

## Chairman's Closing Piece

The recent Full Council meeting had an interesting debate on the guidelines for councillors when a planning application is made. Can they visit a site to see for themselves? If a public meeting on a controversial matter is organized, should they attend it? The albatross of the Simons' contract for Churchgate re-emerged, with a reminder of the initial legal advice that councillors should not attend a meeting whose title indicated that it was to "oppose" the contract extension. When this was changed to "discuss" the extension, councillors were advised that they could attend and not be seen to have 'predetermined' the issue. At the time they were attending meetings with Simons which were telling them all the good things about the scheme, and that was deemed okay, even though contractors tend toward propaganda rather than critically evaluating their own marketing pitch. It seemed then that councillors' ability to think for themselves was being denied. The draft guidelines, which had a list of things that councillors should not do are to be revised and will hopefully incorporate the message, as described by Cllr Judi Billing, of the positive role that they can play when disputes arise, as well as giving them more credit for thinking objectively.

Planning processes are of great importance, as Adrian Gurney comments in a following article. Why people think they can ignore or even bypass them is beyond belief. The start of the conversion of The Windmill pub in Charlton has been done without planning permission, something which will now be under increased scrutiny by our council. It is interesting to see that another developer in Wandsworth even demolished a landmark pub in a conservation area, without permission. He has now been ordered to rebuild it, brick by brick. Good to see what force a council can exercise!

The future of our Town Hall and museum remains in limbo until some agreement is reached between the Council and Hitchin Town Hall Limited. Apart from the capital costs, the potential income from the hall concerns those who look at the sums. We hope that both may be open soon, and that both may be used well.

Bancroft Recreation Ground will have some improvements over the next year, hopefully with the splash park and an adventure playground. However the prospect of easy access public tennis remains uncertain, and how much a Multi Use Games Area (MUGA) will compensate for the closure of the old courts remains uncertain. The bowls club still need reassurance about parking provision - close enough so equipment can be taken to the greens.

Our Annual General Meeting is booked for October 20th and I hope that is in your diary. Reports and details will be delivered soon. I am stepping down as chairman, so this is my last piece in this role, but may not be the last word from me.

*Mike Clarke, Chairman*

## The Big Hitchin Autumn Clean Up!

**Following the success of previous Big Hitchin Tidy Ups, Hitchin Forum is organising an Autumn Clean Up around the town:**

The date for your diaries is Sunday 18th October from 10am until 12 noon. As summer now wanes along with all of its festivities, though they have been fantastic and really liven up our town, in contrast I think the footpaths and recreation grounds around the town are in dire need of a good spruce up.

Which leads me to ask how the litter got there in the first place? It always amazes me after visiting countries such as Spain and the gorgeous island of Menorca in particular, just how dirty our great nation really is! I can honestly say that Menorca is one of the cleanest places I have visited and during my stay there I kept asking myself, and my ten year old, what is so different (apart from the weather) about the way people live over there from how we live? There is quite literally not a scrap of litter anywhere, whether pavements, gutters, roadsides or parks!

That is why I am so pleased that we have on board another Hitchin resident who is also passionate (or just bonkers, like Ellie and me) about litter and who wants to do everything she can to stop the litter in its tracks before it hits the ground and pollutes our precious environment. Rachel Campbell has started a campaign to rid our town of as much litter as possible by challenging, and hopefully changing, the attitudes of those who drop litter.

You can follow her campaign on twitter: @cleanuphitchin and Facebook: [www.facebook.com/lovehitchinhatelitter](http://www.facebook.com/lovehitchinhatelitter). In the meantime please do come out and join us on the 18th October in the war against litter and who knows - it might be the last time we all have to do this!!!!

**Lynne Maylin**

## Proposed Hitchin 20mph limits

**Residents in northwest Hitchin have just received details of this scheme from Hertfordshire County Council.**

This signals the start of the informal consultation period. The deadline for comments from residents is 28th September. A further statutory formal consultation will follow before a Permanent Traffic Regulation Order can be implemented. The further timescale is hard to predict due to action being dependent on the results of the informal consultation.

