

# HITCHIN FORUM

Caring for our Town

## NEWSLETTER

November – December 2018 No. 150

### Chairman's Piece

[The Hertfordshire Traffic and Transport Data Report 2018](#) predicts that, over the period 2016-2031, transport growth in North Hertfordshire will be 22.1%. With frequent congestion, two Air Quality Management Areas in Hitchin due to high pollution levels and the high likelihood that we will see the construction of over 700 homes at Highover Farm alone, it makes sense to abandon our cars and walk, cycle or use public transport wherever possible.

To encourage this 'mode shift', walking and cycling routes must link places we need to access without going out of our way. They should be free of obstruction, have well-maintained surfaces and be well signposted. Not only should they be safe to use, but users must perceive that they are safe.

In addition to the road network, Hitchin and its environs have an extensive network of rights of way. However, the surveys I have recently conducted on some of them have raised a number of problems with our footpaths and bridleways which militate against the move to active modes of transport.

Perhaps the most obvious and frustrating is the number of paths which do not take the pedestrian anywhere useful. Within Hitchin, paths emerge onto busy roads at points where the pedestrian is forced to divert from a direct route to find a crossing. The Paynes Park gyratory system exhibits examples of this. Pedestrians having to take detours are further delayed by waiting until lights change. Bridges under or over the railway line in Hitchin are few and far between, the busiest barely allowing two pedestrians to pass each other. Further afield, the A505 between Hitchin and Luton severs a number of rural footpath and bridleway links for all but the most determined (some might say suicidal). Where paths continue across a major road, there is rarely a sign to warn motorists of the likely presence of pedestrians. This means that the paths remain, but are used relatively infrequently, thus becoming overgrown, further discouraging their use.

A second problem is poor or inconsistent signage. Whatever your view of the final development, one virtue of the Hitchin Hospital site when plans appeared on NHDC's website was, I believed, the cycleway connecting it to Symonds Road, thereby improving the safety of cycle routes between west Hitchin and the station. The cycleway crosses Maxwell's Path. Instead of warning pedestrians on Maxwell's Path of the presence of cyclists, the only signs erected imply that cycling on the cycleway is prohibited!

A third problem is illegal, sometimes reckless, use of bridleways by motorbikes. Although predominantly a rural problem, I have seen mopeds driven along paths in Hitchin. In the rural situation, a solution can be found by the renewal and maintenance of barriers and gates allowing horses, cyclists and pedestrians through.

[North Herts District Council's Local Transport Strategy](#) envisages an increase in walking of 1% per year, and a doubling of cycling journeys (from 2% to 4%) throughout the term of the Local Plan. If our Councils are serious about increasing the uptake of walking and cycling, funding for improvements to our rights of way network needs to be given greater priority.

**Bill Sellicks**

## Steering Group Profiles

At our recent Annual General Meeting the following Steering Group members were elected.

**Maureen Carroll** - has been Hitchin Forum's **Membership Secretary** since 2003. Originally from north London, she has lived in Hitchin since 1978. Having retired from teaching in various Enfield primary schools, she continues to be involved in education, but now as a member of the volunteer team at the British Schools Museum in Queen Street, delivering Victorian and WW2-style lessons to visiting school and adult groups.

Contact: [membership@hitchinform.org.uk](mailto:membership@hitchinform.org.uk).

**Ken Chapman** - worked for Barclays Bank for many years, all over the country and abroad, moving to Hitchin in 1995. Since leaving Barclays, he has worked in the charity sector both as a volunteer and at "Futurebuilders", a government fund set up to make loans to charities. He was treasurer for 8 years of "Living Streets", the UK charity for everyday walking, and is still a director of its trading company. He is our Treasurer.

Contact: [treasurer@hitchinform.org.uk](mailto:treasurer@hitchinform.org.uk).

**Mike Clarke** - is our President, website and twitter administrator. He is Hertfordshire born and bred and has lived in Hitchin since 1981. He is particularly interested in the historical aspects of the town.

Contact: [admin@hitchinform.org.uk](mailto:admin@hitchinform.org.uk)

**Chris Honey** - has been a member of Hitchin Forum since 1996. He examines planning applications for the Steering Group and comments on green issues. He is a designer with a passion for maintaining what is good about Hitchin and only accepting excellent development alongside it.

Contact: [planning.appl@hitchinform.org.uk](mailto:planning.appl@hitchinform.org.uk).

