



NEWSLETTER

November/December 2013 No. 120

Chairman's Piece

I am yet again upset about having a very large truck driving dangerously close to me and my bike on Fishponds Road. The recent cyclists' fatalities in London bring home the message that we live in dangerous times. A member has drawn to my attention some of the work of the Campaign for Better Transport (www.bettertransport.org.uk/) which has a wealth of information on this aspect of our lives (and maybe deaths!). "On A-roads: HGVs are involved in 1 in 5 fatal crashes, a ratio that has worsened over the last 5 years. On minor roads: An HGV is five times as likely to be involved in a fatal accident than other traffic". The campaign to have town-wide 20mph speed limits, which would at least give collision victims a better chance of survival, is discussed below.

Another Better Transport item describes the benefits of the 'arrival experience' at railway stations encouraging visitors and improving local trade. Similar considerations are echoed in the Hitchin Town Action Group's report (read more below), and arose in the Hitchin Town Talk last week, stimulating discussions about the parking problem for rail users. Councillors Derrick Ashley and Richard Thake agreed to champion the search for improvements. May the force be with them.

Bancroft Recreation Ground was on the agenda for Hitchin Committee – mostly a progress report, waiting for the design consultant to arrive and for the survey results. The remarkable part of the report was para 3.3 – "As with many surveys of this type it is inevitable that the views expressed may not be wholly representative as a result of the largely self selecting sample and because of organised attempts to give prominence to a particular issue or set of issues." This feels like a get-out-of-jail-free clause, "we reserve the right to ignore views expressed on the survey which might come from any group that has a special interest in any part of the area". Pity if those with most experience or knowledge may be deemed out of court. How would a Council official decide on this? Whose views will be accepted – only those who totally agree with the Council's "masterplan"? Surely not!

Another year, another AGM, which was a good event. It was especially interesting to have NHDC's Chief Executive, David Scholes, as our guest. Finances are tight and getting worse. Austerity means less money for what we often feel are essentials, so Mr Scholes has the unenviable task of tightening the district's belt. This coincides with executing plans to swell the district's housing stock, if the housing consultation finds a way forward through the many responses. We look forward to constructive discussions with him and his officers on a range of issues over the coming year.

The end of year financial report for us is that we are spending more than we receive. We have more members than ever, but also more expenses. We decided to keep subscriptions at the current level, but would be pleased to welcome new members, and donations. One aspect of membership is that people may feel guilty if they are not doing more. This should not be the case: although we encourage attendance at meetings and offers of practical help, the presence and quiet support of members is highly valued by the steering group.

Mike Clarke, Chairman

newsletter@hitchinforum.org.uk

Founded 1992

Chairman: Mike Clarke

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

The "Hitchin Town Action Group" is launched!

Adrian Gurney represents Hitchin Forum on the HTAG steering group. Here he discusses the launch of HTAG and moving forward with ideas from that meeting.

As Members will know, *the Hitchin Town Action Group* (HTAG) was set up by The Hitchin Society, Hitchin Forum, Hitchin Historical Society and Hitchin Initiative to enable local people to have a say on the future of Hitchin Town Centre.

It was launched successfully on 16 October at The Sun Hotel at a well-attended public meeting. The evening was designed to enable attendees to write down their own ideas on a series of general topics with minimal help from facilitators. We had a big response and it was challenging to summarise the main issues and suggestions. But a report was put together by 5th November and sent to all attendees and Hitchin Councillors. It is available on the Hitchin Forum website: www.hitchinforum.org.uk. It will provide a very useful resource as we face major issues over the next year, particularly on the Local Plan and Churchgate – likely subjects for future HTAG meetings.

The HTAG Steering Group has since met and considered whether we can take forward a few actions based on the findings. The following **short term actions** bear in mind the cost constraints for Local Authorities, and the Societies' existing commitments that might limit our ability to take on more work:

- One of the most significant of the findings was support for improving the attractiveness of Hitchin to visitors. We propose to develop an 'app' to provide visitors with a virtual guided tour, taking in the town's main attractions.
- A second major theme was the need to further improve the environment of the town centre. We would like to undertake a survey to identify unnecessary street clutter, and opportunities for "greening" the town centre through improved planting.

- A third main area of discussion was transport, with a wide range of major issues which could be addressed. We propose to lobby for increasing the provision of real time information and boarding location maps at all bus stops in the town centre.

We would also like to initiate a **longer term project**. There was considerable support for additional provision for younger people in the town centre, and for their increased involvement in influencing the future of the town. In addition, there were some particularly imaginative proposals for the Woodside area. We would therefore like to initiate a process (with local schools, Voice of Hitchin Youth and existing organisations at Woodside etc) to explore opportunities in that area.

We were able to discuss our proposals at the Hitchin Committee on 12th November where they received whole hearted support from Councillors. They welcomed the positive approach to the future of the town and the opportunities that HTAG would provide for involving more people in influencing actions and decisions. They endorsed all the specific proposals, and said they would consider an application for some help with funding of related activities.

A report on Next Steps will be provided for all attendees and the wider public.

