

NEWSLETTER
July/August 2013 No. 118

Brian Limbrick MBE

22 October 1931 - 7 May 2013

Brian Limbrick, who died on May 7th, had been our president for the past two years. He was a fervent supporter of the Forum since its inception in 1992. He knew so much of the history and valued so much the heritage of Hitchin and was loud in his protests about anything that looked likely to threaten his beloved town. He enjoyed the debates at our steering group meetings, delighted when we took on campaigns, whether about Churchgate or litter, and often had words of wisdom to share.



His only regret over the past year had been that he could not do more due to his increasingly frail health. He did not like to sit idly by.

He spearheaded the monumental work of saving the Hitchin British Schools from demolition and in 1990 founded what has become such a splendid museum. Fiona Dodwell, recently retired archivist at the British Schools Museum, described that work in her tribute at the service of thanksgiving, from the time he joined the Jill Grey Collection Working Party, to the setting up of the HBS Trust and the Friends of Hitchin British Schools. He had a marvellous enthusiasm for the enterprise which led to the Trust purchasing the buildings and developing the large team of volunteers and staff who now manage the museum. His MBE in 2002 recognized that unique contribution, which delighted him and all those who had been infected with his enthusiasm. It was an infection from which few recovered. He was personally engaging and used his skills acquired through many years of work in persuading people to buy the product he was passionate about.

He had previously made his mark in the world of country dancing, forming the Offley Morris Men and the Staplers Country Dance Club and becoming the colourful and popular MC of many events. This experience also made him a loud advocate of retaining the floor in the Mountford Hall in the refurbishment of the Town Hall – well sprung and said by dancers to be superior to anything else in the region.

At the Thanksgiving Service his son, Toby, gave a moving account of Brian's life, ending with a quote from Reginald Hine, one of Brian's heroes. Hine also wrote "In my judgement it is those who have been scornful of the past who are the first to miss their footing into the future". Brian was ever dancing between Hitchin's past and looking to its future. He was knowledgeable, engaging, encouraging, amusing – a great president, and we miss him.

Mike Clarke, Chairman

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Chairman: Mike Clarke

Member of: Hitchin Initiative
Campaign to Protect Rural England
Historic Towns Forum

Chairman's Piece

Too late to report in our last newsletter was our members' meeting on 9th May when Peter Lilley came to talk, listen and discuss Hitchin and our concerns. It was extremely interesting and useful and we are grateful for his time – both then and since. The role of our local MP lies between central government and our local authority, and we have issues with both! The edicts of government can have councils scurrying to fulfil the latest performance or budgetary expectation (i.e. reduction). Government says Localism is important, so consult and decide with the people, but do it before yesterday, which leads councils to short circuit consultation, or am I misreading something? Peter Lilley has followed up on two of the issues that we discussed - the housing consultation and the Council's plans for Bancroft Recreation Ground – and he can look forward to further engagement with us on these matters.

The debate at the last Hitchin Committee over the plans for Bancroft Recreation Ground was good (minutes available on <http://tinyurl.com/oht9y3t>). Council officers have prepared a draft Master Plan, but we are not sure how much of that is agreeable to local residents and Bancroft Recreation Ground users. We will be exploring that issue over the coming weeks. Fortunately, Hitchin Councillors said this should not be taken as the final plan and they also asked that any refurbishment of the Recreation Ground should not be separated from the provision of a new community hall in Bancroft Rec.

Nothing much has emerged recently about Top Field. We understand that the Hitchin Cow Commoners Trust and the lessee – Celeriter – are still trying to resolve issues over the lease. We do hope that there will be a sensible way forward! The Save Top Field Campaign (STFC) has a new chairman, John Skeeles, who is Hitchin Historical Society's representative on STFC. We continue to support STFC but have heard nothing more about any of the proposed developments.

A debate is looming over "20's Plenty" for Hertfordshire. The County Council's Scrutiny Committee is due to hear evidence on the current policies within the county on two days in October, at which I hope to have a full five minutes to present evidence from Hitchin. Watford Borough Council have been leading the way on challenging some outdated policies and we hope that some progress can be made in allowing towns and villages to choose whether a 20mph speed limit is right for their area - a choice which many towns, cities and even one county (Lancashire) have made. We will be providing an update on the website and welcome your views.

