

NEWSLETTER
May/June 2012 No. 111

Chairman's Piece

Litter is on the move, hopefully off the streets of Hitchin and into black bags. Why do people drop it? Judith Gurney explores that on page 4. How can we help in picking it up? We are running a campaign to do just that, focussing on one day – 27th May (see page 7). 'Love Hitchin' is in line with the national 'Love where you live' campaign, to run over 3 years, so we may return to this again.

'Waste management' became a special interest of mine recently – when I was nearly eliminated by a large truck bearing the title. I was cycling up Fishponds Road when overtaken by the truck which tried to squeeze between me and a traffic island. The boss of the firm responded promptly and politely to my complaint, and hopefully his drivers now know to behave safely on our roads. But I wonder about the sanity of such large trucks driving along narrow roads, being able to drive above 20mph past schools.... and the cyclists.

The frogspawn never appeared in my pond, and Simons' plans for Churchgate have not appeared. Hammersmatch, the current lessee of Churchgate, has put out a possible development proposal, but whether that will mature into a firm plan is uncertain. John Urwin comments on the recent meeting where the ideas were discussed (see page 3).

And then came TescoLand. A small Tesco by the Station may be okay, apart from the extended hours to sell booze. But what about a whopping Tesco on Top Field? Read more on page 6.

We applaud those who have struggled through the process of making the Hitchin Town Hall into a joint museum venture, and hope that will be successful. Compromises have been made on the design (as we heard when the plans were presented by NHDC officers on 5th May, ahead of the full Council meeting to approve those plans on 10th May), but the retention of the Mountford Hall is welcome (see page 5).

Our new website was launched and I am pleased that it is being used frequently – but I would be grateful for more comments on how we can further improve it, for thoughts on what other pages or features it could have, and also for any town photos that you think could be used.

I am sad at the loss of some very valued members. In particular Bill Bowker was a friend and a great support to the Forum. It is good to see that others are joining and I look forward to their contributions to our efforts.

Someone who is likely to spark and stimulate us is Bruce Nixon – who will speak on 16th July at our public meeting during the Hitchin Festival. He has been involved in Berkhamsted Transition Town, but has global concerns, as described on his website <http://brucenixon.com/>. Do join us (see p. 8).

The last members meeting was very lively and I hope you can join us for discussion of the various issues and campaigns on Thursday 28th June (see page 7).

Mike Clarke

Churchgate 1 – the legal concerns

By Andrew Wearmouth, of Hitchin Forum's Steering Group

As we all know, following lengthy public consultation, the Council formally adopted the **Churchgate Planning Brief** in 2005. That Brief drew a distinction between development and enhancement, allowing development on Areas 1, 2 and 3 (Churchgate, the market and Biggin Lane car park) but enhancement only on Areas 4 and 5, St Mary's Square and Portmill Lane. It specifically required retention of the *"key open views of St Mary's Church, particularly from Queen Street"*. The meaning of this was quite clear to everyone – public and Councillors - who took part in the consultation process.

A development of any magnitude such as this must, by law, be advertised in the **Official Journal of the European Union (OJEU)**, and when the Council did this, they specifically required compliance with the Planning Brief. The advertisement states that the Council *"would like to see a scheme taking a comprehensive approach to the development of Churchgate and the Enhancement Area. However it may also give consideration to individual elements which fit within the framework of the Churchgate Development Area Planning Brief, adopted in 2005...(quotation continued below)"*. Quite clearly, the Council hoped for a scheme for the whole area, development and enhancement, but was also prepared to consider proposals for part only. The over-riding requirement however was that any proposals had to comply with the 2005 Planning Brief.

The advertisement invited interested parties to apply for an **Information Pack**. That pack was brief – two pages plus two plans – but it confirmed the wording of the advertisement in requiring compliance with the Brief. For a variety of reasons, other developers fell by the wayside, but it appears likely that they may have recognised that the scheme requested would not be viable. Only Simons remained in negotiation with the Council, signing up to a **Development Agreement** – a legal contract – to deliver a scheme that complied with the Planning Brief and the advertisement. That contract states that there are specific Objectives in its creation, and these include the

requirements of the Churchgate Planning Brief, which are detailed in the contract in full.

