

HITCHIN FORUM

Caring for our Town

NEWSLETTER

September/October 2014 No. 125

Chairman's Piece

Having just spent a week negotiating the tides on the Dyfi estuary in Wales I am aware that one can only make progress against the tide if there is a good wind blowing. There is a flood tide of issues running through Hitchin: Churchgate, Hitchin Town Hall, Bancroft Rec, Top Field and Priory Fields. Information is not always easily available, but it does give the power to challenge and question, and to battle some of the undercurrents which beset us.

A Freedom of Information request has given us a first glimpse of the reasoning behind the refusal to grant Lottery monies to **Bancroft Rec**. We hope that the meeting of Council officers with the Lottery Fund will be followed by some open discussions and realistic plans for the future. **Top Field** seems open to another type of lottery – will there be football or shopping as the main recreational activity there in years to come? We hope that football and other sports will prevail. Could the Cow Commoners ever contemplate giving a longer lease so that the area could be eligible for sports grants? We hope so, and that there will be a dialogue about the future of this important place they hold in trust for the people of Hitchin.

We are holding our breath about **Hitchin Town Hall** – it seems that the wall on the stage is permanent, that original interior features have been damaged and that the future of the sprung floor is uncertain. We don't know if good can come out of this, but we were encouraged that the Council Planning Committee recognised the problems. Whether officers, the architect and the builders can eventually provide a satisfactory facility remains uncertain.

The Council heard a presentation from Hammersmatch at the end of July and agreed to seek legal advice on whether they could move ahead, tentatively with the current **Churchgate** leaseholder. The placement of the market remains as a major concern, and whether the cinema chain's desire to shift it will remain binding. Surely a creative architect could design something that would work?

As you walk around town do you notice the state of footpaths, the litter or the noise from aircraft? We are hoping to work with others to help remedy these environmental issues. Read on.

Connect, Grow, Enjoy! is the inspiring battle cry for **Triangle Community Gardens**, one of our member groups. They are raising money for improvements, even organizing a sponsored litter pick. How good is that? Do look at their Treasured Spaces appeal - <http://www.trianglegarden.org/>

I hope that you have looked at the revised **Hitchin Forum website** recently. It should be easier to use on mobiles and tablets, and we welcome any comments on its content and ease of use.

Our **AGM** is on October 21st. We hope that is in your diary. Do let me know if there are any particular issues that you would like us to discuss on the night.

Mike Clarke, Chairman

newsletter@hitchinforum.org.uk

Founded 1992

Chairman: Mike Clarke

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

Improving Hitchin's Footpaths - can you help?

Progress on footpaths

It is about a year since many of you were working to produce surveys of Hitchin's footpaths. The report that was prepared was forwarded to the Countryside Access Team Leader at Hertfordshire County Council, who suggested that the Countryside Access Officer (CAO) for North Hertfordshire would be the right person to progress matters. We met him recently.

As a result of our report the CAO is aware of the dangerous section of the HOOP between the railway bridge on Wymondley Road and Gypsy Lane, and is hoping to take steps to improve things. As a first step he has offered to meet us and to see the situation for himself.

The CAO also asked if we could let him know of any current issues with footpaths. I have forwarded him an interim list of problems and intend to check more paths in the coming weeks, but if you notice any pressing issues, please email me at: footpaths@hitchinforum.org.uk.

Footpath Wardens

Longer term, one of the suggestions in our original report involved volunteers (Footpath Wardens) taking responsibility for a number of paths to keep an eye on various issues such as damage, fly-tipping and over-hanging vegetation. Some of these issues are HCC responsibilities and others are NHDC's. From the HCC point of view the CAO is happy to work with us on this.

What would the wardens do?

If you are prepared to take part, I would like to know what you think you can realistically do.

Possibilities include:

- Walking a set of local paths regularly.
- Notifying me or council officers direct of issues (NHDC have forms to report fly-tipping, abandoned vehicles, graffiti and dog fouling).
- Clearing small items of litter and weeds (HF could provide bags and disposable gloves)

If you are interested in helping to improve our paths, I would be grateful if you could answer a few questions (below) and send your responses to me at footpaths@hitchinforum.org.uk.

Questions

1. Which paths would you be prepared to keep an eye on? (please either use their names or number on the Definitive Map - <http://webmaps.hertsdirect.org/row/row.htm>).
2. How often would you be prepared to walk your local paths?
3. Would you prefer to notify HCC / NHDC directly, or to notify me so there is a single point of contact?
4. Given disposable gloves and bags
 - would you be prepared to clear litter?
 - would you be prepared to clear weeds?
5. Do you have any further suggestions?

