

HITCHIN FORUM

Caring for our Town

NEWSLETTER

September - October 2018 No. 149

Chairman's Piece

Parking rage broke out in Hitchin during the prolonged hot spell, as people flocked from miles around to the outdoor pool. I am reliably informed that on Sunday 22nd July, while mayhem ruled in nearby streets, just 67 of the Lairage's 306 spaces were occupied at about 11.00am, and only 39 at 3pm. Contrary to the suggestion by one Councillor recently, the extra spaces in the proposed overflow car park would not have helped much. At last year's Public Inquiry into that proposal, I suggested that real time signage on major roads into Hitchin could direct customers to the Lairage at peak times. In addition, signage directing customers to the pool would have been necessary. Parking for up to 3 hours is also refundable for Archers members at the Lairage. If the Council had consulted residents before becoming committed to their proposal, I am sure they would have received a number of constructive alternative suggestions. It is, though, encouraging that NHDC's Projects and Contracts Officer has invited Tony Riley and me to discuss this and other issues soon.

Hardly a week goes by without complaints about brown bins being left unemptied, in spite of the extra payments made by their owners for the removal of garden waste. NHDC (North Hertfordshire District Council) apologists say that the system needs time to settle down and assert that criticism is overstated. The 'consultation' survey questions clearly signalled the Council's commitment to the 'brown bin decision'. NHDC's 2017 Residents' Tracker Survey showed a 13-point decrease in those that agreed NHDC 'makes an effort to find out what local people want'. The accompanying report attributes this largely to the unpopularity of the garden waste arrangements and cynicism on the part of opponents of the Submission Local Plan.

The Council's Consultation Strategy states 'If consultation is to be meaningful, it needs to be undertaken at a point when the mind of the decision-maker is still open to change.' The recent survey on Churchgate regeneration was based firmly on the assumption that it will be 'retail led' despite frequent reports of the predicament of high street retailers. Open-minded, early-stage consultation is so often bungled or, as in this case, absent.

With this in mind, Hitchin Forum's initiative to convene a group, under the umbrella of Hitchin Town Action Group (HTAG), to consider ideas about Churchgate regeneration is, I believe, a model of how early-stage consultation might happen. The group consists of representatives of Hitchin Forum, Hitchin Historical Society and The Hitchin Society with support from Hitchin Initiative. Representatives from Hitchin Business Improvement District (BID) and Hitchin Markets Ltd. also attended. As it evolves, the group will call for ideas from the wider community to put to NHDC for consideration. There is an update following the first meeting of the group later in this Newsletter.

Bill Sellicks

Highover Farm

I have thought for a long time that Highover Farm deserved preservation; it is, after all, the last of Walsworth's farms, and some of the buildings are of some age, having been recorded since the late 13th century. Its location has led me to believe that the site has been occupied since antiquity.

With this in mind, along with the proposed "development" in that quarter of the town, I decided to apply for listing. Anyone can do it, for any building. For England, Historic England is the organisation that handles these things. Applications can be made online, via their website. It isn't that difficult, and there is no fee involved. It is important to gather your evidence in advance though.

I was fortunate with Highover Farm inasmuch as I already had a good deal of information, having been involved in a section for Hitchin Historical Society's new book, *Discovering More About Hitchin*. In addition, another member of the Society had even more information, which she kindly made available to me.

I applied for listing of the farm complex in January 2017. It wasn't a fast process: it was October before the full inspection took place, and April 2018 before the decision was made. The results were good and bad. Unfortunately, only the threshing barn was listed, but that's a lot better than nothing. To quote the listing report:



"The threshing barn at Highover Farm is a particularly well-preserved example of a late-C16 or early-C17 barn, built during a period in which English agriculture was the most advanced in the world. Like many working agricultural buildings, the barn has been subject to some repairs and extensions: an aisle was added to the north-west side in the C18; shelters were added to the south-east elevation in the C19, and the roof covering was renewed. However, these changes do not detract from the architectural quality of the

threshing barn, or affect its impressive spatial character which is one of the most distinctive qualities of this building type. The extensions of the barn indicate the agricultural prosperity of Highover Farm in the C18 and C19. The threshing barn retains a high proportion of its original building fabric, including its queen-post roof structure, timber-framing, and flint and brick walls. The floor-plan of the seven-bay threshing barn survives intact, with a central projecting porch, opposing doors, cobbled threshing floor, and flanking storage bays, exhibiting the threshing process. The threshing barn fully meets the criteria for listing and should be added to the List at Grade II."

Full details are available on the Historic England Website, at:

<https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1452743>

Simon Walker
Hitchin Historical Society

Churchgate Update

How many Churchgate articles have we published in Hitchin Forum newsletters over the past 20 years? An archivist could have great fun, but we all know the recurring theme in the Churchgate saga – the need for public involvement in trying to make Hitchin a better place.