The obligations therefore to enhance St Mary's Square and Portmill Lane rather than develop them and to retain the *"key open views of St Mary's Church particularly from Queen Street"* were clearly embodied in the original Brief, the OJEU advertisement, the developer Information Pack and Simons' legally binding contract. If the Council now goes back on this and approves any scheme that does not comply with these requirements, it will not only be breaking faith with the electorate who participated in the drawing up of the Brief, but it will also be in conflict with its own contract. More importantly it appears that it would be breaking European Union law in proceeding with a scheme that was effectively not advertised in the OJEU.

A second point has now also arisen. In a letter to local organisations the Leader of the Council has claimed that there was always the intention to promote a development scheme on the entire area, and has mentioned this as being phased, with the development of St Mary's Square and Portmill Lane being intended for 2015. This is of course a completely new idea which has never been consulted upon and is not the understanding of the public who worked so hard with the Council to create the adopted Planning Brief! However, the Leader has suggested that the slippage in delivery of the original scheme is such that the Council is now entitled to consider the "2015 phase", with development all over the entire area surrounding the Church. **However, the advertisement that the Council placed in the OJEU does not allow this.** The quotation from the advertisement in paragraph two above goes on to say *"...and which will not compromise the ultimate development of the overall area"*. It therefore does not permit any future phases of development, because it expressly excludes any development that exceeds the Brief.

Simons' representatives have stated in public that they have every intention of building on St Mary's Square (public meeting of Churchgate Liaison Forum, Church House, 23rd March 2011).

If the Council allows this to happen, and approves a scheme that does not comply with the Planning Brief and the OJEU advert, it seems

that it will be breaking EU law on two separate counts, and EU law has the full force of UK law.

Churchgate 2 – an alternative proposal

John Urwin, Chair of Hitchin Forum’s Planning Group, reports on a recent meeting with the current lessee of Churchgate:

Hammersmatch recently invited representatives from groups they perceived to be interested in Churchgate to a presentation in the Sun Hotel. They said that their current planning permission to refurbish Churchgate expires in August, but they will be re-applying. They confirmed that just refurbishing Churchgate was still a viable option, but a new plan presented to the meeting showed further development, which could take place at the same time as refurbishment, or later. Their proposal was sketched on what seemed to be a map of the existing area, but it was not to scale.

This plan involves demolishing some of the existing Churchgate and building four larger units over about half the current market area, reducing the number of stalls to about 90 from the current 160. It suggests that some more temporary stalls could go along the river frontage in front of St Mary’s car park. Retail floor space in the extended Churchgate would increase from 52,000 to 80,000 sq ft. They claimed to have interest from hotel and cinema operators for the first floor areas. In addition they want to build residential accommodation on stilts in the Biggin Lane car park, reducing the number of parking spaces from 76 to 56. The market traders’ vehicles would have to move to St Mary’s Square or Portmill Lane car parks.

Our first thought was that Hammersmatch cannot proceed with building on part of the existing market area as this is part of the land under contract between NHDC and Simons. However, Simons could ‘walk away’ at the first cut off date in their Development Agreement

with NHDC. A Freedom of Information request for this date has been refused by NHDC on grounds of that familiar chestnut, commercial confidentiality. However, we understand this date is likely to be within the next few months and some Councillors have indicated that they are against an extension.

The Hammersmatch plans were not to scale which creates problems because the plan indicated the new market stalls were to be much smaller than the present size, suggesting that the market area might be reduced to one quarter its present size – a non-starter. They also were not proposing to increase car parking levels in line with the increase in shopping area – an effective reduction in car parking.

The existing Churchgate centre is unlikely to earn Hammersmatch much money as the tenants are on short leases with low rents, so building more new shops does seem to be attractive from Hammersmatch’s point of view.

The Market area is currently not used for three days a week which is not a good use of this asset, but the Market is of considerable value to Hitchin. Offering such a wide range of goods, it is often described as Hitchin’s department store and it attracts a wide range of income groups, so is socially desirable. Neither Simons nor Hammersmatch have offered imaginative proposals for the Market which reflect its role in the town. However, if Hammersmatch reconsidered this aspect, their proposal might be worth further consideration as it is much less risky than that of Simons.

NHDC – Are We Satisfied?

