



## NEWSLETTER

Nov/Dec 2011 No. 108

### Chairman's Piece

We had a good turnout at the AGM, held in the Hitchin British Schools. The place was a reminder of how much can be achieved in preserving and building on our historic heritage, and what could have been lost. We welcomed one new person on to the Steering Group, Judith Gurney, while retaining all members from last year. Our membership numbers have been stable over the past year, but we would always feel benefit from an increase – we need more support to make our voice heard. As a ginger group we benefit from more opinions to add spice to the mix, and at times more people to share the tasks. We are in need of volunteers who could help with administrative tasks or helping with the website. Please get in touch if you think you can help.

Keith Hoskins spoke after the business meeting and gave a thorough and fascinating account of all of the Hitchin Initiative and Business Improvement District's activities. The activity in and around the town continues to grow and leaves me quite breathless. Apart from the inevitable discussion about Churchgate there was a suggestion that some of the town's old street names should be revived. If Simons ever get to build on St Mary's Square we should perhaps change Queen Street back to Dead Street, for that is what we fear it will become. The ongoing plans to renovate and transform the Town Hall have required enormous effort to overcome all of the obstacles, but that is proceeding with the support of the Council. However, there are continuing frustrations in trying to retain another public facility, Bancroft Hall, and in not getting the appropriate degree of Council support. The dislocation between the community's aspirations and the Council's machinations continues to belie what should be the spirit of all the current localism and national planning chatter.

*Mike Clarke*

### News Round-Up

**Top Field:** Dunmore Developers Ltd have made an application for Top Field (site of the Hitchin Football Club) to be removed from the register of Cow Common lands. An inquiry, chaired by a Government-appointed inspector, will be held at Christchurch on Bedford Road on 14th December, commencing at 10am, when evidence/objections can be made.

**Hitchin Town Hall:** Progressing; the appointment of Supervising Architect was to be confirmed on 21st November.

**Benslow Field:** Awaiting a decision on whether this green space will be designated a Town Green.

**Bancroft Hall:** Hitchin Bridge Club has presented a strong case for replacement and community management; we await a response from NHDC.

**Community Enterprise & Training Shop:** Situated in Hermitage Road and operating in collaboration with Hitchin Initiative, it aims to give mentoring and support to budding entrepreneurs and young adults in their chosen fields. Old hands are needed to give the benefit of their experience! Volunteers please contact the H.I. office.

07967 118665 [info@hitchinform.org.uk](mailto:info@hitchinform.org.uk) [www.hitchinform.org.uk](http://www.hitchinform.org.uk)

Chairman: Mike Clarke  
President: Brian Limbrick MBE

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

## Churchgate: The Lobbying Goes On

**John Urwin chairs Hitchin Forum's planning group and is also our representative on the Churchgate Liaison Forum. Here he summarises recent lobbying undertaken jointly with The Hitchin Society and Hitchin Historical Society:**

Recently, representatives of The Hitchin Society, Hitchin Historical Society and Hitchin Forum were invited by the Chairman of the Churchgate Liaison Forum, Martin Stears-Hanscomb, to meet Charles Vyvyan of Simons Ltd. Similar meetings have been held between Simons Ltd and Hitchin Markets Ltd and Hitchin Initiative. The laudable purpose was to explore common ground outside the rather adversarial atmosphere of the Churchgate Liaison Forum.

The position of all three societies is that any development should adhere to the Churchgate Planning Brief, as this is adopted NHDC policy following extensive public consultation. Charles Vyvyan repeated his position that such a scheme was not financially viable, and the meeting could have ended there!

Further discussion ensued and it seems Simons propose reducing some building heights and increasing the "gap" in St. Mary's Square building through which St. Mary's Church would be visible from Queen Street. They still have not resolved the location of the Market as Portmill Lane East car park will only accommodate 70% of current stalls. They would consider a multi-storey car park on the Post Office site with 30% of the Market on the ground floor, but this is dependent on Simons purchasing the site. We expressed concern over architectural quality and scale and massing.