Many would say Hitchin is very fortunate in having two options on the table for the future of Churchgate. On the one hand the draft Local Plan, which will guide development up to 2031, proposes the kind of mega **redevelopment** so loved by Simons, with 4,000sqm of 'town centre uses' sprawling across the three car parks surrounding the Church and the Market and car parking relocated 'somewhere'.

On the other hand, the Council is negotiating with Shearer Property Group for a **refurbishment** of Churchgate and the area around it. This entails moving the Market further away from the shopping core by creating a rather pointless little 'public space' between the shopping centre and the Market. Pivotal to Shearer's proposal is taxpayers taking all the financial risk.

So we have two proposals, one wholly unrealistic given the changing nature of shopping, the other unacceptable in gambling with public finances. Town centres are changing, and rapidly. We really don't know what the retail landscape will look like in ten, or even five years' time. What is emerging is that successful town centres are no longer mainly retail but are becoming social centres.

To look at some of these issues, Hitchin Forum recently convened a meeting of representatives from the *Hitchin Town Action Group*, with presentations looking at different approaches to the opportunities here. One looked at the town centre and ways in which Churchgate could be used to create a better sense of 'place' by creating interesting vistas to support wayfinding and movement through the town. The other considered how the process of looking at options for Churchgate needs to improve, and practical suggestions for redeveloping Churchgate to meet future social and retail demands.

Some of these ideas were presented to the Hitchin Committee in September and were warmly welcomed by Councillors. We are now looking at ways to stimulate wider discussion of the issues within the town and how to feed townspeople's ideas into the Council's decision-making processes. We hope to have more detailed discussions with you at a future members' meeting and will continue to keep you informed.

Ellie Clarke

Planning Application: Rush Green Concrete Batching Plant

A concrete batching plant takes in raw materials (aggregates, sand, cement etc.) and mixes them together to make concrete. The raw materials come in by lorry and liquid concrete leaves in the familiar cement mixer trucks.

Breedon Southern Ltd. operated a plant at Langley Sidings in Stevenage until 2016 when they were asked to vacate it by the landlord. The site was well served by dual carriageways and the A1(M). The search for a new location has resulted in an application to build a plant on the Rush Green Motors scrapyards site on the B656 (London Road) south of Hitchin.

Before a formal application was made NHDC gave pre-application advice. The message was clear: this would be an inappropriate development in the green belt, and highway safety was likely to be an issue. I think we would all agree.

The site seems particularly ill-suited to an operation relying on HGVs to bring bulk materials in and take finished product out. There is no suitable direct access avoiding minor roads to either Stevenage or Luton, which means all of the HGV traffic would need to use the B656, which is narrow, twisty and much used by cyclists and horse-riders. To the south, lorries would have to negotiate the High Street in Codicote, which is often congested and reduced to a single lane of traffic. To the north lorries would arrive at the Three Moorhens roundabout in Hitchin, where there is already an Air Quality Management Area (AQMA) on Stevenage Road, the poor air quality being largely attributable to nitrogen dioxide (NO₂) and particulates from diesel-engined vehicles. A proportion of the extra HGVs would also add to air quality problems at Hitchin's other AQMA, at the Paynes Park roundabout. A start needs to be made on improving air quality at both these sites, not making it worse.

Hertfordshire County Council (the highways authority) would deal with the traffic problems by requiring planning conditions to restrict the number of HGV movements to 54 per day (27 in and 27 out), with only 8 (4 in, 4 out) allowed during peak periods when traffic is queuing in Hitchin and Codicote. Vehicle routings would be restricted to avoid HGV traffic on narrow country lanes. Unfortunately, this is based on typical road capacities and trying to squeeze as much traffic as possible through the road network. We would argue that the environmental and road safety issues are too serious for this development to go ahead. A more suitable site needs to be found.

David Borner

Grove Road Maintenance Works

Did the Grove Road reconstruction affect you? For many of you I think the answer will be yes. This major access road into the industrial estate for HGVs and other vehicles was closed to all traffic for several weeks over August. If we only had another way into the industrial estate from, say, Stotfold Road. This subject may be familiar to you from our September/October 2017 newsletter.

The construction of this road was the subject of a transport study commissioned in June 2017 by Councillors Judi Billing and Derrick Ashley. The aim is to provide additional capacity and remove HGVs from Grove Road, which has been blighted for a number of years by HGVs and scrap metal lorries in particular. To achieve this the principal proposal was a link road from Stotfold Road, banning turning movements between Grove Road and Cadwell Lane and an HGV ban on Grove Road.

The closure of Grove Road in August not only caused traffic delays around the town it also redirected the problem of HGVs to Bearton Road and Old Hale Way where access to Bury Mead Road was opened up via The Mead. This exposed these residential roads to all the noise, damage and unpleasantness suffered by Grove Road. This access was also used by other vehicles contrary to the signage.

At least Grove Road has been reconstructed to withstand the HGVs better. The roundabouts on to the A505 have only been resurfaced and are already showing signs of wear. How long before they are badly damaged again?