There are more details on our website. I look forward to hearing from you at footpaths@hitchinforum.org.uk.

Bill Sellicks

Diary Dates

Saturday 4 October: **Hitchin Councillors' Surgery** - 10.30am - 12 noon, Hitchin Market Place

Sunday 12 October: **The Big Hitchin Tidy Up** - 10am - 12 noon, you decide where!
Help clean up our streets, parks & footpaths to make Hitchin a brighter, cleaner place!
See feature article.

Tuesday 21 October: **Hitchin Forum Annual General Meeting** -
Our annual review of what we have been doing, how we've been doing and looking at how we tackle what might be ahead in the coming year. Reports etc. will be sent to members in early October.

The Big Hitchin Tidy Up - coming to a street or park near you!

Lynne Maylin has been recruited onto Hitchin Forum's team co-ordinating our litter campaigns:

Some of you may be aware that over the past few years two Hitchin Forum members, Ellie Clarke and Judith Gurney, have organised a major local event called *The Big Hitchin Tidy Up*. Under the national umbrella of 'Keep Britain Tidy' these events have been hugely successful and have gained momentum over the years.

Our last event saw over 80 bags of rubbish collected from over 12 different sites and 135 (wo)man hours put in by volunteers across the town. There was so much enthusiasm and satisfaction that volunteers have asked if it can be done again this year.

So from this great feedback we are holding our second 2014 event on **Sunday 12 October from 10 am to 12 pm**.

Which leads me to introduce myself and why I am writing this. I am extremely passionate about our town and I want it to be the very best it can be. Hitchin has changed a lot over the years and whilst there are obviously parts that we cannot improve, we can make our streets

cleaner and more appealing. So I have been asked by Ellie and Judith to co-ordinate the next Big Tidy Up event which I am hugely excited about, and I truly hope that I can do it justice.

But as always, we couldn't do this without the tremendous support from the Hitchin townsfolk and out-of-towners who give up their time to make our town a cleaner, brighter place.

We also need to thank NHDC who provide us with the support of collection services and bin bags; Hitchin Initiative who provide public liability insurance, extra litter pickers and assist with collecting the litter; Countryside Management Services and Friends of Walsworth Common who loan us waders; and The Hitchin Comet who give us great publicity.

So for anyone who wishes to take part in this national campaign on a local scale get your gloves on, grab our pickers and join us for this fantastic, worthwhile cause. You can contact us at: litter@hitchinforum.org.uk.

Priory Fields

Hitchin Town Action Group (established by Hitchin Forum, The Hitchin Society, Hitchin Historical Society and Hitchin Initiative) organised a walk on 27th July through the area known locally as 'Priory Fields' to highlight the immense threat its development for housing holds for the town.

The accompanying article on the Local Plan (see page 6) provides the background on current progress by North Hertfordshire District Council in identifying potential housing sites, and preparing the District-wide Plan. Like the other societies, Hitchin Forum recognises that there will be concerns from local people about the wide range of sites in the Green Belt identified for possible development.

However, the HTAG Steering Group agreed that the greatest threat to the town as a whole comes from the potential loss of Priory Fields to housing. The area spans 120 acres of arable fields and meadows between the villages of Charlton and Gosmore and lies south of Park Way, the town's bypass. It is currently designated to take over 1000 dwellings.

300 people turned up on the 27th and, whilst walking the area in small groups with volunteer guides, saw for themselves the extent of the area that could be affected and:

- its historical significance as part of the Priory Park and the medieval deer enclosure north of Maydencroft;
- its recreational importance with the large number of footpaths and bridleways giving access to the natural environment;
- its landscape beauty with views to the Chilterns and the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty;
- its role in keeping Charlton and Gosmore as distinct settlements separate from Hitchin;
- and the implications in terms of access and other needs related to such a development.

Walkers were aged 8 months to nearly 80 years, with many young people and young families joining in. The guides and other helpers were delighted with the turn-out and the level of questioning and comments about the impact such a development would have on Hitchin. We know that many of those who took part have contacted councillors since the walk.