A recent report to NHDC’s Cabinet observes: *“People in Hitchin are less likely to be satisfied with the way NHDC runs things than in other areas. A contributing factor to this could be the media coverage which has featured in the local press over the last two years on the Churchgate redevelopment project and to a less extent on other projects in Hitchin. The letters on the topic have been almost without exception negative and highly critical of the Council and its development partner.”* Are they listening at last?

Litter – facing up to the problem

Hitchin Forum has just launched *Love Hitchin – pick up on litter*, a town-wide campaign to rid residential areas of rubbish before the Queen's Jubilee in June. Here, Judith Gurney of Hitchin Forum's Steering Group explains some of the psychology of litter:

Most people get fed up with litter; many get angry and upset about it. In a letter published a few weeks ago in a local paper, the writer reported that he deliberately avoided driving along one of Hitchin's approach roads because he got so upset about the amount of litter beside that road. I can understand why they get so upset, and I am sure you can too.

Some litter arrives by accident, but most litter is there because someone made a decision to throw it there – they held in their hand something like an empty crisp packet or a takeaway drinks cup and chose not to put it in a bin, or take it with them, but to just drop it. And there it is. I think we get so upset because we know an individual has deliberately decided to go ahead with an easily avoidable act which results in spoiling a place for everyone else.

Most people do not drop litter as they walk along, or wind down the window of their vehicle and throw it on to the road, but studies of human behaviour show that a significant proportion do - and the evidence is all too easy to see in both public and privately owned places. So the question is – why do individuals make those litter-dropping decisions?

I have had a brief look at some research, and one theory emerges as particularly helpful. "The Broken Window Theory" looks at the relationship between how an individual, or group of people, interact with the place they are in. The idea springs from looking at the causes of vandalism of buildings, and states that if a building looks dilapidated and uncared for - having one or two broken windows, for instance - it is much more likely to receive more damage, (such as graffiti, more stones through the windows), than a nearby, well-maintained building. Many of you will have heard of this theory – keep a place clean and tidy, and people are less likely to mess it up.

A strong reason for taking this theory seriously is that it is well supported by evidence from studies of human behaviour in real situations. In the late 1960s researchers tried a variation of a

study that involved abandoning cars by the roadside, and then observing what happened to them. In this case one car was left in a rundown area of New York, and within hours it had been stripped of anything useable and left as a wreck. A similar car was left in an area of California perceived as "respectable and law abiding", and after a week it was still in perfect condition. So far, the different fates of the cars reflected what many would have predicted considering the differences between the areas.

However, the study did not stop at that point; at the end of a week a researcher deliberately smashed a window of the intact car in the respectable area – and in no time at all that car was wrecked too. Even in an area usually free of anti-social behaviour, it seems that the smashed window acted as a cue for further criminal acts.

Much more recently, and closer to home, in 2008 some Dutch researchers published results of a well controlled study comparing individuals' behaviour in orderly and disorderly outdoor settings. They found that bicycle owners in an alley were more than twice as likely to drop litter (a flier attached to their handlebars) if the walls were covered in graffiti. People were far more likely to litter in a car park (this time the fliers were attached to their windscreens) if trolleys had not been returned to the shop. Passers-by were far more likely to steal a money-containing envelope protruding from a post box if litter was on the ground, or there was graffiti on the post box. You get the picture – signs of "disorder" such as graffiti and litter seem to encourage further littering, and even dishonesty.

The flip side of this, though, is that it is worth making an effort to keep a place litter-free and looking good, thereby encouraging positive behaviour. We can do this as individuals or groups, picking up litter ourselves where it is safe to do so. Hitchin Forum is urging residents to join our campaign "**Love Hitchin – pick up on litter**" and do whatever they can to clean up their roads, and public places that do not get very regular council cleaning (see page 7).

The “North Hertfordshire Museum and Community Facility”

“The innovative nature of this project and the prospective partnership with Hitchin Town Hall Ltd would provide wide-ranging benefits for the district: the preservation and enhancement of an important heritage asset, community benefit and significant inward investment.” Here, John Keene of Hitchin Forum’s Steering Group, elaborates on this report to Council.