This meeting was intended merely as an informal exchange of ideas. Mr Vyvyan subsequently produced summary notes that were circulated to attendees. However, these were not accepted as a true record as they gave the impression of greater agreement than was the case. Changes were requested, but before these had been agreed, it was learnt that excerpts from his notes had been incorporated into a report by NHDC officers to the Hitchin Committee. The three societies asked for a letter which clarified our position

to be read out at the Hitchin Committee and incorporated into the minutes, as it was felt that the report suggested some measure of agreement between the societies and Simons.

Although this meeting was useful, it has been overtaken by another, procedural, matter which may result in a formal complaint being made to the Ombudsman.

It seems that if NHDC agrees to a Churchgate redevelopment that involves building on St. Mary's Square and Portmill Lane (areas 4 & 5), then it will contravene European Union law. This is because in the Planning Brief, the subsequent Development Agreement with Simons and the advertisement in the Journal of the EU, NHDC said that they wanted development on the existing Churchgate, on the market location and on Biggin Lane car park (areas 1, 2 & 3), but enhancement of areas 4 & 5. Clearly if a developer knew that NHDC were minded to accept development on areas 4 & 5, that would be more financially attractive and encourage them to bid. So the European Journal advertisement may have disadvantaged developers who decided not to bid and if NHDC accepts a Simons proposal that does have building on areas 4 & 5, then their procurement process will have been flawed and, we believe, contravened EU law.

The three societies wrote to the Leader of the Council pointing this out and raising other points of procedure. These include NHDC's flawed scoring process which was overly favourable to Simons' proposals and the way the provisions of the Planning Brief seem to have been expanded without further public consultation. NHDC are also deferring recovery of their costs until planning permission has been granted and this is not the usual procedure.

The reply we received was not satisfactory so we have written again, in more detail.

The whole Churchgate saga is most unsatisfactory, particularly because the "user"

in Hitchin is effectively at war with the Council, which is not what the Government is promoting. We hear from other local societies that there is much better co-operation with

their local authorities. If anybody can suggest how this situation might be improved, then let's hear it!

## 22 Bridge St Hitchin: The end of the Green Line bus journey!

### Chris Honey & Ellie Clarke of Hitchin Forum's planning group assess the latest of a series of redevelopment proposals for a significant 'gateway' site in Hitchin:

For the fourth time we are having to defend a unique site in Hitchin – the facade of the garage on the corner of Bridge St and Park St, previously occupied by London Transport. A group of local developers and architects have reapplied for its demolition in order to replace it with a poor quality development which was rejected in 2008.

The proposal to demolish this building fails to recognise its local historic interest, both commercial and social. It is in a Conservation Area and dates from the late 1920's, becoming one of the most northerly of London Passenger Transport's garages (See photographs back page, taken from *London Transport Garages* by Ken Glazier). Few of these now remain and just because it is in a rundown state does not mean it should be demolished. NHDC designated this area as an 'Enhancement Opportunity' in the Town Centre Strategy (2004) which promised, in Policy 6, the preparation of a Design Brief. We are all seven years older now and still waiting and, it has to be said, enhancement does not equate with wholesale destruction. If this was in Hampstead, no architect would dare suggest pulling it down!

We don't deserve such treatment even if those in the past have defiled the building for commercial reasons. Much of Hitchin's attractiveness resides in its rich stylistic mix and local distinctiveness. Unusual and quirky buildings, such as this one, contribute to interesting and characterful street frontages. A restored/modified facade of the existing building for residential use would be more appropriate in the context of this important gateway to Hitchin town centre. The architect

who handled the Gainsford School listened to what informed members of the public had to say about its restoration and came up with a hugely sensitive result.

