



## NEWSLETTER

September/October 2013 No. 119

### Chairman's Piece

Strange to think of the life that lurks in Council meetings. Bit like pond dipping. I have occasionally tried to stimulate interest, to suggest that they are really interesting. Really! A lot of work goes into the preparation for those events and they do cover some fascinating stuff. Two items of particular interest have been discussed recently.

In June the Hitchin Committee debated the future of **Bancroft Hall**, seeking a review of the decision not to replace it and requesting that its future be considered alongside the development of the recreation ground. Unfortunately the Bancroft Project Board's July minutes carry the riposte to that *"whilst conscious of the wishes of the (Hitchin) committee the approach adopted so far had proved to be robust and in keeping with the Council's policy objectives"*. Shorthand for leave us alone? There is clearly a desire to get on with the Bancroft redevelopment project, but we hope it is done with due consultation and consideration for current users and local residents.

The Full Council met on August 8th to debate the financial risks to the **Hitchin Town Hall Ltd** and the Council following the acquisition of 15 Brand Street – which would enhance the Town Hall and District Museum building. It felt like a steeplechase – HTH Ltd seem to be faced with one high fence after another. However, they cleared this hurdle, with the Portfolio Holder for Community Engagement and Rural Affairs pointing out that risks are always present. The opportunity that the acquisition of 15 Brand Street offers makes it a step worth taking. I wonder what the next fence will look like, but we will cheer them on until they reach the finishing line.

Council meetings are also a people-watching exercise, and it's good to see the elected members showing their teeth and resolve. One great loss from that assembly is David Billing who died in early July. The universal opinion was of someone liked and respected for his wisdom and caring attitude. A different type of loss from that assembly is Laura Burge, our local Comet reporter. She has provided good and accurate reports of town events and we wish her well in her new job.

This newsletter has an announcement about the **Hitchin Town Action Group** – a combined effort by Hitchin groups following on from the 'Planning Hitchin's Future' paper which we jointly published in April – with an important town-wide meeting on October 16th. Read all about the **Bancroft plans**, and please take part in the online survey and ask your friends and neighbours to do the same.

Information for the **AGM** – Wednesday October 23rd - will be sent out soon. A short business meeting will consider the reports and elect the officers and steering group. If anybody is interested in becoming more involved in any part of our work please do contact me or another member of the Steering Group. In the second part of the evening the Council's Chief Executive, David Scholes, will be speaking and joining in the discussions about the town and our activities. It should be both interesting and informative and I urge you to put it in your diaries. So – see you then, if not before.

*Mike Clarke, Chairman*

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Chairman: Mike Clarke

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

## Proposal for a "Hitchin Town Action Group"

### Adrian Gurney, Chairman of Hitchin Forum's Planning Group, discusses the work of Hitchin groups to bring townspeople together to discuss Hitchin's future.

Hitchin Forum, the Hitchin Society, Hitchin Historical Society and Hitchin Initiative are, at the time of writing, due to make a presentation to the Hitchin Committee (10 September) to seek the Councillors' support for the idea of a Hitchin Town Action Group.

Since helping to defeat the Simons' proposals for Churchgate in January 2013 by signing the petition, there has been a growing demand from local people that they would like to know more about what is happening in the town centre and be able to influence thinking positively earlier in the process. We hope the HTAG will help to meet that need.

HTAG will be the responsibility of the four organisations who propose to organise three open meetings a year:

- Providing an opportunity for the town's residents and businesses and all users of the town centre to be kept up to date with what is happening, and to clarify their concerns and contribute ideas.
- Giving people the chance to contribute strategically and creatively to the long term future of the town centre, taking into account the wide range of needs and opportunities.
- Enabling those with particular proposals or concerns (e.g. a developer or the Market Traders) to air these informally so that they can be discussed in open session as soon as appropriate.

- Inviting Councillors to join us, and also reporting back to the Hitchin Committee the range of views expressed on any particular topic so as to inform the Committee of the issues and opportunities being raised.

We propose to hold our first open meeting on **Wednesday 16<sup>th</sup> October at 8 pm in The Sun Hotel**. We are currently planning how to advertise the meeting, including through posters and articles in the press. We will be inviting directly all Forum members and all those who took part in the petition and gave their email address. Our aim is to involve as many people as possible in and around the town - with a good range of age groups.

