

NEWSLETTER
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Chairman's Piece

Hitchin Festival provides so many fascinating and enjoyable events that I have only been able to sample a few. Amongst the more memorable so far has been a lovely rendering of Joni Mitchell's 'Big Yellow Taxi' with what could be the Forum's battle cry - "You don't know what you've got till it's gone", and maybe the following line - "They paved paradise and put up a parking lot". This was illustrated in Richard Whitmore's presentation of old films about the town, with some of the lost treasures of buildings. This included shots of the slums around St Marys, demolished in the 1930s, revealing the now much cherished views of the church. Another film, of Bill Bowker's crop spraying business and 'Hitchin's First Airfield', was another reminder of loss, but also a celebration of an active life.

While Churchgate may still be on the back burner (despite a Comet headline), other issues bubble up, like the weeds in my rain-soaked garden. The **Save Top Field campaign** is gaining momentum and a meeting with the Cow Commoners has begun to shine some light on this dark corner. However, the longstanding difficulties between the Commoners and the Football Club still need clarifying, and seemingly with a need for a renegotiation of whatever lease agreement they have. If, as they suggest, the Commoners cannot lease to a profit-making organization, whether the footballers play at home on Top Field, or away on the Stevenage Road, then that needs to be sorted first. The Commoners say they cannot have regard to the future use of Top Field, as their commission is purely to provide sporting facilities, but they also say it is for the town to decide on what deal they do. The supermarket threat is only one of many threads to follow.

20's Plenty For Us is a national campaign to restrict speed limits to 20mph in towns. A new consultation from the Department for Transport suggests a 20mph limit reduces collisions and injuries by 60% and encourages councils to decide on local speed limits that reflect the needs of all road users. I raised this at a personal presentation I made to Hitchin Committee at the end of May, following my close encounter with a large truck approaching a traffic island. Being human, truck drivers probably test the limits and one Councillor observed such a truck doing 40mph in a 30mph zone. Bearton Councillors have proposed 20mph limits on some of their local roads. Hertfordshire Highways have a perverse ruling that they do not support 20 mph limits unless 85% of vehicles are already doing less than 25mph. At the last members' meeting we put such limits to the vote. 30% voted for a town limit of 20mph, 50% for zones where the limit applies, and 20% for individual streets alone to be limited. Nobody voted for allowing the current 30mph limits to be unchanged. We will be following the debate at the Hitchin Committee, which supports a change, and looking further at the issues.

Please let us know what you think about Top Field, speed limits, and anything else that troubles you and might be worthy of our attention. But we cannot do anything about the rain.

Mike Clarke

Churchgate – more debate

At our recent members' meeting, aspects of both Simons' and Hammersmatch's proposals and their impact on the market were considered. John Urwin, chair of Hitchin Forum's Planning Group, began by throwing out some questions:

The two proposals for improving the Churchgate area both involve changes to the market which are not feasible. It is possible the developers will lobby councillors to accept these changes and it is possible that the councillors' vote may disadvantage the market because they may not be properly informed. The community groups have raised this as a risk, but NHDC are not minded to address it.

The following asks some questions about the market:

The market is a commercial operation that trades off public land and benefits from a low overhead cost. This low overhead is effectively a tax-payer subsidy and means that traders can offer goods at lower prices than local shops. These low prices benefit the less prosperous in our society and so we may feel that this subsidy delivers a public good. Another public good is that it offers a way for people to start a business.

Hitchin Market is "fixed", rather than being "demountable", which means that it prevents other community activities taking place on the public land for three days and seven evenings a

John Haykin, board member of Hitchin Markets Ltd, responded on the 'fixed' versus 'demountable' stalls issue. In his presentation to the meeting, he also put forward an alternative development scenario which would suit the market and possibly the town, and, he suggests, perhaps even a developer:

Having a fixed market offers the town a market on every market day, whatever the weather, because it is secure and weather proof. It provides a dry area to unload into, with no hazards incurred in the erecting and dismantling of heavy metal bars and table tops that make up the stalls.

The argument that the market area is unused for three non-market days and evenings is only true in so far as that's how the market was designed; a new design could offer more opportunity for use.

However, I have a car but I don't use it every day

week when it is not trading. Is this reasonable? If the market were demountable, could a community building be provided on part of the land? Could some traders use this building on market days? Could the remainder of the land be used for other purposes on non-market days, perhaps by young people?