Members are urged to take the opportunity to write to councillors and the local press to express their concerns. It is not too late to make sure that this unusually important area of Green Belt is not included as a site for development

when the Draft Local Plan is produced later this year. Please go to our website at <http://www.hitchinforum.org.uk/priory-fields-campaign/> for councillor contact details and other information. **Adrian Gurney**

Luton Airport Noise update

Flight paths

If you have noticed that Hitchin seems to be overflowed more frequently during the spring and early summer, the figures from the airport's annual monitoring report bear out your impression. One reason is that the wind direction has been from the east more often of late, and that means that there have been more easterly departures. In March this year (the most recent month for which figures are available) 37% of all flights departed in an easterly direction compared to an average of 21% for the 5 year period ending on December 31st 2013. One route, for aircraft bound for Northern Ireland, Scotland or Iceland, and known as the Olney route, is responsible for many of the departing flights that pass over the town during easterly operations.

A first glance at the 'noise preferential route' (NPR) suggests that these aircraft should pass to the south of Hitchin. However, any NPR only needs to be followed whilst an aircraft is flying below 3000ft (4000ft at night – between 11pm and 6am). In practice, most aircraft leaving Luton in an easterly direction reach 3000ft as they fly over Stagenhoe. After that, air traffic controllers 'vector' them onto flight paths that are the most direct, taking into account such factors as weather and other traffic in the area. This often seems to be over Hitchin.

It would appear that anything goes, and the airport will doubtless claim that it isn't their

decision. I have been checking the altitude at which planes over-fly Hitchin, and it is often about 4000ft. It seems to me that it would be possible to increase this to reduce the noise nuisance that we are subjected to. Often there seems to be a levelling-out at this altitude until after flying over the north western fringes of the town. Of course, increasing the rate of climb uses more fuel and produces more CO₂, which is not desirable. Also the costs would be passed on to the customer, and the airlines would argue that their competitiveness in flying from Luton would be reduced.

Noise Complaints

If you experience noise nuisance, especially due to the frequency of overflights from Luton, please do submit a complaint. In 2013, there were 52 complaints made by just 3 Hitchin residents. Multiple complaints from a few complainants carry less weight than the same number of complaints from more complainants. You can complete the complaint form at <http://www.london-luton.co.uk/en/noisecomplaint/> (which does not have a category for frequency of flights) or simply email to noise@ltn.aero which allows more freedom.

Please refer to Hitchin Forum's website <http://www.hitchinforum.org.uk/update-on-luton-airport-expansion/> for maps and further details. **Bill Sellicks**

Planning - far and near

The Forum Planning Group regularly reviews the latest planning applications filed on the NHDC website and responds with considered comments where appropriate.

See www.hitchinforum.org.uk/planningmatters/whatwedo. These, either within Hitchin, on its borders, or further afield, have an impact on all our lives.

But what about a proposal which may influence you personally like an application next door? Take a look at the Hitchin Forum Planning Leaflet included with this newsletter. This has been updated to give the latest advice on responding to such an issue.

Chris Honey

A Community Future for Charnwood?

Bernard Eddleston, Chairman of the newly-formed Charnwood Community Management Association, discusses their proposals for this much loved building.

NHDC Cabinet is soon to receive a report from Council Officers on the future of Charnwood (the old Hitchin Museum) which will become vacant when the Hitchin Town Hall refurbishment is complete (scheduled for mid 2015) and the Museum service move out of Charnwood. It is expected that the report will declare the building surplus to requirements.

When Charnwood was gifted to the Hitchin Urban District Council (subsequently transferred to NHDC and HCC), there were covenants attached requiring that the building be used for a library, museum or other public use. Those covenants are still valid. Charnwood is registered with NHDC as a community asset. Charnwood is an important and iconic public building which should not be lost to the residents of Hitchin.

A public meeting was held on 1st July to form Charnwood Community Management Association. The meeting was successful and we now have an interim committee consisting of a Chair, Secretary, Treasurer and four other committee members.

The aims of the association are to acquire and maintain the building for community use, providing a 'community hub' for Hitchin residents with an emphasis on supporting those groups with an educational focus. The Council has already declared that Bancroft Hall will be demolished when the refurbished Town Hall reopens, so there will be a lack of community facilities in the centre of the town. Whilst the refurbished Town Hall will provide some facilities this will be mainly for larger groups, functions and events, and we do not see the use of Charnwood for community purposes detracting from the Town Hall but rather complementing it. It is the intention of the Association that the building should become a 'community hub' which is in line with proposals for the Paynes Park area of town put forward by Hitchin Forum and HTAG.