The proposal affects a total of 21 sections of residential road. It is clear that these have been chosen because average speeds are already low, often because the roads are narrow with on-street parking. There are inconsistencies – most

obviously the omission of Periwinkle Lane. Major roads, such as Fishponds Road and Old Hale Way will continue to be subject to 30mph limits with 20mph limits close to schools – an approach that evidence suggests does not reduce accidents.

Although these proposals are a welcome start, a simpler area-wide 20 mph zone would be needed to realise the full benefits in terms of safety, reducing noise and pollution, and encouraging more walking and cycling.

**Bill Sellicks**

## Is the Local Plan System Broken?

**1. The Problems:** There have been a lot of changes to the planning system over the last few years, some of which have started to make things more difficult for local planning authorities to prepare and officially adopt a Local Plan:

- Every authority has to determine its own housing need, but has to do so starting with government figures that are updated each year, so that it is impossible to get the plan to the next stage before the figures are altered.

- Each authority has to co-ordinate with its neighbours to ensure that any surplus housing need is met elsewhere if not in their own area – despite the fact that some neighbours will have already finalised their plan while others are a long way behind.
- As each plan is taken to examination by an Inspector, the latest government guidance is brought to bear requiring yet more revision – most recently on the size of sites where affordable housing is required.

**2. A Hertfordshire Response?** The recognition that we are not alone has galvanised one ex Councillor in Hertfordshire to explore whether local civic and other amenity societies would like to bring joint pressure on the government to make plan preparation less onerous. A meeting was held in early September to which Hitchin Forum was invited by the Hitchin Society. A number of other towns including St Albans, Harpenden, Bishop's Stortford and Hertford were represented. One of the most telling experiences is that of Buntingford which, without a local plan and beyond the Green Belt, has granted permission piecemeal to a flood of housing development applications, without any comprehensive consideration of the infrastructure needs of the town.

**3. Next Steps:** Only 25% of Local Authorities have an up to date plan. The Planning Minister in July said that Councils that have not produced a plan by early 2017 will have the powers taken from them. The government's *Fixing the Foundations* productivity paper suggests that there will be streamlining of the length and process of plan making. As a result of the Hertfordshire meeting, contact has been made with the relevant Parliamentary Select Committee, and a joint letter is being drafted to list the issues that could be addressed to help Local Authorities make progress: for instance, making clear that housing estimates are not automatically out of date every time new projections or demographic data are published. We all hope to sign the letter soon and send it on to our local MPs, Councillors and organisations such as CPRE.

**4. Some local Progress:** In relation to our own Local Plan there has been some useful progress in preparation of the Economic Development Strategy (EDS). We responded as part of *Hitchin Town Action Group* to the first consultation draft in March this year. We expressed concerns about the decline in jobs in the District and the increasing dependence on commuting, and suggested that focused investment in older employment areas (including improved access) could help to achieve change.

In July we were invited to a workshop to develop ideas and identify specific actions. Most of the other attendees were from the business community and education, and we were able with the Hitchin Society and Keith Hoskins to provide strong Hitchin input. As a result we have seen a table of over 20 specific tasks that would be led or assisted by a still to be appointed Economic Development Officer. There will be a final public consultation in the next couple of months to clarify how a marketing strategy will be developed and the actions prioritised.

As we stated in the response to the Preferred Options Report at the beginning of the year it is vital for the prosperity and sustainability of the District for there to be a buoyant local economy. Please let us know if you would like to have the opportunity to be involved in commenting on the EDS. **Adrian Gurney**

## **Cadwell Lane Playing Field Greenspace Action Plan (GAP)**

The Countryside Management Service has produced a Briefing Document for consultation prior to the preparation of the full plan for the period 2016 to 2021, and has invited us to comment.

The area for the proposed GAP includes the recreation ground, i.e. the football pitch and the surrounding areas of rough ground which harbour some interesting flora in addition to the obvious nettles. The wooded area between the recreation ground and the railway line is also

included. The entire river corridor south to Grove Road and north to the rail bridge forms a significant part of the area. Hitchin Forum members have been involved in clearing this river corridor as part of the Hitchin Tidy Up in recent years.