If the market were demountable and operated elsewhere in Hitchin, would this allow an improved Hammersmatch solution to come forward? Their solution requires that they extend over part of the existing market location. What would they give Hitchin in return? Would they provide the market with modern secure stalls, rather like ones they currently have, but able to be moved? Is it feasible for the market then to trade from Hermitage Road, Bancroft and Brand Street, if these were car free?

If there is not a satisfactory solution, might we say that we are happy to leave the market alone and forego any improvement to Churchgate? Might it be better to leave Hitchin alone and let it find its own way in the wider retail environment?

or every evening, but I still want a car. We have car parks that are only really full at the weekends and yet we hear the regular cry that we don't have enough car parking space.

We also have parks and open spaces that are not in use evenings and through the night, but we still want parks (including the bandstand that is rarely used).

What we do have is a large, popular market that gives Hitchin a massive outdoor department store and some very specialist traders. We should value and support it.

Following the last presentation from Hammersmatch and a discussion about their plans for Churchgate, it was obvious that at least two shops – Iceland and the Electronics shop - would have to be moved to make way for their proposal.

If these shops were to be vacated, there would be an opportunity to extend the market lengthways from Churchyard Walk to the Biggin car park, using the shell of the shops to provide a walled “U” shaped area for lock-up units. These could then be gated and locked up, making the area safer and tidier on non-market days. Pulling back the frontage of these two shops would also provide a clear, unblocked vista from the Market Place through to the Biggin, with a cleaner, straighter line of retail units.

The stalls on a newly-developed market would run from the river to the Churchgate shops, giving a clearer view of Churchgate from the river and Queen Street. This area, too, could be gated for security and safety, meaning a much

Editor’s Note: As we went to press, a **draft Development Brief for the Post Office site** was being reported to the Hitchin Committee. It is then due to be considered by NHDC’s Cabinet at the end of July, after which it will be issued for public consultation.

Protecting Hitchin’s Heritage

Ellie Clarke, of Hitchin Forum’s Planning Group, explains new statutory protection for our special areas:

Hitchin’s first Conservation Area, covering much of the town centre, was designated in 1969. It was reviewed in 1998, when a Register of Buildings of Local Interest for Hitchin was also adopted. Following another review in 2009-11, Hitchin now has no fewer than four separate Conservation Areas and a greatly expanded Local Register, providing considerably enhanced protection for our most special and distinctive areas.

This review created three new Conservation Areas based around **Butts Close** (including Wilshere Dacre School, the houses opposite Butts Close along Fishponds Road, and up Oughtonhead Way as far as The Green); around **Hitchin Hill Path** (including Butcher’s Lane and up to St Elmo Court between London Road and Stevenage Road); and around **Hitchin Railway and Ransom’s Recreation Ground**. Hitchin’s main Conservation Area was redefined and extended to include the town centre and much of the Victorian housing to the north and east.

smaller area to be seen as vacant on non market days.

This would create an opportunity to open up the river, using this as a boundary for the market. It would also create an area for development from the river up to Queen Street, on two levels and the full width of the current market site. No car parks would need to be removed or reduced and development could be kept to the levels which are currently acceptable.

This is only a suggestion and is most definitely a work in progress, intended only to alter the way we have been thinking about the redevelopment of Churchgate. It tries to show that moving the market, or reducing it in size to such an extent that it is weakened, are not the only options. If we think about changing the shape of the market and investing in better structure, we can give the market what it needs, the developers something to work with and the people of Hitchin a much improved area of public use.

Because of its size and varied nature, it was divided into seven **Character Areas**, each having a unique character and appearance.

This review was also far more comprehensive than those carried out previously. In addition to identifying **Listed Buildings (Grade I & II)** and **Buildings of Local Interest**, it also designates **Positive Buildings; Important Boundary Walls, Gates and Piers; Landmarks; Important Views; Trees with Landscape Amenity Value; Important Tree Groups** and **Important Green Spaces**. All of these are described in detail and areas where specific improvements would be of benefit are highlighted.

The **Register of Buildings of Local Interest** includes buildings of particular quality by well known local architects or craftsmen; of particular local architectural or historic interest; which act as important architectural landmarks within their setting; or documented to have a close historical association with important and significant local historic events or people.

Snippets

Neighbourhood Plan Update – at the Members’ meeting on 28th June, John Wyer and Adrian Gurney presented some of the pros and cons of undertaking a Neighbourhood Plan over the coming year. There were questions about the process involved and a lively discussion.

It was agreed that it would be helpful to hold a meeting with the Hitchin Society, Hitchin Historical Society and Hitchin Initiative to explore the planning issues that are particularly relevant to the town, and whether or not it might be helpful and feasible to pursue a Neighbourhood Plan.