This proposal is on a visually prominent site; it catches the eye as one comes into the town from Hitchin Hill and is the main view when leaving Queen Street. You would think a sensitive architect would take account of the visual significance of this site as well as its immediate context and should at least maintain and possibly enhance the appearance of this important area. Instead a pseudo-Georgian three storey block would be crammed in, dominating Eric Moore's Bookshop. Rather than having any design integrity of its own, it is 'Anytown Architecture', dressed up with the usual details drawn from a 'Catalogue of Bland Non-Distinctiveness'. This complete lack of distinction by comparison to that which could be achieved in a rejuvenated facade is nothing short of a travesty. It is too important a site to be mishandled in this way. **Note: If you wish to object, write to Tom Rea at NHDC quoting Ref 11/02634/1.**

**"All change – the bus terminates here".**

#### **A Message from the Membership Secretary:**

Thank you to the many members who renewed so promptly. If we have not already received your renewal, another form is enclosed with this newsletter and it would be much appreciated if you would complete and return it with your subscription as soon as possible.

## The National Planning Policy Framework

**This might sound dry as dust . . . but it is the most fundamental planning reform in a generation and led to an outcry from national conservation groups when the Government published it for consultation. John Urwin summarises the issues.**

This document aims to reduce 1000 pages of planning guidance to 53. When one considers that most local planning applications are quite mundane, i.e. extensions, revised shop fronts, small housing developments and changes in conservation areas, the case for simplification of planning policy makes sense. It is unlikely that a nuclear power station or a motor car factory will be built on the outskirts of Hitchin, but we are always under threat from the ambitions of Stevenage and Luton to expand – this threat being more political than planning. The draft NPPF covers a multitude of topics, but we decided to confine our comments to those that seemed relevant to Hitchin.

On ***Delivering Sustainable Development***, we felt the document should list key sustainable development planning principles and these should be cross-referenced throughout the document. ‘Sustainable development’ in the NPPF places excessive emphasis on economic development, when other factors such as social wellbeing and high quality environment are relevant. The assumption that permission should be granted if local planning documents are not up to date is draconian and help should be given to local authorities to speedily get these finished.

On ***Plan Making***, we said that when local authorities have to co-operate, such as with Stevenage, both authorities should use the same methods of analysis to establish the need for more housing, and do this at the same time. Local needs rather than county wide needs should be paramount.

On ***Business and Economic Development***, we pointed out that the NPPF has no provision for spreading work more evenly across the country. It is necessary to have a policy resisting excessive employment growth in Hertfordshire.

On ***Planning for Prosperity***, we want a policy that will maintain the viability of town centres in preference to out of town developments. On ***Transport*** we want a national parking standard for non-residential development to ensure that out of town retail parks are not made more attractive to motorists.

On ***Housing*** there should be a common method of assessing various housing needs in each authority, and of assessing whether development land is “viable”. The brown field target should be reinstated. Major developers should not be allowed to lock up building land indefinitely, thus restricting supply to maximise prices. This will help make housing more affordable and allow local and self builders to buy building land. The provision of a further 20% of building land on top of the 5 year supply should be scrapped.

We supported the desire for good ***Design***, but pointed out that major developers buy their materials in vast numbers at rock bottom prices, leading to ‘identikit housing’ and the demise of vernacular building. We strongly supported the idea of design reviews and involving the local community in design judgements.

We strongly supported the continuing protection of the ***Green Belt***, but not the replacement of a green belt in one place with a new one elsewhere. We supported the policy on ***Climate Change, Flooding and Coastal Changes***, but want targets for emissions. On ***Natural Environment***, we want a policy that allows local people to identify important areas that they want protected, other than Green Belts.

On ***Historic Environment***, we welcomed the policies in the NPPF which will help us resist the current overweening proposals for development around Churchgate.