May I encourage you to take up the invitation which Bill Sellicks has written about in these pages – to survey footpaths which we hope will lead to better use and maintenance of this historical web of delights. As with lower road speeds which help encourage cycling, better paths and more walking should make us all healthier (18th century proverb tells us that we can also be wealthier and wiser if we are early to bed and early to rise, but I don't believe that one).

Our next members' meeting is not until Tuesday 3rd September so do enjoy the rest of the excellent Hitchin Festival and whatever the weather throws at us.

Diary Dates

Tuesday 16 July: **Town Talk** - 6.30pm, **Hitchin Committee** - 7.30pm; Hitchin Boys' School Main Hall
Issues can be raised in the public Town Talk session; Hitchin councillors debating in committee.

Thursday 18 July: **NHDC Full Council** - 7.30pm; Council Offices, Gernon Road ***See Stop Press p.6 ***
This meeting will debate the officers' report on future possibilities in the Churchgate area.

Tuesday 3 September: **Hitchin Forum Members' Meeting** - an opportunity for our members to catch up on and debate the latest Hitchin issues.

The Local Plan

Adrian Gurney, Chairman of Hitchin Forum's Planning Group gives an update on our initiatives to influence future development in Hitchin.

As members will know, we (together with Hitchin Society, Hitchin Historical Society and Hitchin Initiative) completed our report *Planning Hitchin's Future* in April, and hopefully you have had a chance to look at it. This is an update on how far we are likely to be able to influence the Local Plan, particularly the Hitchin section, and what other actions we can take over the next few months to get some of our issues addressed.

We sent copies to Councillors on Hitchin Committee at the end of May, and were able to make a presentation to the Committee on 4th June, particularly on the town centre issues that seem to be most urgent in the context of the current challenges and opportunities. Councillors were very appreciative of the initiative of the societies and work that had been done:

- They requested that the societies should be invited to contribute on a regular basis to that part of the Local Plan relevant to Hitchin; and
- They supported our suggestion that the Hitchin Town Centre Working Party should be re-instated.

We were able to begin making a direct contribution at our joint meeting with officers on 6th June. It was agreed that some of the issues raised could usefully be included in the main policy part of the Local Plan (for instance space standards for housing), and the introduction for the Hitchin section could take into account the main thrust of our vision (for instance the strengthening of Hitchin's role as a day visit destination).

Update on West of Stevenage

A report to a recent meeting of NHDC's Cabinet says that the Secretary of State (SoS) wants to re-open the inquiry into the application for 3,600 houses here, but the original applicants have indicated they will not attend any such inquiry. NHDC have told the SoS that re-opening the inquiry is therefore not appropriate. They say that they may pursue costs against the applicants for not withdrawing an application they are no longer prepared to defend. NHDC may also pursue costs against the SoS if he does proceed with re-opening the inquiry as it is likely to incur significant costs for all parties but has no prospect of leading to a deliverable development.

Ellie Clarke

Our concern is that the Hitchin section will remain focused on 'deliverable' proposals with little reference to longer term opportunities. We will need to push further on this, as well as pursuing specific issues such as transport concerns (with Hertfordshire Highways) and design principles and open spaces (to influence related strategies). The sections elsewhere in the newsletter on Footpaths and Housing focus on two of our current areas of involvement.

It is likely that NHDC's Draft Local Plan will be prepared by the end of the year, with the main consultation taking place in January and February 2014.

With regard to a Hitchin Town Centre Working Party, we are discussing with the other societies (including Hitchin Initiative) what the potential aims of a HTCWP might be. These are likely to include bringing together Councillors and the societies; acting as a means of involving local people in order to consider the long term future of the town centre; and the implications of specific proposals in this longer term context (including those at Churchgate, but also elsewhere).

We are hoping that the HTCWP will be able to influence key issues, e.g. licensing policy, and look at 'areas of opportunity' in the town centre. We would particularly seek to influence the production of development briefs that will pick up some of the ideas in *Planning Hitchin's Future* such as the creative quarter at Paynes Park, and the development focus on cultural and youth facilities at Woodside.

