hall to create a new glazed entrance hall are due to be decided by NHDC's Planning Committee on 17 March.

It is hoped that work will begin on site in January 2012, with completion by June 2013. The Town Hall will be closed for the duration and NHDC has written to all groups using the Town Hall about this. The Council and Hitchin Initiative are working together to help these groups find alternative facilities where possible and to encourage their return once the work is complete.

The recent background to this project is that an application for listing was made to English Heritage, who accepted it as a case in December 2009. The Town Hall gained Grade 2 listing in October 2010. Principal qualifications for listing were the architectural interest - the designers, EW Mountford and T Geoffrey Lucas were renowned architects with many listed buildings to their credit. Mountford designed the Old Bailey and Lucas (a member of the well known local family) was responsible for buildings in Letchworth and Hampstead Garden Suburb. They were both regarded as being at the leading edge of their time. The Listing description pointed out that both the exterior of the Town Hall and the interior of the main hall are largely intact, and the Lucas Room retains its elaborate plaster work. The Town Hall is also identified as having a "group value" with the original Town Hall across the street (now Ivory), demonstrating the evolution of building styles from the mid 19th century onwards. (Incidentally, the Workman's Hall and gymnasium date from 1841 but are seen as having little architectural merit.)

In the summer, NHDC intends to use the main exhibition gallery at Letchworth Museum as a clean and secure space for a review of museum objects, including items in storage at Hitchin and Letchworth museums as well as their Burymead Museum Store. They will assess the significance and condition of individual objects, identifying their importance locally, regionally and nationally. The Council would welcome volunteer help in this (contact Ros Allwood on 435197 or ros.allwood@north-herts.gov.uk).

The alliance of the Community Builders Fund, a council and a town partnership is so far unique, a first for all concerned, and you can't help wondering if there were not some culture shocks along the way. This project has involved a staggering amount of work and responsibility for the Hitchin Initiative team, all in addition to their normal business. The community owes them a great debt of gratitude.

Editor's note: link to the illustrative images by architects Buttress Fuller Alsop Williams, showing how the new museum entrance will look alongside the front of the Town Hall: <http://www.north-herts.gov.uk/docfilesrv/1/00/92/32/00923213.pdf>

Snippet:

Planning proposals for the redevelopment of the former bus depot on Fishponds Road to create 14 flats and 15 houses have met with support in Hitchin Forum. Our planning correspondent reported: *"The architects should be congratulated for a scheme which is appropriate for the site, sympathetic to its surroundings, at a suitable size and scale, but not traditional. Just what Hitchin needs!"*

Changes in Planning

John Urwin, explains what is happening locally and nationally.

The aim of the planning system is to provide, and in many cases protect, most of the things we see around us: housing, roads, schools, woodland, green belt, all manner of retail outlets etc. This is all laid out in planning policy and guidance documents (currently over 7,000 pages of them). They are quasi legal and imprecise which may be fine for planning barristers, but difficult for Joe Public to understand what is going on. Many councillors also regard the whole thing as too difficult. The result is disillusion with local government, with many of us feeling “they will do whatever they want”.

The Coalition Government has recognised this and aims to reform the system to make it simpler, more user-friendly and more locally-based. Nevertheless, given the number of vested interests, it is probably wise that we do not hold our breath.

However, it is a big help that the planning system updates documents at a snail’s pace, giving time for interested parties to get together and learn what is going on. We have the advantage in Hitchin Forum that one or two of our members work within the planning system and this greatly aids our understanding of the process. We do need to understand: the government wants local people to be more involved and the advantage of this can be seen all around us in Hitchin – where the most attractive parts were built when whatever planning system existed was minimal and local people were more hands on. The results of getting it wrong could be catastrophic as the situation around Churchgate makes only too clear.

NHDC are in the process of producing their Local Development Framework which should guide future development in the district. Later this year, they will publish two Development Plan documents for public consultation, the “Draft Core Strategy” and the “Draft Development Policies”.

The **Core Strategy** sets out what the Council wants to achieve, i.e. how the environment is to be protected, or the overall provision and distribution of housing. The **Development**

Policies set out how these aims would be realised, i.e. by refusing proposals that would reduce biodiversity or damage important architectural features, or by ensuring housing developments provide varied accommodation and are located within towns and villages.