The aim of the GAP is to preserve and enhance the area for everybody to enjoy, and there are three objectives: to promote awareness and interest, to promote and enhance biodiversity and to ensure that standards of maintenance are

sustained. The objectives are broken down further to give more detail, but not presented as a formal plan at this stage. All appear sensible and the third objective addresses how actions will be financed during the period of the plan, which is of obvious concern in the current climate. Increasing public awareness, together with measures to deal with litter and fly-tipping in particular have the potential to make the area very much more attractive. We therefore welcome the plan and are willing to take part in further consultations when the draft plan is published early next year.

We will also suggest that the so-called 'guerrilla path' that runs alongside the river within the plan area be adopted as a public right of way throughout its length (i.e. from Grove Road to Ickleford). For much of its length, it would present a very attractive alternative to the relatively dreary section of the Hicca Way (footpath 26) which runs from the Icknield Way, near Ickleford, to Cadwell Lane near the rail curve. The rail curve dominates this path, and the entrance to the Nationwide Metal Recycling (NMR) yard is not pleasant and often flooded.

Along the informal path, there is an abundance of wildlife, with kingfishers, egrets and water rail

## Scilla

It has been a very sad month with the passing of Scilla Douglas. As was said so well at her funeral by David Howlett, she did an enormous amount for the town (David's tribute is now available on the Hitchin Historical Society website: [www.hitchinhistoricals.org.uk/news/news.php](http://www.hitchinhistoricals.org.uk/news/news.php)). Her funeral was inspiring and superbly organized, as was everything she did!

She had a passion for the history of the town, which can be seen in the book that she produced with Pauline Humphries - *Discovering Hitchin* - and which remains a brilliant source book if you want to find out more about our surroundings. Her subsequent support, as she saw it, of over twenty authors writing their own accounts of different aspects of local history, was superb. I speak as one of those authors, and found out at firsthand how well she managed the process (again working closely with Pauline). I ended up describing her as a type of witch, able to conjure up all sorts of things, and able to get things done that seemed supernatural. But, as Rev Michael Roden said, there may have been some other

among the sightings. There is an excellent blog about this path written by Stuart Hutton who, with volunteers, did much of the work on the path - see <http://purwellvalley.blogspot.co.uk/> However, although passable during winter, the section of the informal path to the west of the NMR site is massively overgrown with head-high nettles at present. NMR also seems to be extending its recycling operations in this direction over the river. There are a number of potential safety issues which I have reported to NHDC. I have contacted Nicholas Maddex (HCC Countryside Access Officer) about adoption of the path. He is supportive, but clearly not optimistic about gaining permission from landowners. He is, however, going to add the suggestion to the Rights of Way Improvement Plan.

The Briefing Document is on the Hitchin Forum website. The deadline for our response is 25th September, and the first draft of the GAP proper will be published for further consultation on 11<sup>th</sup> January 2016 with the consultation period finishing on 5th February 2016. Do contact me at [footpaths@hitchinforum.org.uk](mailto:footpaths@hitchinforum.org.uk) for further information or to make a comment.

**Bill Sellicks**

power - the way that she looked at you, that you knew you could not say no!

She was personally a close friend and also a very keen supporter of Hitchin Forum and worked with us in various ways. She often noticed stuff and prodded us to do something. Amongst many other issues, we recall that she mounted a mini campaign to have the bridge in Bridge Street rebuilt with original materials. She noticed the details that make up an historic town, and worked to draw attention to them. She organized the book about the late Caldicott Centre, produced whilst we were campaigning to retain it.

She left a wonderful legacy and will be missed, but in the words of the poem she chose -

*'You can shed tears that she is gone.....*

*or you can do what she'd want:*

*smile, open your eyes, love and go on'.*

Scilla was ever vigilant and always encouraging us, and others, to work hard for the town, which we will continue to do.

**Mike Clarke**