**John Keene** - has lived in Hitchin for 43 years, is now retired and spent most of his working life in the advertising industry. Keene by name and keen by nature, John is very involved in most of our campaigns.

**Jennifer Piggott** - joined Hitchin Forum in 2015 and is the Forum's Newsletter Editor. Jennifer has lived in Hitchin since 1972, teaching in local schools and the University sector before retiring in 2010.

Contact: [newsletter@hitchinform.org.uk](mailto:newsletter@hitchinform.org.uk).

**Bill Sellicks** - is a retired chemistry teacher who moved to Hitchin in 1984 and is our **Chairman**. A keen walker and cyclist, he would like to promote greater use of Hitchin's network of footpaths to reduce congestion on our roads, and see improved facilities for cyclists. He is concerned about development in the greenbelt, and the impact of Luton Airport on the town and surrounding villages.

Contact: [chairman@hitchinform.org.uk](mailto:chairman@hitchinform.org.uk).

**Andrew Wearmouth** - was born in Hitchin and has always lived locally. He is a Chartered Surveyor with 40 years of experience in local government, for the last 20 of which he was Head of Estates at St Albans City and District Council.

## NHDC's Churchgate Proposals - Supporting Contemporary Hitchin?

As we go to press, the latest proposals for a deal between North Herts District Council and Shearer Property Group (SPG) to regenerate Churchgate, Hitchin Market and surrounding area have been published in a report to the Hitchin Committee, Cabinet and Full Council. A fundamental change in the proposals is that SPG are no longer considered for a Joint Venture Partnership, rather for project management of any scheme. The Council would be sole funder and owner of the regenerated scheme. Crucially, funding from the Hertfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) would be needed.

The Council's current plan still includes a facelift of Churchgate, with bigger and better shop units, and refurbishing the Market, moving it away from the shops and creating a new (and somewhat pointless, it has

to be said) open space. Recent changes include four flats above the Etcetera shop (made possible because of rebuilding the Market Place frontage), a glass roof over the Market and a three-screen cinema.

Disappointingly, the focus remains retail, despite ongoing and mounting evidence that shopping in town centres is in decline. These proposals were out of date before they hit the drawing board. Further, the new location of the Market fails utterly to recognise the significance of the Market for a market town, or the evidence that rejuvenated and re-invented markets can kickstart regeneration.

We must rethink the way town centres function. Those that are most successful have transformed themselves into attractive places where visitors can experience a range of services and activities and meet to socialise. That is already happening in Hitchin and this is an opportunity to regenerate Churchgate in terms of function as well as appearance.

Hitchin Town Action Group (set up by Hitchin Forum to co-ordinate views on the Local Plan with Hitchin Initiative, the Hitchin Society and Hitchin Historical Society) has been reconvened, now including Hitchin Markets Ltd and the Business Improvement District. The group recently heard presentations from local professionals who have been exploring the opportunities available in this part of the town centre, in particular improving activity and pedestrian movement to help create a more dynamic space. These 'opportunity concepts' were also presented to the Hitchin Committee on the 13th November and they were strongly welcomed by Hitchin Councillors.

The ideas in the 'opportunity concepts' look at Hitchin as a 'destination' town. Its riverside is a potential asset and pedestrian access and movement can be improved and increased, with an enhanced river walkway and new riverside areas opening up views of The Biggin and other important buildings.

A redeveloped Churchgate and market should support the rest of the town centre, rather than potentially tempting retailers away from their current premises into new units by using initial rent and fitting out incentives. A reduced shopping arcade with glass roof should have units which are totally flexible to allow for changing retail requirements and fluctuating demand. A modern market should be at the centre of any regeneration; vaulted and glass roofed Market and Food Halls spring to mind, with flexible outdoor space for day markets as well as events, and allowing for fine views of St Mary's. A single screen auditorium could provide space for public meetings, music and films/documentaries. A strong residential element would underpin the viability of a redevelopment. Upper floor residential units should be truly affordable with a range of different types including social housing, studio flats, pay-to-rent units and single ensuite rooms with communal facilities for younger residents. A small row of river-front town houses in the Biggin Lane car park would help underpin the scheme financially. There need be no loss of car parking as up to 30 spaces can be created in St Mary's car park and a deck over Portmill Lane east car park could provide another 60 spaces.

