



## NEWSLETTER

January/February 2013 No. 115

### Chairman's Piece

A busy time, a lot of meetings about Churchgate, exhibitions and some serious thinking. Not the easiest start to the New Year. This is very far from the idea of halcyon days – periods of calm for relaxation and reflection, traditionally expected in mid winter.

The day after the Churchgate Liaison Forum a kingfisher flew by as I cycled near Sainsbury's. The myth of the kingfisher (halcyon) being allowed a few calm weeks in mid winter to rear its young came from Alcyone, who became the bird when her husband died, and was helped in having a dad, Aeolus, who was King of the Winds.

The notion that the Chancellor's budget might bring good news for the Simons scheme seemed to delay the Council's decisions before Xmas, but we hope that has been dispelled. We can but hope that the Council will reflect on the reality of the financial, social and historical concerns which have been discussed (and outlined on our website), and not be distracted by myths.

At the beginning of last year we revamped the website. We have had well over 2,000 'unique visitors' and over 400 individuals have logged on already in 2013. In the last few weeks we have signed up to twitter to make more connections locally. All of this is intended to spread information about issues which have an impact on the town, to provoke discussion and help our councillors and Council know what local residents think and to support their actions when we can.

A few of our web visitors are not local residents. A town visitor emailed to complain about the state of the pavements in the area around the church. Somebody from Belgium wanted to trace a deceased relative who died near here in the first World War. A priest in South America wanted more details on the 14th century Gilbertine Priory now known as The Biggin. We do help when we can! We are also pleased with the feedback so far, but please keep telling us what you think, and do send in photos and writings for the website.

We are hoping to expand the website with a section on the green spaces in Hitchin – where they are, what walks to do. Please let me know if you have thoughts on this and would like to be involved.

The next few months will see discussions on a planning application for Luton Airport, a new lease to be agreed on Top Field, forming a view on how the Local Plan should influence the future of Hitchin and .... oh yes, some decision on Churchgate.

Do read on for more information, but also do go for a walk and look out for the kingfisher.

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## Churchgate

**John Urwin, Hitchin Forum's representative on the Churchgate Liaison Forum (CLF), reports on the situation following the first meeting of the CLF in nearly two years to discuss Simons' latest proposals.**

Hopefully most members were able to attend the Simons display of their latest proposals or looked at them on their web site. They have made worthwhile changes from their initial proposal but the area to be developed remains the same.

These were discussed at the Churchgate Liaison Forum meeting in Church House on 9th January. About 80 people were present and all but three of those who spoke were strongly opposed to the revised scheme.

One of the three turned out to be Cllr. Cowley's husband, who made an impassioned address in favour of the scheme. His points, ignoring his marital association, were important and were similar to those made by the other two. He said that the Churchgate and the area including the market location and St Mary's Square are unsightly. This writer commented later that they are squalid. There is agreement and this is the reason why people desire improvement. He said "We must do something". If that is softened to "We would greatly like to do something", there is agreement. He said "We must be prepared to accept change". Bearing in mind the considerable amount of housing built in Hitchin over the last 12 years, which has changed the town, it is hard to see how we have not been prepared to accept change. Also, when a number of those who might be considered "the usual naysayers", were shown Whitebarn Developments' initial very modern designs for the Post Office site, the room was full of people nodding approval.

The problem is that Simons want to build three and one third Churchgates in order to improve one Churchgate, which is odd when Whitebarn can afford to buy the smaller PO site and develop it in isolation. Simons then show proposals at the last minute, which do have some merit, but leave little time for public consultation and give the impression that our councillors are being railroaded into approving an extension to the contract.

John Haykin, who speaks for the Market Traders, gave a devastating critique. He made it clear that the Market could never be integrated in these proposals and if we want to remain a Historic Market Town, then Simons should be denied an extension. The other elephant in the room is the diminishing high street retail environment in favour of online shopping. If retailers like Next move to "Simonsgate", there will be holes in Hitchin's historic core and we will have bought a turkey – the town will be diminished forever.

So what to do? If our councillors refuse an extension, the Development Agreement falls. Alternative plans by Hammersmatch were being published as we went to press. At the CLF the point was made that the council's rent take of 40% from Hammersmatch was excessive, preventing them from financing improvements (10-15% is more usual). The main problem with Churchgate is aesthetic. To those councillors who might find it hard to support a rent reduction, we say - try justifying to other North Herts towns a £2.1 million "bung" to Simons for their scheme. And if the Market is given a long lease, that will allow them to raise finance to improve its appearance.

