

HITCHIN FORUM

Caring for our Town

NEWSLETTER

May/June 2015 No. 129

Chairman's Piece

I started to draft this as we waited to vote, and wondered what changes might come in central or local government over the next few weeks, and years. I am not sure if this is the right time to speculate about the advantages or otherwise of a **Community/Town Council for Hitchin**. We invited Carina Helmn, who is the County Officer for the Hertfordshire Association of Parish and Town Councils and the Kimpton Parish Clerk, to speak at our last members' meeting about this. The advantages of a community council will be different for every area, and her view is that it is up to local residents to set the agenda. But will it deliver more than the district council, would it gain the powers to make a difference, would it attract the sort of people as councillors who could explore and use those powers for the good of the whole community? We will be discussing this more in the coming months.

Meanwhile Tesco in **Top Field** has become merely a passing nightmare. We have yet to find out if the Cow Commoners did all that was required by the Charity Commission in their dabble with New Road Developments. We have yet to see what may be around the corner. The football club wants new facilities, but how will that be funded? We can but hope that all future plans for the area are discussed openly, that peace and goodwill prevails, and that no more money is spent in court actions (it seems that every pound spent by the Cow Commoners in legal bills could have been spent on the primary aim of their Trust - *for the benefit of the community through the provision of facilities for the charitable use for cricket, football or other sports or for other general charitable purposes for the benefit of the inhabitants of the town of Hitchin*).

Bancroft Recreation Ground awaits its water splash, but what else might be added to the attractions of this valuable space awaits further deliberations and funds. We are striving to understand what the 'principles of the masterplan' are, and hope there will be further dialogue about those principles and the future of the Rec. Watch this space.

Attempts to resolve the deadlock at the **Town Hall** are apparently proceeding behind closed doors, and again we can but hope for good sense to prevail. On a brighter note the **Big Hitchin Spring Clean** was a notable success with litter pickers galore around the town. Well done to Lynne and Ellie and all the volunteers for their efforts. This gained a welcome nomination for the Comet 'Great & Green' Community Award for the second year running. Now we just need to find a way to stop people dumping their rubbish in the wrong place. Answers please to litter@hitchinform.org.uk.

Finally a further tribute to our excellent **town centre manager** who fully deserved the MBE he recently received. After 18 years of patient and persistent working for the town, with weekly insightful comments in the local press, he continues to smile and inspire. A further opportunity to celebrate 'our community life and spirit' and what has been achieved through **20 years of Hitchin Initiative** comes with 'Heart & Soul' on Friday June 19th with an evening of entertainment and feasting in St Marys Church. Contact Hitchin Initiative office for details and tickets.

Mike Clarke, Chairman

newsletter@hitchinform.org.uk

Founded 1992

Chairman: Mike Clarke

Member of: Hitchin Initiative
Campaign to Protect Rural England

The Big Hitchin Spring Clean

Lynne Maylin, Co-ordinator for our Big Hitchin Tidy Up events, reports on Hitchin Forum's 2015 town-wide clean up:

The weather gods were looking down on us when The Big Hitchin Tidy Up, now in its fifth year, became the Big Hitchin Spring Clean in April with more great results!

This time we had around 130 volunteers young and old! The youngsters ranged from primary school age, with Guides, Brownies, Beavers and Cubs making up a colossal team in the Dell, whilst older volunteers, some of retirement age, tackled the dangerous verges along the Park Way bypass, much to the delight of passing motorists!

A greater number of sites was also tackled this time, 17 in total and of the 130+ bags that were filled, 60 came from the Dell itself! I think NHDC refuse collectors may have got more than they bargained for when they pulled up at Woodside car park on Monday morning to collect our rubbish!

Some of the main recreation grounds in Hitchin - King Georges playing field, Ransoms Rec, Butts Close and Pinehill Field - were given a thorough clean as well as the area outside the station and around Family Bargains. One entire neighbourhood was cleaned up - the Triangle area covering Verulam Road, Dacre Road, Radcliffe Road, Walsworth and Nightingale Roads. Cambridge Road, the footpath behind the college and St Michael's Road were also tackled.

We may not have found the front end of a car this time around but we certainly found an odd array of items, such as the toilet seat extension and toilet cistern, a digital camera, a laptop, a range of hubcaps, a fully working set of scales not to mention endless cigarette butts, fast food straws and a 25ft length of tarpaulin!

Although Hitchin Forum organises these clean ups, they could not happen without the many willing volunteers who turn out so enthusiastically. Our thanks also go to Hitchin Initiative for providing publicity and essential insurance cover, to NHDC for providing litter pickers and more importantly collecting the rubbish afterwards, to Friends of Walsworth Common for the loan of litter pickers and to the local press for publicity. We would also like to thank NHDC for responding to our request to clear the verges of the A602 prior to our Hitchin clean up, which they managed to do the previous weekend. This was an area that had been mentioned several times, both by our volunteers and in the local press, but is clearly unsafe for volunteers to tackle.