At the first meeting we will be seeking people's views on the boundaries of the town centre and on the range of potential issues for consideration. We are assuming that the initial discussions will be on Churchgate, but also on the other 'opportunity areas' identified in our joint document 'Planning Hitchin's Future: [hitchinform.org.uk/planning-hitchins-future/](http://hitchinform.org.uk/planning-hitchins-future/).

Please look out for the notices of the event and let your neighbours and friends know. We will need you there to inform and enliven the discussion. We would also be very pleased to have volunteers to help on the day with stewarding and a range of other tasks. If you think you can help, please contact us on [planning@hitchinform.org.uk](mailto:planning@hitchinform.org.uk).

## Footpaths Survey Progress

Many thanks to those who have completed surveys so far. At the time of writing, I have received comments on 37 different paths. Many of the surveys completed cover paths on the 'About Hitchin' map on Hitchin Forum's website, but there are others which do not appear either on that map or on the Herts County Council Definitive map! At the time of writing, the only paths not yet surveyed include: Lucas Lane, Crow Furlong, Braunds Alley and Lyles Row. I am in the process of preparing a draft report for consideration at the next Hitchin Forum Planning Group meeting in September, but please keep the surveys coming in - the more we have the better.

**Bill Sellicks**

## Bancroft Recreation Ground - Your Views Please!

**Mike Clarke explains the story so far and the issues around what NHDC is proposing in their refurbishment proposals here.**

Over the past 4 months Hitchin Forum has taken an even closer look at NHDC's plans for the redevelopment of Bancroft Rec. This follows the efforts last year by Hitchin Initiative who undertook to review the possibility of a replacement for Bancroft Hall, which is doomed by NHDC to be demolished when the Town Hall & District Museum opens. However HI were told a replacement was not possible and felt that they could do no more at present.

We started to look at the whole area and, in talking to other users of Bancroft, felt that there were other concerns about the whole of the park that needed to be aired. Those conversations led to us convening a meeting for people who had made their concerns known. There have now been two meetings of the **'Bancroft Users Group & Supporters' (BUGS)** which has tried to bring together those concerns and to contribute to the enterprise that we would like to support – a major improvement of the Rec. So far, BUGS has representatives from Hitchin Bowls Club, supporters of public (& easy access) tennis, hall users and Hitchin Forum. **BUGS is organizing a further meeting on Tuesday October 1st in the Pavilion at Bancroft** to which all are invited. We hope that there will be a wide attendance of all who use and care for the recreation ground.

There has been no public meeting or meeting of any group focused on Bancroft Rec (or "Gardens" as NHDC has called it) since November 2010. We were particularly concerned that as the Council is looking for Heritage Lottery funding (to add to monies already allocated by the Council) there should be more public discussions about the plans. We thought that the Pre-Application form which NHDC sent to the HLF overstated the community involvement and agreement to the 'Master Plan' which had been prepared by council officers and accepted by Council 12 months ago. In recent discussions with the Council we have been told that the term "Master Plan" should not be taken to mean that the proposals are set in stone and that another survey (currently underway) and the work of the landscape architects (soon to be appointed) may lead to changes following a

further public consultation. We hope so! A full account of the history of how we have arrived at where we are now will be put on our website.

**The issues** which we think still need to be addressed and discussed further (and which we hope people will comment on in the survey) are as follows:-

### **1. Tennis and MUGA:**

The council has said that the 4 hard courts currently available for free (and easy access) public use will be removed. The idea is that this will create more green space for informal recreation. It is proposed that the 'lower' bowls green will be converted to a hard surface "multi user games area" (MUGA). This could either be designed with one part for soccer and basketball, and the other part as a normal tennis court (as in King George Playing Field), or be marked out to provide 2 tennis courts with mesh metal nets, or 2 soccer/basketball areas with the 'nets' then becoming fences between the two pitches (as in Baldock's Avenue Park).

The Council is due to renew the lease for the Tennis Club which has 3 well maintained and floodlit courts. It has said that there should be public access to these. However the access is likely to be only when the club does not have its own activities and matches and will not be 'easy access' as is currently the case with the 4 public hard courts: booking would be by emailing the club which will then arrange for a club member to meet the prospective players at an appointed time to take the fee (£10 has been mentioned) and provide them with the code to be able to leave the court when they are finished.

So easy access tennis courts will be reduced from 4 to 1 if the MUGA has a separate court. If there are combined courts and pitches there will be 2 courts if nobody is playing soccer, or none if soccer is being played.