The Government through its Locality programme is encouraging community groups to come forward to take over and manage community buildings for the benefit of residents. A number

of funds have been established to enable this to happen. These government funds are available to local groups such as ourselves to carry out feasibility studies and then acquire community assets.

In July this year we applied to SIB (Social Investment Business) for a pre-feasibility grant so that we could convert the Association to a Charitable Incorporated Organisation, carry out a survey of the building to establish what repairs are needed and prepare some outline drawings of the building, together with first ideas on potential improvements to suit community needs. We would also put in place all the necessary policies and procedures for good governance of the organisation, establish a website, survey public needs, contact local groups and draw up an outline business plan.

We are pleased to announce that our application was successful and we have been awarded a grant to cover these activities.

There is a time limit attached to the spending of the grant for these activities and we now need the support of the Council and Officers to complete them.

A further fund to acquire capital assets such as Charnwood and carry out improvements will be launched by the Government in the Autumn and this will certainly attract a large number of applicants.

However this provides a wonderful window of opportunity for the Association, NHDC and other Hitchin organisations such as the Hitchin Forum and one that we should not miss. Working together we can bring significant funds into the town to improve the building and make it a 'community hub' of which the Association, NHDC and residents would be proud.

We need the agreement of the Council now to enable us to have access to the building, complete this pre-feasibility phase in a timely manner and move on to the next phase of an exciting project.

The District Local Plan

Adrian Gurney, Chairman of Hitchin Forum's Planning Group, reports on the progress of NHDC's Local Plan and our input.

It is vital for the future of Hitchin and the wider District that North Hertfordshire District Council has an up-to-date Local Plan in place as soon as possible so as to have a legal basis for protecting areas of environmental importance, making decisions on housing and other applications, and seeking appropriate infrastructure and other improvements.

In 2013 Hitchin Forum and the other societies in the town decided to produce *Planning Hitchin's Future* as an input to the Local Plan process, outlining a vision for the town and suggesting relevant policies and proposals. It is on our website: <http://www.hitchinform.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/Hitchin-Local-Plan-7.04.131.pdf>.

Meanwhile the Council has been considering potential sites for housing through its *Strategic Housing Land Allocation Assessment*. There were consultations in 2013 and earlier this year an updated list of potential sites was published (see http://www.north-herts.gov.uk/shlaa_report__ap_1-3.pdf) which excluded much of the major areas south and west of Hitchin but retains many sites in the Green Belt around the town including Priory Fields (see separate article on page 3). We are

urging members to write to councillors now about sites that concern them.

The Council has recently announced the currently proposed dates for preparation of the District Local Plan:

- the Preferred Options Consultation is due in December 2014 - January 2015;
- responses to that consultation will be considered and a Proposed Submission Consultation will take place in September - November 2015;
- an Examination in Public by an independent Inspector is expected in 2016, with adoption possible by 2017.

We are re-submitting *Planning Hitchin's Future* with a new foreword to provide an update on specific issues so that our concerns (including those on Priory Fields) are brought to the attention of NHDC officers and councillors as the Draft Local Plan is being prepared.

Please contact us on planning@hitchinform.org.uk if you would like advice on any issues that are of particular concern to you at this stage. We will hold a Members' Meeting when we have the Preferred Options documentation.

STOP PRESS: Bancroft Recreation Ground - Heritage Lottery Verdict

"Decision: Reject

"North Hertfordshire District Council sought a first round pass of £2,117,500 including a development grant of £110,600, 80% of eligible development costs (HLF £73,733; 66.66%)(BIG £36,867; 33.33%) to restore and enhance 3.4 ha Bancroft Gardens in the centre of Hitchin to attract wider audiences through a range of new facilities and activities and tell the history of the site through restored features and new interpretation.

"The Committee for the East of England had recommended the project as a medium priority for support. BIG's representative had recommended it as a low priority.

"The HLF Board and BIG England Parks for People Committee noted this was an experienced applicant and there was potential for this project, which included redesign of the public space and new capital works, to reach out to new and diverse audiences. However, this element appeared weak and there was a low budget for activity costs. Consultation with all parks users and potential audiences also needed strengthening together with more detail of the long term management requirements. HLF trustees queried the proposals regarding the tennis courts and the wider concerns regarding their removal and sought more detail. The HLF Board and BIG England Parks for People Committee agreed that due to the concerns raised the application was a medium priority for support and the project was rejected in view of this and in light of the available budget."