More and more people are becoming increasingly aware of the problem of litter and it is interesting that several of our volunteers now have their own litter pickers, an indication that residents are more regularly cleaning up their areas. People are also asking why we have such a problem with litter, who drops it and why? It is generally felt to be quite antisocial, detracting from the neighbourhoods where people live. Are we just treating the symptoms of a wider "problem", or are people who drop litter simply thoughtless? These are the sort of questions people are asking, but nevertheless our volunteers continue to be willing to tackle the problem with great gusto, getting tremendous satisfaction from their achievement. So we are already looking to the next Big Hitchin Clean Up!

Finally I'll leave you with some lovely comments from a couple of our volunteers:

"I had a great time, discovered a hidden gem of a place in Hitchin and would definitely do it again. Happy to join more of these in the year and to spread the good word about pitching in." "It was fun to be part of it and always good to meet nice people! My friend's children were very enthusiastic for such a young age! And my daughters are going to invest in some litter picker uppers with their pocket money for next time!" **STOP PRESS:** For the second year running, our effort has been nominated for the Great and Green Award of The Comet's Community Awards 2015! Report on www.hitchinforum.org.uk/comet-community-awards/ & gallery on www.hitchinforum.org.uk/spring-clean-gallery-of-heroes/

Bancroft Recreation Ground

Mike Clarke and Andrew Wearmouth, members of Hitchin Forum's Steering Group, provide this update:

The status of Bancroft Recreation Ground has been reported in the Newsletter before, but it seems appropriate to provide an update on the situation.

The Ground was acquired by the Council in 1924, from Skynner's Almshouses, now part of Hitchin United Charities. The purchase was subject to a restrictive covenant that the land will be used as a recreation ground. That has a specific meaning, different from "Gardens" and whilst the misleading signage remains and that title was used in the Lottery application, the Council has acknowledged the proper name and now uses it. Hitchin Forum continues its efforts to ensure that it remains for recreational purposes.

The Council's application for Heritage Lottery Funding was refused last year, and the proposed works are therefore unable to proceed in a single phase. However, the Council has declared that principles outlined in the masterplan as set out in the Cabinet report of Jan 28th 2014 will still be taken forward as and when funds are available. Parts of the plan are welcome, such as the children's water play feature and the re-provision of the toilets, but there appears to have been no concession made to the concerns expressed by various people at the loss of recreational facilities, such as the public tennis

courts, or the detrimental effect of the loss of car parking on users such as the bowls club. Indeed, the public car park adjoining the recreation ground is itself subject to the restrictive covenant, and a small part should perhaps be reserved for users of the ground.

At the time of writing we do not know which Councillors will be involved following the election. However, Hitchin Forum, together with representatives of the tennis and bowls clubs, had a meeting with the current Portfolio Holder, Cllr Jane Gray, on 23 April, when these points were discussed. The question of the loss of Bancroft Hall was also raised. It is understood that this comes under a different Portfolio at the Council, but given that it is located wholly within the Recreation Ground and used for recreational purposes, it seemed appropriate to raise the question of its replacement or an appropriate extension to the existing pavilion.

Hitchin Forum undertook to produce comments related to the listed features in the 'masterplan' (or as titled by BDP, the company employed to prepare the plans, 'Initial Design Concepts'), outlining the various suggestions made, in the hope that a dialogue between the Council and the community will produce widely accepted improvements in the recreation ground.

Transport Matters

Comments by members of the Hitchin Forum Planning Group:

1. Footpaths

Nicholas Maddex, Hertfordshire County Council's Countryside Access Officer, informs me that the Council has now protected the budget for the work to improve the section of the HOOP between the Wymondley Road railway bridge and Gypsy Lane. The proposals are going through the safety audit. When the work will be done is at present uncertain, although I am encouraged by his statement that it cannot be completed until the birds have finished nesting, which implies that it may be planned for this year. Widening of Braunds Alley and the installation of a safety barrier are in progress, and fallen or leaning signposts on footpaths in Priory Fields will be righted soon. I am planning to prepare a further report on footpath issues for Nicholas Maddex in July.

Another volunteer has recently offered to help keep an eye on footpaths. If anybody else would like to join us, do let me know, but even if you do not wish to make a regular commitment, please don't hesitate to contact me at footpaths@hitchinforum.org.uk if you come across any footpath issues.

Bill Sellicks

2. Pedestrian Crossings

In March, we received an invitation from Hertfordshire County Council to comment on proposals to install a zebra crossing on Stevenage Road near to Hitchin Hill Path and two central refuges to assist pedestrians in crossing London Road in the area of Coach Drive and Lister Avenue. We were very encouraged that our views had been sought, and pleased to learn that there are proposals to make negotiating these roads safer for pedestrians.