We support the provision of other sports, particularly for younger people, and the increase in the range of sports such as netball (and Hitchin houses the national association!), if that

is possible, but are mindful of the possible loss of tennis courts that this may entail.

## **2. Bowls:**

The Bowls Club are quite happy to lose one of their greens, but wonder about the possibility of a smaller pavilion overlooking the remaining green.

They have a major concern about car parking. At present they mostly park in front of the pavilion. When the Council (with good reason) temporarily stopped this in the past, the club found that other clubs cancelled fixtures as alternative parking was too difficult. The nearby car parks were full, and carrying the bowls from far off car parks is not possible for many. The Master Plan excludes cars from their present area (in front of the Pavilion) and the proposal for a small car park between the current greens is impractical and would be hazardous to pedestrians.

## **3. The (Bowls) Pavilion:**

The Pavilion was built in 1929. It is underused and, since the Hall was built in the 1960s, has only been used by the Bowls Club. In the HLF Pre-App form the Council wrote that it aimed to bring it into "full community use". We fully support that. The form also suggests that it can "potentially house a cafe and toilet" and mentions the possibility of it being extended. The business case for a cafe has not yet been researched and we do not know if that is viable. Toilets, however, are very important, particularly if families are to use the park more. We have been told that income from a cafe could possibly fund the upkeep of the toilets (maintenance costs were the reason for closing the old toilets some years ago). It seems that if an extension were to be built on the Pavilion, then its use for various functions, children's parties, community groups etc, could also generate the income to pay for the toilets.

As indicated in (2) above, the Bowls Club would like to have a smaller facility closer to the bowling green.

## **4. Bancroft Hall:**

The hall has been deemed to be outside of the scope of the redevelopment project. NHDC decided its future came within the realm of the District's Community Hall Strategy, and it was surplus to requirement. Hall users have been

told that they could be moved to the refurbished Town Hall or other community halls. This may suit some, but probably not all. Whilst the Town Hall managers will clearly want to accommodate such groups there is some uncertainty about how affordable and available the Town Hall will be. The access to the park, the availability of the kitchen (for a lunch club) and the storage space for equipment are all assets in the present hall.

The Bridge Club (170 members, 50 turning up for each of their 3 regular weekday spots) will be most affected and they have campaigned most vigorously for a replacement. They have many resources which could be useful for any continuing indoor facility in that area and use it 12 months a year. They also provide a useful social and wellbeing function (mental and social activity which reduces depression and dementia etc).

We feel concern that HLF funding depends on improved usage of the Rec, but closure of the Hall without replacement will substantially reduce footfall and use.

## **5. Play and water area:**

Howard Park and Gardens in Letchworth offers a wonderful facility and it would be most desirable to have a similar water play feature. However Bancroft is a smaller site and does not have the nearby provision of a MUGA, several tennis courts and bowls greens that are found on Norton Common. The park should be available to the whole community and with many flats being built in the near vicinity, the needs of local residents must be supported. Some improved play and water area would be welcome, but the right balance between open grassed areas and sports areas on a limited site, in the absence of some detailed research about current usage, is difficult. We hope that the survey currently being carried out by the charity 'Groundwork' will provide useful information for that.

The outline proposals, the survey, and the timeline with all relevant documents over the past 3 years are on the NHDC website: [www.north-herts.gov.uk](http://www.north-herts.gov.uk); just enter 'Bancroft redevelopment' into the search facility. **Please fill in the online survey form with your thoughts on the above issues and look out for face to face interviews being conducted in the park.** The consultation closes on 1st October.

# Planning Matters

## 1. Community Care!

### **Chris Honey, of Hitchin Forum's Planning Group, updates us on recent planning applications and decisions.**

The title of this article is the same as that in the August Newsletter with one exception: the "?" has been replaced by "!" Why, because positive outcomes have come about with regard to the two planning applications reported in that article.

Following our and many other people's opposition, the proposed two storey restaurant and drinking establishment in the **former Philpotts** furniture shop in Sun Street was withdrawn. Two applications have followed. NHDC Planning has granted permission for a restaurant on the ground floor with restrictions on opening and delivery hours. Also, with disturbance to neighbours in mind, they require a noise survey with proposed control measures and planning/listed building consent for air conditioning and extraction. That still leaves some concern regarding external lighting and car parking, but it is a much better outcome than the previous proposal.

A 'Secret Garden Play Shop' for young children and their mothers or carers plus relaxing treatment rooms is proposed for the first and second floors. This should be no trouble to neighbours and increase trade in local shops whilst youngsters are cared for in the crèche. That's what I call community care!