Currently NHDC is consulting on a **Design Supplementary Planning Document**. This will be used to guide developers, ensuring good design which complements its surroundings.

We will keep you informed of progress on these documents, trying to give pointers on how to make our voices heard so “that they do not do whatever they want”. If you are interested in knowing more about how the planning system works or would like to discuss NHDC’s Development Plan documents when they are published, why not come along to a meeting of our **Hitchin Forum Planning Group**? It meets informally on an ad hoc basis, is informative, interesting and – wait for it – even fun on occasion! Email planning@hitchinform.org.uk for more details.

STOP PRESS:

Congratulations to **Bancroft Bridge Club**, the first ‘mind sport’ club in the country to be awarded charitable status! The club recently presented its plans for a new building on the edge of the park to both the Hitchin Committee and NHDC’s Cabinet. Designed to be a considerable improvement on the existing decaying building (fate unknown), it would easily accommodate existing users and attract new ones. Equipped with audio visual, wi-fi and broadband facilities, it would be capable of being sub-divided to provide the optimum space for different activities. Use is expected to be 30% Bridge Club and 70% other groups.

The Bridge Club suggested that they enter into a partnership with the Council to deliver this new bridge clubhouse and community hall for the town. The club would be completely responsible for management and maintenance.

Top Field

John Keene explains the background to the present situation:

Top Field was purchased by trustees in 1880 to compensate for the loss of Bury Mead and Cock Mead, common land used for grazing which was now required by the incoming railway companies. The Hitchin Cow Commoners were formed in 1886 to maintain the land, and, after the Land Commission gave consent, use it for cricket, football or other charitable purposes for the benefit of the community. We understand that Hitchin Town Football Club (HTFC), who have used the field since 1928, have had a rather uneasy relationship with the Cow Commoners (CCs). A charitable clause appears to inhibit the CCs from permitting the HTFC the improvements they would like to make. (Cricketers, on the other hand seemed not to have presented such problems).

Top Field has been the subject of legal wrangling for some time now, culminating (or so one would have thought) in a High Court action in 2001. Involving Celeriter Ltd a property company which supports the HTFC, Roxanne Investments Ltd, and the Cow Commoners, the action established that the land is registered as common land under the Commons Registration Act of 1965 but not

registered as being subject to the rights of common. That would appear to rule out grazing, then.

You might have thought that would have settled the matter, but Dunmore Developments Ltd has brought an action at Hertford Court to have the land de-registered, claiming that it was never properly registered in the first place. The Cow Commoners did not oppose the action, the result of which is not yet known, but speculation has it that if the legal action is successful, the part of the site not occupied by the football ground could be sold for development to invest in better facilities for HTFC. It could also provide some affordable housing for the town. On the other hand this would mean the permanent loss of a site for recreational and "charitable" events.

There is something strangely compelling about the concept of common land, and a press photo from 2001 of a man and his goat on Top Field, the pair looking relaxed and companionable, reminds us that Hitchin is a country market town. Ah well...

Hitchin Allotment Association

In our ongoing focus on Hitchin Forum's member organisations, Chairman Roger Sandy explains who they are and what they do:

The Hitchin Allotment Association was formed in 1990 to safeguard allotment land and to encourage North Hertfordshire District Council to improve and promote allotments in Hitchin. We now work in partnership with the Council to upgrade and make improvements to allotment sites.

There are four NHDC allotment sites in Hitchin (at Old Hale Way, Burford Way, Pirton Road and Nightingale Road) and the Association is the only organisation working in Hitchin to improve services and security on these sites. The Association has site representatives on all four sites; they report to the Council any

matters relating to repairs or other work that needs to be done as well as vandalism or theft.

The Association runs an annual Best Kept Allotment Competition with the Council providing the judge. The competition is open to all members with prizes for the best allotments on each site, most improved allotment and a cup awarded for the overall best allotment. The members can also take advantage of a bulk seeds purchase scheme run by the Association to provide them with seeds at a discounted price.