Hitchin's footpaths – a request for help

Bill Sellicks is a member of Hitchin Forum's Planning Group and is spearheading an exciting (and leisurely if you so wish!) summer project to assess Hitchin's network of footpaths. Here he asks for **YOUR help.**

Recently, Planning Group members Adrian Gurney, Ann Heymans, Chris Honey and I managed to dodge the June showers and take an enjoyable stroll of just over 3 miles from Hitchin Market Place to the Cambridge Road Garden Centre. Our route took us via Riddy Lane and the Hitchin Outer Orbital Path (HOOP) along Ippollitts Brook, Gypsy Lane, Kingswood Avenue and the Garden City Greenway.

In the process, we explored the Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust Nature Reserve at Purwell Ninesprings, saw what we believed to be a goldcrest (possibly Britain's smallest bird) and enjoyed refreshments at the garden centre restaurant with its fine views over the town. With our collective residence in Hitchin totalling well over 50 years, it was surprising that none of us had ever walked the path through the Nature Reserve before. If you are inspired to emulate this part of our expedition, it is advisable to take steps to protect yourself against the very tall stinging nettles that line stretches of the narrow path! It is well worth the effort for the wildflowers alone – among numerous others, ragged robin and white campion were in full bloom - but also for the possibility of seeing one of the species of secretive warblers which inhabit such wetlands. We were unsuccessful in achieving a convincing sighting, but a more leisurely visit might prove rewarding.

Some weeks earlier, I had made an assessment of the state of some of the paths on our route.

With Chris taking meticulous notes, the purpose of our walk was to come to an agreement on the findings.

During the coming months we are hoping that you will get involved by completing a similar checklist on one of Hitchin's rights of way as the first stage of an ongoing project. There are 2 ultimate aims:

- To provide walking route guides on the Hitchin Forum website with links to information on features such as local history, wildlife and buildings;
- To make recommendations to Hertfordshire Highways about how to improve footpaths in order to promote walking and reduce car use.

For this year, we will limit our assessments to footpaths within the boundary of (and including) the HOOP (most of these appear on the '**About Hitchin**' map on our website).

We hope that Forum members will find the time to complete a checklist either for familiar territory or an unexplored area of the town, and that over the summer we can achieve a fairly comprehensive coverage of the town's footpaths. Full details, including the checklist with a completed sample for one of the paths on our walk, instructions and guidance, will be sent to members shortly and will be available on the website. Thank you in anticipation of your help.



"Community Care?"

Chris Honey reports on significant planning applications in Hitchin recently assessed by our planning subgroup.

Now here is a thought: Why not change the premises previously occupied by Philpotts into a two storey restaurant and drinking establishment? Don't worry about noise and antisocial behaviour well into the small hours disturbing nearby residents. Neighbours in Bridge St and Tilehouse St have put up with this for years so they should be used to it by now! So what if it can't be controlled by licensing and who cares about traffic congestion at a town centre junction caused by large vehicles making deliveries?

Well the applicant certainly didn't until the people of Hitchin, who did, complained so vehemently that the application was withdrawn and a smaller ground floor restaurant was proposed instead. We will consider the implications of this as well!

Another thought: Cedar Dell, let's block off the path through our estate and make it private. Ignore the fact that it existed long before our houses were built and that this proposal has failed to pass NHDC Planning twice before. It's our path, just install a lockable gate at the top of the hill, that should keep them out!

Think again.

Beyond living memory Saunders Walk has provided pedestrian access to the town centre by connecting Cemetery Path with Storehouse Lane and Lyles Row. Hitchin Forum has mapped the paths within and around Hitchin and is now surveying them. We don't wish to climb over a gate to be accused of trespass. Instead we await the 'application refused' stamp on this antisocial proposal.

Housing Options - more sites proposed

Adrian Gurney highlights a second consultation, being held by NHDC during July, to get our views on the suitability of further sites for housing.