When asked at the CLF what would happen if no extension was granted, the Simons director strangely said "we will talk to the Council to see what we can do". Does this suggest that there is much more room for manoeuvre with Simons? It sounds like it. If so, let's help the Council break free from the gold-plated contract that Simons enjoy, thus strengthening the Council's negotiating position. Within the local community there are planners, surveyors, architects, landscape architects, project managers, financial experts and professional engineers – and that is just the retired! If the Council and Hitchin's residents can engage in a proper dialogue, a good solution to improve rather than damage Hitchin will emerge. But first our councillors must work with their local community on 31st January.

## Top Field - still kicking the ball about

### Members of Hitchin Forum's Steering Group report on recent meetings and analyse the issues.

The airwaves have been quiet for a few months, no news from Hitchin Cow Commoners Trust (HCCT) or from Hitchin Town Football Club (HTFC) or Celeriter (its owners). Two members of our Steering Group did meet a trustee of HCCT and the owner of HTFC to try and understand more of the situation. Both encounters were useful with fairly frank discussions, though an impasse seems inevitable, and questions we raised afterwards have not been answered.

For the two sides the next important phase is the negotiation of the lease, currently for 14 years. If this were to be for 25 or 30 years, HTFC could apply for grants and improve the ground. HCCT want a break clause so that the option of swapping the field with another field opposite Kingshott School could be pursued. If this is not resolved in March, they could do what they have apparently done in the past – go to court. At that stage the relevant rules seem to come from the Landlord and Tenant Act rather than charity law.

We do not know exactly what their past court actions have been about apart from the redesignation of Top Field as not being Common Land. HCCT has hinted that the actions have cost a lot of money and led to longstanding debts. How they have managed all of that is not in the public domain. Whether this was a justifiable use of money entrusted to them is uncertain – they have not published their financial accounts.

Part of the equation which we are uncertain about is in the wording of the 'Scheme' which governs HCCT. Para 4.1 states:- *"the Object of the Charity is for the benefit of the community through the provision of facilities for the charitable use for cricket, football or other sports or for other general charitable purposes for the benefit of the inhabitants of the town of Hitchin."* What is meant by "charitable" in this context? This is interpreted by HCCT as meaning that they should not lease Top Field to HTFC, as this is a business which makes profits. (Despite HTFC probably not making a profit – it relies on supporters to provide some funds for players

and facilities). It also occurs to us that as the activities of a football club should include encouraging young players, some of its business is 'charitable'.

HCCT say that a judge made the ruling regarding not letting to a business, but this seems inconsistent with the Landlord and Tenant Act which says that HTFC must be given a new lease as they have been on the site for so long. Would a judge have contradicted an Act of Parliament?

We are confused about the status of HCCT as a charity. They refer to it as a "charitable trust". Formally it is not registered with the Charity Commission, but any change in its 'Scheme' has to be approved by the Commission. It seems to have an income above that usually required to be registered as a charity. As with other aspects of its functioning – its accounts, the method of adopting new trustees, and its engagement with the inhabitants of Hitchin, this does not encourage confidence in its management.

We are also confused about the ultimate intentions of Celeriter. The owner is undoubtedly passionate about football and his local team. It seemed from the suggestions of HCCT last May that they would favour HTFC being run by a not-for-profit organization so that it would conform to their 'Scheme'. Whether that is necessary is uncertain. HTFC would like the freedom to develop its facilities. That could be done if it was granted a long lease. The site was intended for sport or other charitable uses for the benefit of the inhabitants of the town. Could that include a community hall?

HCCT has suggested an alternative sports development on the field opposite Kingshott School. We are interested that they do not appear to have looked at the Council's Sports Strategy, or to have made a business plan. If they are trying to shake off the debts of court cases then we would expect them to be very cautious about a project which could lead to more debts.

The impression is of two bodies which have not been able to negotiate. Public sympathy seems to be with the football club - they run an activity which many support and follow. HCCT seem careless about the prospect of a supermarket development which lacks appeal and is likely to

compromise the fragile state of retailers on the high street. Continued conflict is likely to waste monies which were intended for the benefit of the town's inhabitants, not of those who make money from court actions. Why don't they just talk to each other?