Several of our members contributed detailed and thoughtful comments on both proposals, and we submitted a summary of these. In terms of the Stevenage Road proposals, issues emerged around the positioning of the proposed crossing to make it both useful and safe. We expressed concerns about the effects on changes to parking arrangements and the proposed removal of a refuge near to The Maples. We highlighted issues about the speed of traffic, in part resulting from the poor design of the Three Moorhens roundabout. We also encouraged more thought about modification of this roundabout to make it safer for cyclists. Motorists routinely ignore the 30mph limit on the B656 London Road, and there were suggestions about speed cameras and clearer road marking to make the limit clear. We presented two views on the efficacy of central refuges – on the one hand that intuitively we would expect they would help to reduce speed, and on the other that they might have exactly the opposite effect, based on the experience of one of our members who has noticed an increase in speed following carriageway narrowing in conjunction with a central refuge and painted hatching in Pirton Road.

We concluded by emphasising the importance of a wider consultation of local residents and businesses. Hertfordshire County Council say that they intend to do this in May. I have written to the officer concerned to try to find out what the arrangements will be for this consultation and await a reply.

Bill Sellicks

3. Transport Planning and Development

Hitchin Forum's response to the draft Local Plan questioned whether the road network on the west of Hitchin would be able to cope with traffic from mooted housing development sites along Lucas Lane.

Subsequently, and prior to finalisation of the Local Plan, an outline planning application was submitted for 27 houses on the "HT4" site at the Blueharts Hockey Club and Hitchin Cricket Club sports ground, plus expanded sports facilities. When the West Hitchin Action Group (WHAG) suggested a transport study in relation to the application, we decided to make a contribution to the cost in order to answer some of the questions about the viability of the Local Plan proposals. Civil engineering consultants Wormald Burrows Partnership Ltd produced this report which has been submitted to NHDC with WHAG's objection to the proposals.

The report notes problems resulting from narrow carriageways, parked cars, limited visibility and conflict between pedestrians and traffic. Vehicle trips through the critical junction between Oughtonhead Way and Bedford Street would double in the evening. The final conclusion is that NHDC should refuse the application on road safety grounds. In reality, the problems are likely to be worse once Samuel Lucas School expansion is complete and the Hitchin Hospital site is redeveloped. The Local Plan clearly needs to find solutions to the traffic and parking problem before development along Lucas Lane (which includes additional sites beyond HT4) can be included. The issue cannot be ignored as it was in the first draft of the Plan.

Dave Borner

Hitchin History Day - Saturday 11 July

Judith Gurney highlights this special day to promote Hitchin, its character and its community strengths:

As part of Hitchin Festival this summer, Hitchin Historical Society is hosting a History Day at Church House on Saturday 11th July. Naturally, a wide range of history groups will be there, explaining their work and achievements, e.g. British Schools Museum, Pirton Local History Group and First Garden City International Exhibition.

Hitchin Forum plans to have a stall on the day, and will need volunteers to mind the stall - hence this article.

As members know, Hitchin Forum is essentially a campaigning group, working to maximise the chances that Hitchin will develop in Hitchin-friendly ways. This means friendly to people who live, work and visit Hitchin as well as friendly to the town's character and ambience.

For instance, most people with connections to our town view Hitchin's continuing identity as a Historic Market Town as key to its well-being. Hitchin Forum works with other Hitchin groups to protect that identity, although our efforts extend beyond that aspect. We want to see Hitchin thrive in the 21st Century, and sometimes our campaigns are directed firmly against clear threats to the well-being of the town. Other campaigns seek to point developers

and councillors towards development solutions that protect and enhance the identity of our town, steering them away from potentially destructive ideas.

The Hitchin Forum Steering Group has identified the importance of increasing our membership, and regards our presence at the History Day as a raising awareness and recruitment opportunity. We already have many engaged members, and we are not in urgent need of more funds, but a campaigning group needs to point to the strength of its membership in order to gain credibility for its arguments in a campaign.

Please consider volunteering for half an hour between 10am and 4pm on 11th July to promote the group that you, as members, already feel it is worth belonging to. Express your interest to any Steering Group member you have contact with or use admin@hitchinform.org.uk and your email will reach the person who is co-ordinating arrangements for our stall on the day. And if you are reading this newsletter and you are not already a member of Hitchin Forum – please join us. You have been interested enough to read this far, and the basic demands of membership are very modest – give us £10 for the year and your contact details and you can add your voice to our campaigns, and strengthen our clout!

Former Sailor Boy Pub Redevelopment

An application to change this former pub in Walsworth to a shop was recently granted permission. A further application involves additional residential development above and behind the pub. Hitchin Forum has written to NHDC expressing concern about the personal security of future residents of the new flats above the shop as access will all be from the rear of the building; the bland frontage which would result from the proposed extension of the existing building, diminishing its individual identity; and the loss of characteristic features such as the chimneys on the existing building, particularly as this building forms part of the setting of a Grade II listed building next door, one of only two such in Walsworth.

Diary Dates

Tuesday 26 May: **Town Talk** - 6.30pm, **Hitchin Committee** - 7.30pm

Westmill Community Centre, John Barker Place - A regular opportunity to raise issues in informal discussion with Hitchin Councillors, followed by meeting of local councillors to discuss and decide local matters. Join us for democracy in action in Hitchin!