That meeting has been arranged for the end of July and we hope to follow it with a meeting with the relevant NHDC Planning Officer to consider the issues in the context of the Local Plan (on which consultation is expected later in the summer). Even if we decide not to proceed, the joint discussions with the other societies will help to inform all of us of the sort of points we may want to raise in the Local Plan consultation.
(Adrian Gurney)

Luton Airport Update – Luton Borough Council and the airport’s operator (Spanish company Abertis) have now agreed to merge their competing expansion plans and will submit a single planning application to LBC later this year. It would be interesting to comment on whether Luton’s plans fit in with the government aviation policy for the south-east. However, not only does the policy not yet exist, but planned consultation has just been delayed for a second time and will not begin until later this year.

The root of the problem in the south-east is what to do about Heathrow. Whereas many major cities worldwide relocated their main airport further away from populated areas as expansion became necessary, Heathrow continued to grow on an unsuitable site, making it very hard to expand further and very expensive to relocate. It is difficult to see the government grasping the nettle before the next general election, and it seems likely that the arguments about where extra capacity should go will rumble on for many years to come.
(Dave Borner)

22 Bridge Street – hope? Three newsletter articles have recently been written about the old bus garage in an attempt to save and restore the facade to its former glory. In December the Planning Committee reluctantly agreed to grant conservation area consent for demolition, despite declaring that too many interesting buildings had already been demolished in Hitchin.

In my last article I pleaded that if the present facade is doomed, then it should be replaced with a distinctive building to enhance the importance of this gateway site. The latest proposal for its replacement overwhelms its neighbour and is a pastiche of the present facade, lacking design significance. Fortunately NHDC Planning agree. Unfortunately they require a frontage that better reflects the design of the bus garage. That’s where I part company with them as I see no point in reproducing a look-alike facade. This is a unique opportunity for a unique site demanding a uniquely impressive response in a unique town!
(Chris Honey)

Litter Roundup - Our pre-Jubilee campaign to clean up Hitchin – *“Love Hitchin – pick up on litter”*, was a great success, with nearly 100 stalwarts turning out at various times throughout May. Concerted efforts on our target day – Sunday 27th May – saw over 60 people tackling several residential areas as well as the river area between Grove Road and Cadwell Playing Fields.

It was interesting that the areas most people wanted to tackle were their local green spaces rather than necessarily their streets, perhaps an indication that the Council is doing a pretty good job of our residential areas. What became obvious, too, is that there are many “litter heroes” in Hitchin who routinely litter pick where they regularly walk, and have done so for years.

This was a real partnership effort: **NHDC** provided tools (black bags and litter-pickers) through **Hitchin Initiative**, who publicised our campaign along with the **Hitchin Comet** and **Best of Hitchin**, **businesses** gave sponsorship, **Hitchin Forum** provided overall co-ordination, **Hitchin people** and **Herts Probation** did the hard work! The campaign revealed a great community spirit with everyone saying how much they enjoyed doing it and asking when the next clean-up would be! A project for next year? (Ellie Clarke)

Membership News – Our membership continues to grow. Eight new members have joined Hitchin Forum since publication of the May/June issue of our newsletter.
(Maureen Carroll)

Battle Field

Hitchin Forum has representatives on the Save Top Field Campaign, and this report has been prepared following meetings of the STFC with Hitchin Town Football Club and Hitchin Cow Commoners' Trust:

The Hitchin Cow Commoners' Trust plan to exchange Top Field for land off the Stevenage Road (opposite Kingshott School). The latter is currently a meadow in the Green Belt, but their proposal would transform it into a fully featured sports and conference centre, funded (indirectly) by the sale of Top Field which, it is strongly rumoured, would in turn become the site of a new supermarket.

Celeriter Ltd, property developers and owners of Hitchin Town Football Club, strongly oppose the scheme, wishing to remain at Top Field, but with greater security of tenure which would help them qualify for grants to improve their present facilities. They could then possibly move up a league, or at any rate, attract a larger crowd. Laudable aims, but questions need to be asked: more people, more traffic? Is it possible that Hitchin Town Football Club / Celeriter Ltd might themselves wish to develop part of the site to fund these improvements?