## Hitchin Cricket Ground

**Hitchin Forum provides information and support to the West Hitchin Action Group (WHAG) about development threats in their area. Here Ann Heymans, a member of both, lists the main issues to do with recent proposals by the cricket club.**

Hitchin Town Cricket Ground (HTCG) proposes selling its field abutting Lucas Lane between Lavender Way and Victoria Road to raise capital with which to rebuild the club house and install an all-weather pitch for Blueharts Hockey Club. They have drawn up plans for a proposed development although no developer has yet been approached. All details are on [www.sportatlucaslane.co.uk](http://www.sportatlucaslane.co.uk).

An application for a screening decision on whether an Environmental Impact Assessment is needed has already been submitted and NHDC Planning have determined that it is not necessary. HTCG plans to apply for planning permission in January.

This is green belt land, which WHAG seeks to protect, especially in light of the Land Allocations

document just published by North Herts District Council. This shows the possibility of strategic planning for housing development to include all the open land along Lucas Lane and also a great swathe of farmland on the SW of Hitchin.

WHAG does not oppose redevelopment of the club house or improvement of sports facilities on the Lucas Lane site but sees the present proposal as a quick fix which will not secure sports provision on the site in the long term. There are also major problems with access, traffic congestion and parking which need to be addressed.

WHAG's position is stated on its website <http://www.westhitchinag.org.uk>. This is regularly updated as plans progress.

## Diary Dates

Wednesday 23 January: **Hitchin Forum Members Meeting**; 7.30pm, Holy Saviour Church Hall, Radcliffe Road. **PLEASE NOTE:** this meeting is rescheduled from 31 January. There will be discussion about the issues surrounding Churchgate - Simons' latest proposals, Hammersmatch's proposals, communicating our views to North Herts District Council. We also want your views for the forthcoming Local Plan (see article in this newsletter). **Please attend this very important meeting - we need your views!**

~~Thursday 31 January: **Hitchin Forum Members Meeting**; CANCELLED~~

Thursday 31 January: **North Herts District Council Meeting**; 7.30pm, Council Chamber, Council Offices, Gernon Road, Letchworth Garden City. To determine whether to grant an extension to the Council's Development Agreement with Simons. **Please attend!**

Saturdays 2 February / 2 March: **Councillors' Surgery**; 10.30am – noon, Market Place.

Monday 25 February: **Hitchin Forum Members Meeting**; 7.30pm, British Schools Museum, Queen Street

Tuesday 5 March: **Town Talk** (6.30pm) & **Hitchin Committee** (7.30pm); Main Hall, Hitchin Boys School, Grammar School Walk.

## Planning Hitchin's Future

**Adrian Gurney is Chairman of Hitchin Forum's Planning Group. Here he lays out some of the issues currently being considered in the Group and to be discussed at our members meeting on 23rd January:**

At a meeting with NHDC planning officers in October 2012, it was agreed that Hitchin community groups (Hitchin Forum, The Hitchin Society and Hitchin Historical Society) and Hitchin Initiative would contribute to the Hitchin section of the Local Plan by putting forward a vision for the town in 2030, together with suggestions for the sort of policies and proposals that might be helpful in realising that vision. The Planning Group had a first meeting on 7th January, and the following are our first thoughts.

There are positive aspects on which we would want to build:

- The extensive historic core of the town is vibrant, attractive and well preserved and includes buildings and community spaces that together with the market provide for a wide range of locally owned businesses and specialist shops and other facilities.
- The current scale of the town relates well to the core, and fits well in its rural setting (including valued areas of landscape) so that most of the population is within walking distance both of the town centre and the countryside.
- The varied housing stock, and good access to work opportunities in London, Cambridge, Stevenage and Luton, means that there is a mix of population that reflects the variety of British society in a comparatively secure environment.

Our vision needs to build on these strengths:

- Creating a critical mass of leisure and cultural facilities (involving theatre, music, museums etc) that will make

Hitchin a centre of choice for day visits from a wide area to underpin its continued prosperity.