It would be very helpful if we could have some indication from the wider membership of any interest in helping with the projects. Do you or anyone you know have particular expertise or enthusiasm in one of these areas and be willing to be involved? It will be particularly helpful to have contacts with local schools and existing youth work so we can assess how to take forward the Woodside initiative.

Please contact us over the next few weeks at: hitchintag@gmail.com.

Hitchin Footpaths:

1. Town-wide Survey Update

Many thanks to all those who have completed checklists, supplied photographs and provided comments about Hitchin's footpaths. Some of you have promised a few more, and if you have completed them, then I will be happy to receive them. At this stage, I have received completed checklists on 41 different paths and text comments on two others. In some cases, more than one checklist has been completed. Given that there are about 120 paths on the Hertfordshire County Council Definitive Map, and a variety of others not shown there, the sample size is about 30%. I think this is sufficient to support a range of conclusions and recommendations unless anybody has a burning desire to do more.

The survey confirms the attractiveness and popularity of many of Hitchin's paths. It

2. Coopers Alley and Paynes Park

Some years have passed since the Coopers Yard housing project was completed – privately owned and social housing on a section of land stretching from Hitchin's Market Place to the Paynes Park ring road. Most of the land was previously owned by Brookers. During construction, Coopers Alley, which runs from near the Coopers Arms Pub in Tilehouse Street to Paynes Park, was closed.

Both the alley and the section of Paynes Park pavement next to the development were left in a very unsatisfactory condition after the developers finally left. This meant that one aspect of the NHDC planning permission for this development had not been addressed – one condition of the permission was that the alley and pavement should be re-instated properly after building on the site was completed.

The good news is that this has now been remedied. Over many months, I had email correspondence with Tom Rea, a planning officer at NHDC, reminding him of the state of these footways, sometimes sending photos to

identifies pockets of neglect (poor maintenance, fly-tipping and vandalism) which discourage use. There is a failure to make the path network accessible to new users and visitors by informative signs or to inform users of, for instance, historical features. No systematic attempt appears to have been made to assess the use of footpaths in Hitchin.

The full report includes a variety of recommendations to address some of these issues (whilst recognising current financial constraints) and will be available to members via the website soon. I am in the process of arranging a meeting with the HCC Rights of Way Service to discuss ways of taking our recommendations forward.

Bill Selicks

illustrate the case. He kept me informed of the (very slow) progress, which involved the legal and/or finance departments sorting out the money available from a bond created by the developers before work started many years ago. Then it was the responsibility of Hertfordshire County Highways Department to complete the work.

The resurfacing was carried out very efficiently this autumn. Coopers Alley now has very attractive block paving along its whole length, and suitably styled lighting, and the pavement alongside Paynes Park is finally up to standard. I am sure I was not the only person to keep reminding NHDC of the issue, and I think polite, but persistent, reminders of the state of these footways helped to keep the matter on NHDC's agenda.

So, readers take note – persistent reminders to the right people about an unsatisfactory state of affairs can see positive results.

Judith Gurney

20mph in Hitchin?

Mike Clarke discusses efforts on speed reduction and whether a 20mph zone is a good idea, possibly for all of Hitchin.

My latest expedition was to the County Council's palace on the hill at Hertford for a Scrutiny Committee. Two days of bliss! The big question - what is the evidence for the benefits of **20mph speed zones** (not just a speed limit on isolated streets)? The obvious answer after two days was that there are many benefits, fewer road casualties and healthier citizens who want to walk and cycle more. This has been tried and researched in many towns and cities across the country and the results indicate that people like it, despite a JIMBY factor (just in my back yard, but not on other streets which will slow my trip to the shops or work).

What should decide the issue is the opinion of local residents – and where such schemes have been introduced the approval rating is near 80%. What should not decide the issue are complicated formulae for working out the current speed of cars. The rules that have been set in Hertfordshire, (but overruled in many other parts of the country) are that cars have to go slowly before a lower speed limit can be introduced. The county speed strategy rule was that a 20 mph speed limit could not be introduced until **85%** of vehicles were doing less than 25mph. Too bad if only 84% were driving that slow, a 20 mph limit could not be introduced unless very expensive speed humps were implanted. The 'big step' that the county speed officers want to take is to change this to requiring that the **average speed** of vehicles is less than 25 mph. And if a **zone** of local streets were to have a joint 20 mph limit, then 90% would have to have an average speed of 24mph or less.

This is a Catch 22 scenario, if cars go slow you can have a 20mph zone, but if they travel fast you cannot.

Imaginative schemes in many places – with officers from Cambridge at the Scrutiny Committee giving a clear picture of theirs - have

taken a step back, recognized the accruing benefits, and made new rules which respect the wishes of residents, and not the snail's pace changes which Hertfordshire's outdated speed strategies have followed.

The national spokesman for **20sPlenty For Us** gave a spirited account of the successful campaigns for change elsewhere in the country, only spoiled by his gift of Quality Street chocolates to all (we need quality streets for all...). Has he not heard that sugar is bad for us?

At the Scrutiny Committee many people from communities gave evidence, including myself, as well as the police, public health officers and others. Ray Shakespeare-Smith, as Chair of the Hitchin Committee and NHDC's Scrutiny Committee (which both gave a ringing endorsement to easier adoption of 20mph zones) gave a clear account of the need for a change in the County Council's approach. County Councillors seemed keen to support change.