This is a generational opportunity and community groups hope these ideas will be considered alongside the Council's. All of the Churchgate area under consideration is public land and there is an argument that a redevelopment should be practical and affordable, but not profit driven; it should substantially cover its costs but not distort its social objectives in order to produce a surplus. Surely the LEP financial underpinning the Council is looking at could be put towards an opportunity that is contemporary and supports what is already happening in Hitchin, rather than working to a template that is out of time and contrary to Hitchin's character and identity as a market town. It would also be in keeping with the Council's own Local Plan policies and our soundings indicate it would have strong community support.

More information about these proposals is available on Hitchin Forum's website - [www.hitchinforum.org.uk](http://www.hitchinforum.org.uk) and at [www.newchurchgate.org](http://www.newchurchgate.org).

**Ellie Clarke**

## Hitchin's Big Green Litter Pick

Our spring and autumn litter picks have featured in Hitchin with increasing popularity since 2012 when just a few volunteers tackled the then former B&Q site to improve the experience of visitors arriving in Hitchin by train. The site was a dreadful welcome to Hitchin, and, to everyone's surprise, in just over an hour we had made a huge difference. The decision was immediately taken to improve Hitchin's environment more widely by involving more residents.

For our autumn event this year Hitchin Forum and Clean Up Hitchin combined forces and, however you look at it, this was our most successful event in six years. We had more teams - 16 in all; double the number of volunteers - 233 in total, including the eldest at 84 and 90 youngsters, with the youngest 10 months old; and 188 bags filled with rubbish.

Many teams reported less rubbish than in past events which is encouraging. The exceptions were The Dell (vigorously cleared of rubbish yet again by a team of exceptional Guides) and Redhill Road and nearby footpaths. As always, it was items that wouldn't fit in the big bags that were the most interesting: a supermarket trolley, bathroom scales, kitchen and bathroom sinks, tents, bicycles (3 of them!), sofa frame, cycling helmet, boogie board, car park barrier, a large billboard for the fair and two sets of bedsprings.

For the first time, this was a 'treasure hunt' as well as a 'litter hunt'. This brought an added dimension and was well-received by all, team leaders, children and parents. We are grateful for the tremendous amount of support from local businesses in donating very worthwhile prizes to be enjoyed by adults and youngsters - everything from tea & cake to ice creams, books and fireworks tickets. Brookers also donated 15 hi viz vests, a great help because there were many more volunteers working along roads.

This was a real community collaboration between local residents and the business community, with strong support from North Herts District Council and Hitchin Initiative.

A photo gallery is on the Hitchin Forum website at:

<https://www.hitchinforum.org.uk/hitchins-big-green-litter-pick-october-21st/> where more information about our spring event in March 2019 will be posted.

**Ellie Clarke**

## North Herts Museum

It is with great joy that we note that there seems to be a final agreement on the sale of 14 and 15 Brand Street to NHDC. This follows an Extraordinary General Meeting of Hitchin Town Hall Limited on October 30<sup>th</sup> and the slight rewording of the Settlement Agreement (all described in the Report to NHDC Cabinet) which will allow the completion of works on the North Herts Museum and the full opening and operation of the Museum. The report to Cabinet on November 20<sup>th</sup> indicated that the works to be done may not be completed until June next year, but at last the public will be able to enjoy the full facilities of the Museum, and the staff can get on with their work! Hooray!!

And congratulations to all who have worked so hard to represent the Hitchin people's interests. Hitchin Town Hall Ltd was set up to ensure the Town Hall was retained. All has not been quite as they hoped it would be, but they have put in a lot of time and effort over the past 8 years and deserve our thanks.

**Mike Clarke**

## Discovering More About Hitchin

I have been moonlighting with Hitchin Historical Society and became involved in the production (but not the writing) of the Historicals' latest book. This was particularly satisfying as this was in part a memorial to Scilla Douglas who died over 3 years ago. She had been a good friend to Ellie and me personally, and an enthusiastic member of the Forum. She had endless energy and spotted issues around the town that needed sorting. We remember her particularly for her published work on the Caldicott Centre and The Arcade, but also for a campaign (with, as ever, Pauline Humphries) on the bridge in Bridge Street. That needed renovating with the original bricks, and it got done. She wore down any opposition.

The ideas for Discovering More About Hitchin arose soon after the publication of Discovering Hitchin (1995), of which she was a co-editor, and came from some unused material and ideas. She made sure that those who could work on it were given the material, and the title, and were clearly expected to get on with it. They did! For anybody with an interest in the town there is a wealth of fascinating information in the book, a 'how did we get here' exercise. It would be invidious to point out any special chapters, they are all good, but I was pleased that the Forum's regular planning applications correspondent, Chris Honey, had taken a good look at the 1960s, an era when cherished buildings were lost, and their replacements were sometimes found lacking. Surprised?