The construction of another access road to the industrial estate would eliminate the need for diversions through residential areas and subsequent traffic queues down inappropriate roads. It would also

provide an alternative access to the industrial area by emergency vehicles in the case of a major incident. It may even help to bring new investment into the estate.

However, the creation of this access road may have unintended consequences. It may replace one problem along Grove Road with another, namely a new rat run through the industrial estate. This may be exacerbated by the residential construction proposed for Highover Farm, Arlesey and Central Bedfordshire. The closure of Grove Road has highlighted once more the problem the town has with HGVs and other traffic congestion.

A wider independent traffic survey of Hitchin, to complement the study done in June 2017, is needed to inform any decision on building a new access from Stotfold Road. Of course, had this research been done earlier, the road could have been built when the railway loop was constructed at less cost than being done separately. If a new access road is supported by the outcomes of a survey, perhaps it could be constructed as part of the Highover Farm development.

Ken Chapman

Fly Tip Clearance Remains a Mystery

On the 22nd April, I reported a fly-tip consisting of building materials on the bridleway between the B655 and New Wellbury to the west of Hitchin. I have reported fly tips near this location several times. They have been removed, generally within a week or two, although I have never received any feedback to say by whom. As fly tips go, this was not large but it did involve a large paint tin, the contents of which would almost certainly be harmful to the environment. The tip was still there on 13th July.



The good news is that the tip has now been cleared. I am unclear whether this was by Urbaser, or by the landowner. I sent 3 emails to NHDC's Service team at approximately monthly intervals and had an email exchange with NHDC's Enforcement Officer on the subject. On one occasion, I was told that it was the responsibility of HCC's Right of Way Team. I had to correct that, and received an apology. I spent a total of 40 minutes on hold to Urbaser with assurances, every 20 seconds, that my call was important to them. My two calls were unanswered – clearly not that important. After that I contacted their national centre, and to my surprise was given the phone number of their Area Manager. He invited me to send him further details, which I did, as well as a number of queries. I have received no reply at the time of writing. I was hoping that he would be able to confirm that Urbaser had cleared the tip so that I would be able to spin this as a good news story. I am still hoping to hear from him and I still have no idea who cleared the rubbish.

Communication doesn't seem to be at the top of NHDC's or Urbaser's list of priorities. Those who regularly report fly tipping do so because it harms the environment and makes places less attractive. It can be a signal of crime and 'no-go' areas. If tips are not cleared, more rubbish accumulates. If I report

a fly tip, I would like to know if and when it will be cleared. If the Council and its contractor are not responsible for a site's clearance, I would like to know why not – I then need not waste my (and their) time reporting similar issues in future. If there will be a delay, I can understand if it is due to using resources most efficiently. Modern technology allows much greater responsiveness than I have seen from NHDC over this and other issues. I have made suggestions about how to improve the system. So far, these have been ignored.

Bill Sellicks

Big Green Litter Pick

Yes, it's that time of year again! Sunday 21st October will see teams of volunteers around the town once again, scouring for rubbish in the most likely (and probably the most unlikely!) spots.

Hitchin Forum has organised twice-yearly town-wide clean ups for the past 6 years with increasing success. The stats for our *Big Hitchin Spring Clean* in March were: 93 volunteers (of whom 29 were youngsters), teams working on 12 sites, 149 bags of rubbish filled.

This time we are hoping for an even bigger event and with a difference! We have teamed up with *CleanUp Hitchin* so that not only will volunteers be hunting for litter, they can hunt for a 'little treasure' on each site. Adults note: the 'little treasures' will be enjoyed by adults as much as youngsters! This is possible largely through *CleanUp Hitchin* with support from our MP, Bim Afolami.

Our list of sites to be cleared already includes The Dell, Priory Way bypass, Butts Close, Bancroft Rec, Ransom's Rec, Windmill Hill and Cambridge Road from the station heading to Walsworth. As more volunteers come forward other areas, including footpaths around the town, will be added to this list. We'd love to hear from you if you have noticed an area looking particularly unloved.

It is always a satisfying and fun event (some people even find it relaxing!) and we hope Hitchin Councillors will also turn out in force to help. Hitchin Initiative supports us by providing insurance cover, and NHDC loans us equipment and collects the bags of rubbish promptly the next day. A real 'team effort' and the only such event in Hitchin!

Details are on our website: www.hitchinforum.org.uk but in the meantime, if you are free on Sunday 21st October, why not join us between 10am and 12 noon for positive and practical team work around the town? To sign up, email: litter@hitchinforum.org.uk.

Ellie Clarke

Diary Dates

Sunday 21st October: **The Big Green Litter Pick:** 10am to 12 noon, all around town.

Tuesday 23rd October: **Hitchin Forum AGM and Members' Meeting:** The Members' Meeting will include a talk on 'The Future of Hitchin Town Centre' by Tom Hardy (BID Manager).