The Council received over 9,000 comments from 2000 respondents to the consultation earlier this year, including proposals from landowners and developers for 32 additional sites. NHDC has launched a second period of consultation on these new housing options, so that the comments can be added to those on the original sites before decisions are made.

The new proposals that will be of most concern to us are development of nearly 3,000 homes stretching from the Pirton Road to Gosmore Road enveloping Charlton Village, and further proposals at Gosmore, Wymondley and Todds Green. They can be seen at: www.north-herts.gov.uk/housingoptions.

The smaller sites would mean the coalescence of Hitchin, Wymondley, St Ippolyts, Todds Green and Stevenage.

The main site south west of Hitchin would have all the detrimental effects of the larger scheme

in terms of the effect of loss of Green Belt on the setting of the historic town, impact on countryside of landscape and recreational value and the merging of settlements (including Charlton and Gosmore). Once the Green Belt edge has been breached here it will be very difficult to defend the wider valley from development at the scale of the other larger proposal.

Our intention is to have a Hitchin Forum response prepared and on our website in the week beginning 22nd July to help our members in preparing their own responses.

It is important that members respond to the current consultation in the same way as we did for the earlier one. You can email your comments to: localplans@north-herts.gov.uk. Consultation closes on 2nd August.

The Post Office Site

Andrew Wearmouth, of Hitchin Forum's Planning Group, details the progress towards an appropriate development on the former Sorting & Post Office site.

As previously reported, both here and in the Comet, the Post Office site has been bought by a local development company, Whitebarn Developments. It is an "L"-shaped site, with a long frontage to Portmill Lane, and we have great hopes that a local company will be empathetic with the town. Discussions so far suggest that this is indeed the case. On 7th May, Whitebarn met with Hitchin Forum, The Hitchin Society and Hitchin Historical Society and explained their proposals for the site.

Their suggestion is for the Hermitage Road frontage to be replaced with shops at ground level, with flats above, the height to be limited to that of adjacent buildings. The intention is not to copy the style of the original design for the road (the site is already between two 1960s buildings), but to offer a bright modern appearance, with the top floor being set back to reduce the effect on the street scene.

To the rear of this would be a hotel, with frontage to Portmill Lane, and between the hotel and the pedestrian riverside walk (from Hermitage Road to Portmill Lane) would be a further block of apartments – all of a high quality contemporary design. The height of the hotel and flats is suggested as rising from three to four

storeys, being between the three storey of the listed former Hawkins Russell Jones building and the four storeys of the newer Portmill House on the corner of Queen Street. Again the top floor is proposed to be set back. Vehicle access is proposed between the parts, to provide servicing for the hotel and Hermitage Road flats, and an undercroft car park for the Portmill Lane apartments, this helping the visual openness that the development aims for.

The proposals were generally welcomed in principle by the three Hitchin societies, and a joint letter to this effect has been sent to Whitebarn to assist them in their discussions with planning officers.

At Hitchin Committee on 4th June Whitebarn presented some slightly altered proposals in response to further comments by officers. These proposals included a retail unit at the corner by the riverside walkway, and a more traditional style for the hotel. Councillors who spoke were strongly of the view that the original contemporary design solution was to be preferred. Whitebarn are currently putting together their application drawings and have indicated they would like to discuss them with the three Societies before they are submitted.

***** STOP PRESS ** Churchgate Report to Full Council 18.7.13***

When Full Council took the momentous decision on 31 January not to extend the Development Agreement with Simons, they also agreed that a further report on future options should be prepared. As we go to press, the Council officers' report on what they see as the future options for the Churchgate area has just been published. It will be presented and debated at Full Council on Thursday 18 July (see Diary Dates, page two).

The report is available as agenda item 13 on this weblink to the council's website: <http://www.north-herts.gov.uk/aksnherts/users/public/admin/kab14.pl?operation=SUBMIT&meet=32&cmte=COU&grpId=public&arc=71> or simply click on 'Council Meetings' and follow the links.

Hitchin Forum will be preparing a response in conjunction with The Hitchin Society, Hitchin Historical Society and Hitchin Initiative, and we would like as many of our members as possible to attend. We hope to be able to email more information and analysis to our members before the meeting, but **please attend if you can!**