The application to block off **Saunders Walk** has been refused by NHDC Planning for the same reason that we opposed it. *'The proposed development would be contrary to the terms of the approved development for the site at Nursery Hill restricting well established public access through this site and access to open space.'* Thus it contravened the National Planning Policy Framework and two Local Plan policies. We can now happily include it in our Hitchin Footpath Survey project.

## 2. Former Post Office Site Redevelopment

### **Adrian Gurney, Hitchin Forum's Planning Group Chairman, summarises progress on development proposals that will transform Hitchin's Portmill Lane area.**

Hitchin Forum was invited, together with The Hitchin Society, Hitchin Historical Society and Councillors, to a presentation by Whitebarn, the new owners who will be redeveloping this site, on 29th August.

Members will know that the scheme is for: shops (with flats above) on Hermitage Road; a hotel next to the Listed Building at 7/8 Portmill Lane; and an 'up market' apartment block between the hotel and the river footpath. In the first drawings that we saw earlier in the year, all the buildings were of high quality contemporary design with the hotel being of three storeys next to the listed building. All three community groups supported this design approach in this urban context, although we were concerned that there was a need to give greater consideration to the riverside walkway.

Since then Whitebarn has been advised by English Heritage and council officers that a more traditional design for the hotel is required to provide a transition between the 17th century listed building and the contemporary apartments. The community groups expressed concern at the meeting that this solution lacks the integrity of the earlier design. However, in the context of the general appropriateness of the development and major improvements now suggested for the riverside walk, we agreed that we would suggest some minor improvements to the more traditional hotel design to help integrate it into the scheme. Whitebarn and Councillors who attended agreed they would be happy to receive comments from the three groups and on 4th September we jointly sent suggestions for changes in the use of materials and to window design in the hope of influencing the design before the submission of the application.

### 3. Update on West of Stevenage

#### **Ellie Clarke, member of the Campaign Against Stevenage Expansion, updates us on the latest events.**

We reported in our last newsletter that the Secretary of State wanted to re-open the inquiry into the application for 3,600 houses here, but the applicants had indicated they would not attend any such inquiry. NHDC in turn indicated they would pursue costs against the applicants if they were no longer prepared to defend their application at a planning inquiry. Perhaps that was an incentive, and now both planning applications to build up to 3,600 homes to the West of Stevenage have been withdrawn by the applicants.

The *Campaign Against Stevenage Expansion*, together with the *Campaign to Protect Rural England*, have steadfastly campaigned to protect this fine stretch of Green Belt, typical of Hertfordshire's rolling countryside, since it was first proposed by Hertfordshire County Council in its Structure Plan of 1996. As has always been contended by campaigners, the A1(M) is the obvious boundary to prevent Stevenage sprawling into the Green Belt, but with draft proposals in NHDC's emerging housing allocations for housing in this area, we shall keep a very close watch when the draft Local Plan is published in early 2014.

#### **Black Squirrel Credit Union: a call for help**

##### **We have been asked by Hitchin Forum member Nafisa Sayany to circulate the following appeal for help.**

The Black Squirrel Credit Union is moving into offices at 9 Paynes Park and hoping to open its doors this month. However, there is a lot to do before then and they are looking for volunteers to help with cleaning, sanding, filling and painting.

When the offices are ready and the move completed, BSCU will be in need of volunteers to help staff the office: reception, data entry, answering the phones, etc. BSCU is also looking for people with a few hours to spare who have experience in finance, credit control or financial advice.

If you know of anyone happy to help, even for a couple of hours, or interested in supporting BSCU, please contact David on 07579 964430.

#### **Diary Dates**

Tuesday 1 October: **Bancroft Users Group & Supporters Meeting** - 7.30pm; Bancroft Pavilion  
See feature article on pages 3-4 of this newsletter. Everyone interested in the future changes to Bancroft Recreation Ground is invited.

Wednesday 16 October: **Launch Meeting of Hitchin Town Action Group** - 8pm; Sun Hotel  
See feature article on page 2 of this newsletter. Posters and further information will be available nearer the time.

Wednesday 23 October: **Hitchin Forum's Annual General Meeting**  
A short business meeting will be followed by our guest speaker, David Scholes, Chief Executive Officer and Strategic Director for Planning, Housing & Enterprise at North Herts District Council.

Tuesday 12 November: **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.