Town halls were always considered to be a mark of civilised progress – a decided advance from holding meetings in pubs – and provided centres for debate, entertainment, leisure activities and instruction. Worthy aims reflected by their appearance, which is usually as grand as possible; the Mountford Hall in ours is named after the architect who went on to design the Old Bailey.

Hitchin has had a town hall for some 172 years now. The original, also in Brand Street, was used as Council Offices by NHDC, and before that, by Hitchin Urban District Council. It became *The Ivory* when sold a few years back, a “solution” initially proposed for – and narrowly escaped by – the present Town Hall, which thankfully, is to be preserved and refurbished as part town hall, part museum. A terrific achievement for NHDC and Hitchin Town Hall Ltd and we wish it well, but for that awful title “North Hertfordshire Museum and Community Facility”. While “community facility” may spring naturally to the lips of those at NHDC, to most of us it signifies anything from a public toilet to a waste disposal centre.

However, there are also concerns that the “Museum” is encroaching into the “Town Hall”. It is evident that there will be an ongoing need for secure off-site storage for museum exhibits which initially will continue to be provided at Burymead Road. There is also significant storage designated within the new museum facility. However, in addition to this, the main stage in the refurbished Town Hall is to be considerably reduced in depth and changing rooms lost to create yet more museum storage, limiting off-stage facilities such as storage and dressing rooms.

While compromises have to be made, changes which could affect the use and flexibility of the remaining large hall, and therefore its profitability, are regrettable, both for the community and Hitchin Town Hall Ltd who have a large loan to repay. The phrase “*why spoil the ship*” comes to mind. Surely the aim is to provide both the best museum and the best town hall possible.

Oh, and I’m pretty certain that we shall all refer to the refurbished complex as the “*Hitchin Town Hall and Museum*”!

Diary Dates

Sunday 27 May: **Hitchin’s Pre-Jubilee Litter-pick!** 10am – 12 noon, your neighbourhood
Further information: www.hitchinform.org.uk – click on ‘Love Hitchin and pick up on litter’;
Email: litter@hitchinform.org.uk or ring 07974 272315; see also articles in this newsletter

Thursday 31 May: **Town Talk** (6.30pm) & **Hitchin Committee** (7.30pm), The Gurdwara, Wilbury Way

Saturdays 2 June/7 July: **Councillors’ Surgery**; 10.30am – noon, Market Place
Monthly opportunity to raise issues of concern with Hitchin’s County & District Councillors

Thursday 28 June: **Hitchin Forum members meeting**

*****ADVANCE NOTIFICATION*****: Monday 16 July: **Sustainable Hitchin?** 7.30pm, British Schools Museum
This is a Hitchin Festival event for which there will be a small entry charge

Tescoland?

The Hitchin Cow Commoners have just revealed their far-reaching plans for Top Field and Hitchin Football Club. But is it the best plan for Hitchin? Mike Clarke, Hitchin Forum's Chairman, reports on a recent meeting called by the Hitchin Cow Commoners:

The Hitchin Cow Commoners are a self selected group, founded in the 19th century to manage land donated to the town as a replacement for common land bought for the railway. They run a charitable trust of the same name (HCCT) and have done a deal with a local developer, Richard Daniels. The good bit is that this might yield a very nice sports facility for the town, as well as a home for a reconstituted Hitchin Football Club on land opposite Kingshott School. The bad bit is that they are relinquishing any say on what will go on the vacated land, Top Field, the present home of Hitchin Football Club.

This was revealed at a meeting with community groups on 10th May. HCCT had discussed some of their plans 12 months before, but swore attendees to secrecy, so the Forum representatives were bound not to reveal any of the discussion with our Steering Group or members.

The plans for the new complex look well planned and attractive. Much thought has clearly gone into the layout. There is a seductive appeal when the details of the facilities are shown. What is less clear is how they will overcome two problems.

Hitchin FC, who lease their ground indirectly from HCCT, had the details supplied to them on the same evening. It is uncertain how they will manage the changes required in how they are run. The rules of HCCT are that they cannot be in a contract with a professional sports club or profit making business. So the club may need to become a community trust or some other body

Tesco by the back door? Ellie Clarke, of Hitchin Forum's Planning Group, reports:

When an application was submitted in March 2011 by a London property investment firm to convert the offices at Lyon Court, near Hitchin station, to a convenience store and 35 flats, our concern was mainly to do with yet more flats in Hitchin. Applications a year later by Tesco stores for extended opening hours and installation of an ATM here provoked quite a different reaction. We objected to the former as it could

in order to be doing business/sharing in charitable work with HCCT.