What of the Hitchin Cow Commoners' Trust? We have identified anomalies in their stated position:

- They have not as yet produced a business plan or feasibility study for the proposed development.
- Who, exactly, would make use of the proposed new facilities?
- They say that the considerable debts they have incurred due to legal action are nearly paid off, so where is the need to sell the land to realise cash?
- They say no business (ie Celeriter Ltd) could be a permanent feature on Top Field because of Common Land Law, but in 2006 it was established (in law) that Top Field is not and never was Common Land, so why can the football club not remain and develop the site properly? It was only the common land status that restricted the erection of permanent structures.
- Under the rules of the Charity Commission, the Trust must be able to prove "best value" (this is not necessarily the same as "best price"). This could only be done by obtaining a planning brief and marketing. A "behind closed doors" acceptance of an offer from one developer (especially one with confidentiality requirements) does not provide transparent proof that the best deal has been struck for the charitable trust.
- If this is the case, has the Trust acted *ultra vires* in presenting themselves to a developer as in a position to sell the land?

There is much that remains unclear, except the extremely serious damage to Hitchin's town centre that a new supermarket at the top of Fishponds Road would cause, and the breach of our precious Green Belt by the proposed new sports centre. Clearly, there is a need for far more information and debate!

Diary Dates

Saturdays 4 August/1 September: **Councillors' Surgery**; 10.30am – noon, Market Place.

Tuesday 11 September: **Town Talk** (6.30pm) & **Hitchin Committee** (7.30pm); Hitchin Boys' School Hall, Grammar School Walk.

Thursday 20 September: **Hitchin Forum members' meeting**; 7.30pm, Discussions and presentations about topical issues in the town.

Sustainable Hitchin? YES!

Chris Honey, of Hitchin Forum's Steering Group and convenor of the former *Hitchin in Transition* group, reports on our Hitchin Festival meeting:

It's time to pick ourselves up, dust ourselves down and start all over again. That was the message with which Bruce Nixon, veteran "change agent", writer and speaker on the environmental and economic crisis, enthused a capacity audience at our meeting on 16 July.

But first he enlightened us with the mess we all had got ourselves into. YES, we are all witting or unwitting addicts of the life oil dependence has given us, leading to environmental catastrophe. Continuous growth, based on unfettered globalisation and debt, cannot be sustained by a finite planet and consumerism is not making us any happier.

That depressing message could have left us with our tails between our legs feeling that there was nothing we could do about it. NO, we aren't stupid; we have just acted stupidly without concern for others including future generations and all other forms of life on mother Earth. Without this knowledge of the underlying global system causing our present problems we will not understand how to transform it for our salvation. The same ingenuity and creativity applied during the ever increasing accessibility of oil and other fossil resources can equally be used during their reducing availability, and we can adapt to a better life without them.

So it's not why we can't, but how we can.

Planning Snippets

Both MacDonal'd's and Tesco have appealed against NHDC's refusal of planning permission for extended opening hours. Ellie Clarke, secretary of Hitchin Forum's planning group, reports:

McDonald's Restaurants Ltd have been granted permitted opening hours 7am – 10pm on Mondays to Saturdays, and 8am – 10pm on Sundays at their drive-through restaurant on Nightingale Road. Tesco Stores Ltd, have been granted planning permission to open their new Tesco Express Store on Walsworth Road 7am – 11pm on Mondays to Saturdays and 8am – 9pm on Sundays and Bank Holidays. However, both outlets want to open 7am – 11 pm, seven days a week.

Hitchin Forum objected to the McDonald's application saying nothing had changed since the last application in 2011, when they had been refused permission, and reiterated that noise, fumes, litter and anti-social behaviour were continuing problems for local residents; extending opening hours would exacerbate these problems. We also objected to the Tesco application as it could contribute to late evening antisocial behaviour, particularly if the sale of alcohol was permitted. Our objections have been forwarded to the Planning Inspectorate for consideration.

Combined action will transform the present system rather than attempting a quick fix. YES, we can! It's our choice. It won't just happen. We can all play our part in facing up to the biggest challenge in our history not least by considering it as an opportunity to stop poisoning the Earth and reduce poverty, economic inequality and violence. YES, 'A Better World is Possible'!

With our heads enthusiastically buzzing we reflected in pairs, for four minutes each listening in turn, to discover the biggest insight we got from Bruce's presentation, what we wanted to offer or question further about and what action we would take. This was followed by one-minute contributions from various pairs leading to proposed actions and implications for a more sustainable Hitchin.

The overall feeling was for local action, which started with those who were motivated to do so, leaving their contact details. Hopefully this will revive the 'Hitchin in Transition' movement, because if we wait for governments it'll be too late (they failed the world again at Rio 2012). If we act as individuals it'll be too little, but if we act as communities it might just be enough, just in time to save our futures. YES, it's not too late to make the change but it's certainly too late not to!