- Providing flexible buildings and spaces to meet a wide range of uses and the changing needs of different people (including an older population seeking space for different pursuits and a younger population for informal recreation).
- Providing a wider range of jobs by upgrading industrial areas through improved access and new premises to meet the needs of modern manufacturing; and making use of other prominent sites (for instance at the station) for high tech research.
- Building small areas of family housing of different sizes and ownership types (including self build) of high design quality.
- Improving accessibility with a coherent parking system, full access both sides of the rail station, the un-doing of the Paynes Park one way system and introduction of clear pedestrian routes to the centre, and delivery of cycle routes where they are needed.
- Improving gateways into the town, open spaces, and the landscape edges of the Green Belt; and identifying views throughout the town to be protected and enhanced.

The Planning Group would like to hear from any members who have ideas for what we should be covering in our submission to NHDC. There will be an opportunity to discuss the work at the Members' Meeting on 23rd January.

## Love Hitchin 2013: Pick Up on Litter!

**Hitchin Forum member Ellie Clarke co-ordinated our first town-wide clean up in May 2012:**

Our town-wide clean up at the end of May 2012 was hugely enjoyed by those who participated and many asked - "when can we do this again?" We hope to organise it a bit earlier this year so we aren't fighting the nettles. We will need volunteers please to co-ordinate the work in their areas. It's fun, satisfying and rewarding, so join us in sprucing up Hitchin for summer! More details to follow.

# Luton Airport – the current position

## Bill Sellicks, of Hitchin Forum's Planning Group, updates us on the latest:

The Planning Application for the Airport development appeared on the Luton Borough Council Planning Search website on Monday 7th January.

The proposal involves making changes to the taxiways, stands and terminal, together with modifications to the local road system, to enable an increase of passenger throughput from 10.3 million passengers per annum expected in 2013 to 17.8mppa by 2028. This will involve a significant increase in aircraft movements and noise.

The expiry date for neighbour consultations is 18<sup>th</sup> February, and the target date for determination is 5<sup>th</sup> April. The application comprises 250 documents. Many are drawings, but a good document to start with is the Planning Application Summary (Search results page 9) and Appendix H01 the Noise Assessment Report (Search results page 14).

Much is made of new noise mitigation measures which appear in figure 7.1 of the Planning Application Summary, and which did not appear in the consultation documents published in September 2012. It is claimed that these demonstrate that the Airport responds to feedback. These still lack clear targets and deadlines for the most part. Before making a formal response I have sent a series of questions to the Planning Officer, designed to establish the effect that these would have had if applied to 2012 operations.

The Comet is organising a petition whose aim is to have the proposal called-in for determination by the Secretary of State on the grounds of lack of impartiality (LBC is a shareholder of London Luton Airport Operations Ltd). The Planning Group are encouraging members to sign the petition.

We will be informing our members of the issues to help you in responding to the consultation.

### Luton Borough Council Planning Search:

[http://www.eplan.luton.gov.uk/PublicAccess/tdc/DcApplication/application\\_searchform.aspx](http://www.eplan.luton.gov.uk/PublicAccess/tdc/DcApplication/application_searchform.aspx)

**Planning application:** reference number 12/01400/FUL

**Comet petition** (from Monday 14<sup>th</sup> January): [www.thecomet.net/news/Luton-airport-campaign](http://www.thecomet.net/news/Luton-airport-campaign)

## Planning Matters

**Post Office Site Development Brief** - following concerns that some consultation responses had been lost and that the collation of public comments and the developer's responses to those were not sufficiently transparent, the consultation was re-run. This time a comprehensive report to the Hitchin Committee laid out how consultation responses were considered, with comments as to why they were incorporated into the brief or not. It will now be ratified by NHDC's Cabinet and adopted as planning guidance.

**Extension at Hitchin Swim Centre** to provide dance studios and increased parking - NHDC revised its original plans to increase car parking by 20 spaces so that large, attractive and mature trees on the car park boundary would not have to be felled. Questions remain about the economic viability / need for these dance studios.

**Expansion plans at North Herts College** include a grid-shell roof to enclose a courtyard between existing buildings, creating an internal 'hub' space. We supported the proposals, saying the plans indicate the creation of an interesting and, for Hitchin, unique enclosed space which looks light, airy and functional.

**Prezzo on Bancroft** applied for new signage which included large LED light bars either side of the name on the front facade. This is a prominent and sensitive location in Hitchin's Conservation Area near the junction with Bancroft and Hermitage Road. Whilst appreciating the applicant's desire for something more eye-catching, we felt it needs the highest quality and most appropriate materials and illumination. The signage was granted planning permission but with a condition to limit the illumination level.