The other concern is how financially viable the scheme will be. No other sporting bodies are signed up to use the facilities. Will the town use the football pitch with its grandstand, will others come forward to use the Astroturf soccer, netball and hockey pitches? How much income will they get from the conference/wedding venue? What will be the impact on the green belt here? The Commoners say they have no other monies, and no financial pot to buffer them against any shortfall in income for the maintenance of the 12 acre site.

However the main worry is what will happen to Top Field. The Cow Commoners seem to have sold their soul to the developer. They have left him to make what he can from any development. It seemed to be accepted at the meeting that residential development would not bring in enough cash to allow the developer to give HCCT the cherished 'leisure facility'. So, for the pleasure of such leisure, Tesco could land nearby. Developers and Tesco do not have at heart the health of our town centre. They are motivated by profit. They are not a charity. Tesco on Top Field will take business away from the centre, shops may close, and a blight or curse will descend.

I can understand how HCCT might be seduced by the vision rolled out by the developer, but the devil is in the detail of what follows. What they hope is for the good of Hitchin, may be a snare and ultimately a delusion.

contribute to late evening antisocial behaviour, particularly with the sale of alcohol, and its probable economic impact on local businesses. We also objected to the lack of parking in an area which is already a traffic congestion point. More fundamentally, this is immediately next to a newly designated Conservation Area and on an important town gateway, yet there has been no investment to improve the environment here.

The Hitchin Forum Members' Page - 1

Love Hitchin – pick up on litter!

Hitchin Forum is launching a **town-wide campaign to pick up litter for the Jubilee**. A first valiant effort took place on Sunday 6th May when a dozen volunteers, organised by some Forum members tackled the former B&Q site opposite the station. In just over an hour, the site was litter-free! Now we would like to do the same for as many residential roads in Hitchin as possible.

As it happens, there is a national campaign to rid neighbourhoods of litter and encourage local residents to care for the areas where they live and regularly walk, “*Love where you live*”: <http://www.lovewhereyoulive.org>, which we have joined, saying we are willing to organise a town-wide litter clean up for Hitchin.

We are suggesting a **two-hour slot (10am – 12 noon) on Sunday 27th May**, one week before Jubilee weekend, for a focused effort by residents to clean up their own streets, footpaths and neighbourhoods. If you cannot manage that particular time, please find another and let us know.

This is a real **partnership effort**: Hitchin Initiative has kindly provided black bags for all the litter and 10 litter-pickers for us to use. All this has been supplied by NHDC's Serviceteam which has

also arranged to collect the black bags. We are also covered by Hitchin Initiative's public liability insurance.

What would we like you to do? Arrange with your neighbours to do a clean-up in your street, or footpaths near you etc. Let us know what area you'll be clearing – we need to know this to arrange Serviceteam collection afterwards - and we'll provide you with black bags and a litter-picker (the latter on a first come, first served basis). Please take 'before and after' photographs, including one of your litter-picking team, and send them to us to use for publicity purposes. We'd also love photos of particular litter hotspots you know about, and we'd love to hear of any 'Litter Heroes' you know who regularly clean up, regardless of campaigns or Jubilees!

We are calling our campaign “*Love Hitchin – pick up on litter*” and are concentrating on residential areas because the Council generally does a good job on the town centre. It is also being supported by the Hitchin Comet. Please join us!

You can contact us through the Hitchin Forum website at: litter@hitchinform.org.uk. Let's get Hitchin litter-free for the Queen's Jubilee!

Hitchin Forum Members' Meeting – Thursday 28th June

Our last members' meeting was a lively affair, with informative presentations and a high level of debate and discussion. Since then, our Planning Group has met, mostly to discuss strategic planning issues like the implications of the Government's new National Planning Policy Framework, but at a more local level, whether a **Neighbourhood Plan** would be appropriate for Hitchin.