## And a local planning matter . . .

Hitchin Forum's Planning Group has supported local residents in objecting to an application by McDonald's Restaurant on Nightingale Road to extend their opening hours by one hour both morning and evening. This would allow them to open daily from 7am to 11pm. Noise, fumes, litter and anti-social behaviour associated with the operation of the restaurant are continuing problems for local residents. Extending opening hours would only exacerbate this, materially affecting their living and sleeping amenity. Further, the Council refused a similar proposal in 2009 on the grounds that it could prejudice any proposed planning and layout of possible residential development on the adjoining railway sidings. Since then, the Railway Station Conservation Area has been created and these proposals would not retain or enhance its special character.

## Introducing Hitchin Forum's Steering Group: 2011-12

**Dave Borner** – Originally from London, Dave has lived in Hitchin since 1987. He works as an engineer in the upstream oil industry, and takes a particular interest in energy and transport matters. A long standing Forum member, he joined Steering Group in 2006 and runs our **Transport Group**. He would like to see local transport policy being friendlier to residents and the environment, and better facilities for cyclists and pedestrians. He is interested in preserving Hitchin's unique character.

**Jeremy Burrowes** – He fell in love with Hitchin when he first arrived in 1982 and has been a member of Hitchin Forum since soon after its formation. Being **Treasurer** and a member of Steering Group has allowed him to pursue interests such as looking after the funds and developing the website, plus carrying out research and analysis of local issues. He thoroughly enjoys the opportunities to make a contribution and the camaraderie which exists within Hitchin Forum.

**Maureen Carroll** – She has been Hitchin Forum's **Membership Secretary** since 2003. Originally from north London, she has lived in Hitchin since 1978. A retired teacher, she is an active and long-standing member of the Education Team at the British Schools Museum in Queen Street.

**Mike Clarke** - He moved to Hitchin in 1981 and before becoming **Chairman** was familiar with the Forum due to Ellie's role in it. Having retired from the NHS (read "*cold baths don't work*" to find out more), he has been keen to support this community's efforts to fight for what is good in Hitchin, for local people to protect what they value. He feels we live amongst a wealth of local history, which can be carelessly destroyed and it is important to speak up and not let this be squandered.

**Judith Gurney** - She has lived most of her married life in Hertfordshire, moving with Adrian to Hitchin in 2000. She is now retired but taught almost all ages, with her last post at John Henry Newman School in Stevenage. She is **Minutes Secretary** to the Steering Group.

**Chris Honey** – He has been a member of Hitchin Forum since 1996, attends the Steering, Planning and Green groups and chairs the **Town Group**. He is a designer (that's not just an occupation but a total lifestyle) with a passion for maintaining what is good about Hitchin and only accepting excellent development alongside it.

**John Keene** – He has lived in Hitchin for 37 years, is now retired and spent most of his working life in the advertising industry. He oversees **Leisure** issues in the Forum.

**Leslie Mustoe** – He was born in Hitchin and returned four years ago on retiring from Loughborough University. He teaches voluntarily at Hitchin Boys' School, is Secretary of Hitchin Historical Society and is on the District Church Council. He is **Vice Chairman** and oversees **Youth** issues for the Forum.

**John Urwin** – He is an enthusiast for attractive housing and joined Hitchin Forum to take part in the CASE campaign. He strongly believes we need to spread employment across the country to avoid poverty hotspots. He chairs our **Planning Group**.

**Andrew Wearmouth** – He was born in Hitchin and has always lived locally. He is a Chartered Surveyor recently retired following 40 years in local government, for the last 20 of which he was Head of Estates at St Albans City and District Council.

**Advance Notification: Hitchin Forum members meeting  
7.30pm, Wednesday 8th February at Holy Saviour Church Hall**



These two views of Hitchin garage show it as it was in 1928, with a new 10710 cubic yards and in 1935, after the busbores had been expanded to allow coaches to enter the depot. The alterations involved the removal of a portion of the existing walls so that the entrance doorway could be lifted to the level of the second floor of the old building and the installation of a higher roof, which can be seen rising above the old building in the 1935 view. The freight window has also been replaced by weatherboarding London Transport Motors.