I have spent the past month encouraging people to buy, but now that is becoming urgent, it is almost sold out! Hurry if you want a copy. Advert over....

**Mike Clarke**

## Friends of Butts Close: Liaisons, Liaisons...

No, not those sorts of liaisons, but the last three months seem to have been taken up with networking and lobbying. September saw a meeting with NHDC Officers and James Bliss, Swim Centre Manager, to review how we thought the summer months went for the Close and also for the Swim Centre. The meeting was productive. We fed back that we thought NHDC management of the Close was effective. We also discussed how the Swim Centre parking issue could be addressed by more strongly promoting the Lairage as an alternative. We have made a submission about this to the Hitchin Parking Strategy via Keith Hoskins. We were then asked to advise the Countryside Management Service (CMS) on 2018/19 priorities for the Butts Close Greenspace Action Plan. As we were about to participate in the Big Hitchin Clean-Up we took this opportunity to check all over the Close, and then appraise the work of CMS to date and to suggest what now needs to be done.

Earlier in the year Friends of Butts Close, along with others, had opposed the plan for a car valeting service on Top Field on environmental and nuisance grounds. In October we learnt that the Council had refused permission and an appeal has upheld their decision.

But not everything ran smoothly. Elmside Walk, on the eastern edge of the Close, is a well-used pathway at night as well as by day, and it was the scene of a nasty mugging recently. One of the Friends of Butts Close had noticed that the street lights on Elmside Walk were not working, and he reported this to Herts County Council. James Bliss had also reported the fault, as no doubt had others. But nothing happened. Despite doggedly contacting Officers and County Councillors it took five full weeks before the lights were on again. It seems that there is a fault in their fault report system... Apparently reporting a bank of eight consecutive lights not working can only be done successfully by reporting on each individual defunct light! James is raising a formal complaint with Herts County Council and their lighting contractor, Ringway.

**Tony Riley**

## Hitchin Business Improvement District

At the AGM and Members' Meeting on 23rd October, Hitchin Town Centre Manager Tom Hardy made a presentation on the work of the Hitchin Business Improvement District (BID). Hitchin BID has been operating since 2009, undergoing a renewal by vote in 2014, and Tom explained that it has just published its plan for the next five years, running from April 2019 until April 2024. The BID is run by the businesses (the current Chairman is the customer service manager at Waitrose) and only funds projects and initiatives that other public bodies such as the Council don't deliver.

To produce the new plan, considerable consultation has taken place, not only with the businesses themselves, but also the public, the Council and the Secretary of State for the Department for Housing, Communities and Local Government.

For the plan to be approved, it requires a yes vote from at least 50% of the businesses in the designated area and voters in favour must represent a majority of the Rateable Value. The BID has proved such a success that on the last occasion 86% of the votes favoured renewal. The ballot is run free of charge by the Council, and once a vote in favour of renewal is obtained, contributions of 1.85% of rateable value are collected on behalf of the BID by the Council from every one of the businesses in the BID area.

The new business plan has been set up under four key objectives.

- 1) "Vibrant". To help to create a vibrant town, the BID provides the floral displays, bunting, Christmas lights, promotional events etc.
- 2) "Promoted". The BID is looking to promote the town to a wide reaching audience through a new tourism strategy, online presence and promotional activities.
- 3) "Clean and Safe". The BID employs 3 Town Rangers, who check the CCTV, observe for antisocial behaviour including shoplifting, and clear rubbish including chewing gum on pavements. They also have an electric van with which they collect cardboard from over 200 businesses.
- 4) "Save and Support". The cardboard collection mentioned above saves small businesses considerable sums.

The BID also looks into such matters as joint purchasing and economies of scale in day-to-day needs of the businesses, a central jobs register, and advice to the Council on the needs of the public realm. It was noted that 50 of the businesses have a radio link with each other, and also that use is made by them of social media to help promote the town, to keep each other informed, and to measure the public's shopping experience.

In answer to a question, Tom drew the distinction between the BID and Hitchin Initiative. Hitchin Initiative tends to support specific projects such as the use of The Dell on Walsworth Road and trying to access the London-bound railway platform at Hitchin Station from St Michael's Road.

**Andrew Wearmouth**

### Diary Dates

Tuesday 4<sup>th</sup> December:

Town Talk – 6:30pm and Hitchin Committee – 7.30pm – both at Westmill Community Centre, John Barker Place.