This is something we would like to discuss at our next members' meeting. What is a Neighbourhood Plan? What could it achieve? Who would prepare such a plan in Hitchin? What would it involve? What issues could be included in the Plan? A few suggestions in response to the last question included the provision of better quality **public spaces**;

provision, quality and charges of public **car parking**; and the inevitable **Churchgate**.

We would also like to present the **latest Churchgate proposals from Hammersmatch** (see Churchgate 2 article above) to get your reaction – better than Simons' proposals perhaps, but will this benefit Hitchin?

We would also like your thoughts on the proposals for **new sports facilities** just announced by the Hitchin Cow Commoners and the implications for Top Field.

We would like your thoughts, ideas, suggestions on these and any other issues you would like to discuss so please join us at our members' meeting on **Thursday 28th June**.

The Hitchin Forum Members' Page – 2

Chris Honey on *Sustainable Hitchin?*, a Hitchin Festival event hosted by Hitchin Forum:

Well yes, we all know that Hitchin is a vibrant market town with a proactive town centre manager, BID scheme and self run market four days a week including a craft & farmers day once a month. That it is a Fairtrade town and that the business sector has set up a company to help restore the Town Hall and manage the community parts of it. That there are some well supported community groups like Hitchin Forum who care about the future of the town and campaign against horrific development proposals or threatening external influences. That we don't want to be 'any town', preferring local retailers to national ones and 'Love Hitchin – pick up on litter'. Less well known are the Local Product Directory, Garden Swap, Kerbside Plastic Collection & Recycling schemes plus many more initiatives. They all help to maintain the

attractiveness of the town and strengthen the local economy.

Is that enough we thought? Other towns like Totnes and Lewes are more advanced in their sustainable activity. So we have invited Bruce Nixon of Berkhamsted Transition Town, sustainability consultant, environmental activist and author of '*A better world is possible*', to kick start improvements. He speaks out about climate change and global economic problems that may blight our future but he brings hope! Act local, think global.

What does this mean for Hitchin? What can we change? Join in the discussion on this challenge at a Hitchin Festival evening not to be missed at **7.30pm on Monday 16th July in the British Schools Museum.**

Members' News

2012 has brought the sad deaths of three of our members who will all be missed for their varied contributions to the Forum.

Sarah Graham died in February, aged 87. She was brought up in Letchworth and lived away from this area for a large part of her life but settled in Hitchin for about the last 14 years. She had strong family and Quaker connections to Hitchin and took great interest in all matters affecting our town. She was artistic (her drawings were often displayed at Benslow Music Trust) and musical. She was a member of Hitchin Forum for many years and was most appreciative of the work we did, in particular for the informative and challenging nature of our newsletters.

John Jarvis died in March, aged 83. He was one of the founders of the Hitchin Physic Garden and cared for it for many years. Most of his working life was spent involved with his first love, the environment, and he kept an eagle eye on his local green spaces, Butts Close and Top Field, which was invaluable for us in the Forum. He was a member of Hitchin Forum from its inception and was active and supportive in our Town Centre Group from the beginning. Even when his health began failing, he attended Forum meetings, always providing his particular, positive and incisive perspective.

Bill Bowker was a founding member of Hitchin Forum, and what he didn't know about Hitchin wasn't worth knowing! He was interested in all transport issues in the town, attended Hitchin Vision transport group meetings for many years and helped campaign against speeding traffic on residential roads and scrap lorries in particular. He was a formative member of the Triangle Residents Association and instrumental in getting the Triangle Design Statement prepared, which was ahead of its time with the coalition Government now championing Neighbourhood Plans. He was a founder member of CASE, the Campaign Against Stevenage Expansion, opposing development on the green fields between Hitchin and Stevenage for over 15 years. His career as a pilot of small aircraft gave him a unique perspective on the countryside around Hitchin. He chaired both Hitchin Forum's Town Centre Group and Steering Group at various times and perhaps shaped the Forum's thinking and action more than any other over its 20 years. His wisdom, wit, support, gentle cajoling and generous personality will be hugely missed in Hitchin.

So far in 2012 we have also welcomed eight new members to Hitchin Forum:

They include: Alan Brookman, Anthony Cole, Robin Dartington, Heidi Ebrahim, Sarah Pond, Tony Riley and John Wyer. They are already bringing their particular expertise, interests and perspectives to the Forum.