Yet when the draft report was produced it seemed that the rule-bound brake on everything but the speed of cars might prevail. Responses by participants to that draft may give it a more enlightened feel, and then it has to travel slowly through the committees of our county council.

We hope that a well-informed local debate can then take place. People do worry how such a policy could be enforced by the police. However a clear message is that when the issues are discussed, in schools as well as committees and in the press, the benefits do become more obvious and people, generally, do comply. It is not about speed cameras, or road humps, but about understanding what we all have to gain.

More on this is available on our website at <http://www.hitchinforum.org.uk/20-mph-speed-zones-and-areas-update/>

Planning Matters

1. They should have gone to..... by Chris Honey of Hitchin Forum's planning applications subgroup.

Articles in the two previous newsletters commenting about Hitchin planning applications dealt with social implications. This one concentrates on visual design considerations.

First, the proposed development of the former Royal Mail Delivery Office site. The first design for this ticked all the boxes. It enlivened Hermitage Road, enhanced Portmill Lane and improved the Hiz walkway whilst being composed of different mass and height buildings with modern stylistic variation. This innovative approach would raise the standard of design and character of this part of Hitchin. Along comes English Heritage, who take a spectacle-less look at the modern facade of the hotel and visually downgrade it to a passé traditional style. Our planning group suggested improvements to this depressing alteration but this was ignored. Ah well 90% success.

Townsend House, in Hermitage Road adjacent to the old Post Office site, was designed for office accommodation. It has never complemented its neighbours but it does have a positive '60s/'70s visual style. The developers, having got permission for change to residential use, then

proceeded to remove their spectacles and deface the facades by imposing vertical slabs of contrasting material with traditional cornices on alternate columns. We objected to this maintaining that the vertical elements should be toned down and that the essential design character of the 'picture frame' surround be retained and enhanced with colour rendering. This was not accepted!

Finally, 61 Radcliffe Road, a delightful Victorian residence adjacent to the Conservation Area containing listed and locally listed buildings. These include the historic Gainsford collection of Holy Saviour Church, The Cloisters, St Bridget's and Gainsford Court. This time North Hertfordshire Homes myopically decided it had to be demolished and give way to a bland neo-traditional visually deprived building. This despite the existence of the Triangle Design Statement requiring retention of buildings which are important to the visual quality and historic integrity of the area. Submissions by us, the Hitchin Historical Society, residents of Radcliffe Road and many others had no effect. Specsavers help urgently needed please!

2. Hitchin Town Hall

As we hope everyone is now aware, Hitchin Town Hall Ltd has entered into a development agreement with North Hertfordshire District Council, taking over the community space of Hitchin Town Hall with a 125 year lease.

Brent Smith, a Director of HTH Ltd, is working on a history of the building and hopes to publish a pamphlet to coincide with the opening in Spring 2015. Brent says, "we are looking for photographs, programmes and particularly memories. We hope that there will be lots of interesting stories. Documents can be dropped in at the Hitchin Initiative office at 27 Churchyard. We will take care of everything - if you want it to be returned please include full address details so that we can send it back to you after scanning. Emails can be sent to: brent@walden7.eu."

Diary Dates

Tuesday, 7 January 2014: **Town Talk** - 6.30pm, **Hitchin Committee** - 7.30pm; Westmill Community Centre. Issues can be raised by the public in the Town Talk session, followed by Hitchin Councillors debating issues and reports in committee.

Introducing Hitchin Forum's Steering Group

Dave Borner – Originally from London, Dave has lived in Hitchin since 1987. He works as an engineer in the oil industry, and takes a particular interest in energy and transport matters. A long standing Forum member, he first joined Steering Group in 2006 and works mainly on transport matters. He would like to see local transport policy being friendlier to residents and the environment, with 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, 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. Having retired from teaching in various Enfield primary schools, she continues to be involved in education, but now as a member of the volunteer team at the British Schools Museum in Queen Street, delivering Victorian and WW2-style lessons to visiting school and adult groups.

Mike Clarke - **Chairman** for the past three years, he was born and brought up just 12 miles south of Hitchin. He has lived in the town since 1981, having moved here to work in the local mental health service (writing a history of this - "*cold baths don't work*" - since retirement). He cycles around town and has been increasingly concerned about the perils of speeding trucks, but is mostly keen to help the voice of residents be heard for the benefit of the town.

Adrian Gurney - He has retired from working in the strategic planning division of a major planning consultancy, but remains active as a member of the London Sustainable Development Commission and in advising the Town and Country Planning Association. He continues as **Chair of our Planning Group**.

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 and Planning groups and comments on green issues. He is a designer (that's not just an occupation but a total lifestyle) who has improved the HF logo plus visual aspects of the website and publicity. He has 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 is **Vice Chairman** and oversees **Leisure** issues in the Forum.

John Urwin – He is an enthusiast for attractive and reasonably-priced 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.

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

Hitchin Forum's Steering Group would like to wish all our members a very happy Christmas and a prosperous New Year!