

HITCHIN FORUM

Caring for our Town

NEWSLETTER

November – December 2019 No. 156

Thoughts from the Chair

Following my recent trip to China, I hope members will not mind some observations on the environment, which are rather more global than is usual in these pieces.

Saturday 19th October; we are sitting in our tour bus on a nominally 4 lane toll motorway travelling at about 25mph. There is no obvious lane discipline, and there may, or may not be, a hard shoulder. The M6 toll is nothing like this. There are many such roads everywhere we go, and more being built. Our guide, Janet, is kneeling facing us on the front seat, microphone in hand, talking, apparently unaware of the vehicles which swerve in front of our coach, rarely signalling their intentions. We are travelling from Suzhou to Shanghai. It's only about 60 miles and would normally take about 2 hours. It's going to be longer - we will be late for lunch.

Janet tells us about the Cultural Revolution. Her parents, both teachers, and therefore bourgeois, were sent to a rural area to be 're-educated' along with their two children. Her mother, imprisoned for writing to relatives in Taiwan, committed suicide when Janet was four. On 19th September 1976, after 43 days of continuous rain, throughout which the 10-year-old Janet was required to plant wheat, a local politburo member made an announcement. Mao had died. The Cultural Revolution was over. Janet taught herself English by listening to the radio, worked hard at school and went on to study English at the second most prestigious language school in Beijing. She became a tour guide and university lecturer.

Less than 50 years later, the Chinese aspire to the '4 Cs' - a career, credit, a condo and a car. The condos are everywhere. Arranged in estates of perhaps 10 identical high rises of 30 floors, their monotony is disrupted only by the cranes of the developers. They are expensive. Green space is rare, birds rarer. Janet illustrates the attitude to cars by an anecdote. A colleague, who lives 10 minutes' walk from the university, recently bought a car. He now drives to work. The journey time is half an hour. We ask Janet what she considers to be the major challenges facing China today. She says corruption, trade wars and climate change.

Focusing on Janet's unexpected, sad, yet uplifting story, I failed to notice that the far carriageway had been clear of traffic for some distance. The explanation became obvious when a large truck, slowly pulling an object perhaps 30 metres long, hove into view. The phalanx of following vehicles tailed back for many miles. I gradually realised that the object was a wind turbine blade. Although coal fired power stations are still being built at an alarming rate, the transition to renewables is starting.

The BBC website reports that the Chinese government has a target of more than a million fuel cell vehicles on Chinese roads by 2020. If that is achieved, it is impressive, and superior to the UK's efforts in that respect, although it will not impact on the horrific congestion. The Chinese current obsession with the car is understandable after decades of impoverishment. We share that obsession, but I would suggest our excuse, whatever it is, is rather lame by comparison.

Bill Sellicks

Steering Group Profiles

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

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 and is also acting as Membership Secretary.

Contact: treasurer@hitchinforum.org.uk & membership@hitchinforum.org.uk

Mike Clarke - is one of our three Co-chairs, 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 for website - admin@hitchinforum.org.uk & chairman@hitchinforum.org.uk

Neil Dodds - is a retired chartered Civil and Structural engineer and is currently a volunteer for a number of local charities. He has lived in Hitchin since 1984, during which time he has campaigned against development of Hitchin's green spaces. He was a founder member of Keep Hitchin Green (an early forerunner of Hitchin Forum) and was an objector at the recent Butts Close access road inquiry.

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@hitchinforum.org.uk

Stuart Howarth - moved to Hertfordshire from the Midlands in 1985 and has lived in Hitchin since 1992. He worked in the space industry in Stevenage as a spacecraft designer until he retired in early 2019. His family includes five pupils at three of Hitchin's schools. His primary interests and concerns are for the environment and the climate emergency.

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@hitchinforum.org.uk

Bill Sellicks - is a retired chemistry teacher who moved to Hitchin in 1984 and is one of our three Co-chairs. 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@hitchinforum.org.uk

Brian Sykes - began his working life as a teacher of literature and language in this country and other parts of the world and subsequently changed direction to the training of managers and awarding of qualifications in management. He has been a Governor of Hitchin Boys' School, including as Chair, Chair of Watford Chamber of Commerce, and is also a Trustee of a Residential Care Home in Hertfordshire. He is a relatively new member of the Forum and is impressed by the atmosphere of goodwill that pervades all it does. Brian is one of our three Co-chairs. Contact: chairman@hitchinforum.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.

Review of the Hitchin Town Hall and District Museum Project

For those who like watching long running drama series, the completion of the Town Hall and Museum project was perhaps sad – it had attracted attention, provided many twists and turns, and left everyone guessing how it would end, and who the true villains were. The heroes were clearly the museum staff who had to endure the delays and uncertainty, and carry on, regardless.

The formal review was arranged by the Council with the appointment of an external Chair – independent, albeit a Hitchin resident. The review was a left-over from the Council’s Task & Finish Group on Larger Projects which was held from 2016 to 2017. That was organized by the North Herts District Council (NHDC) Overview & Scrutiny (O&S) Committee. I was one of a few ‘public’ attenders at the Task & Finish Group, mostly to see what they made of the Churchgate project. That became very frustrating as the then chairman decided that the ‘public’ could not comment on the project, and I quote – it “...was not intended to be an enquiry body looking to criticise past projects, nor was it intended to be a scrutiny exercise. Instead it was an exercise to see what the Council could learn from its past projects. It would appear that the four public speakers aimed to criticise the Churchgate project, using the Task and Finish Group as a vehicle to do so. This sort of criticism was not part of the Task and Finish Group brief and it was primarily for this reason that public participation was refused during the early stages of the review, when considering Churchgate.” How can any public authority improve when it seeks to exclude those who might be misguided enough to criticize??

Fortunately, the Town Hall & Museum Review had a very different ethos. The Chair - John Richardson - and the Councillor members actively encouraged all to comment, and provided an open invitation for the ‘public’ as well as NHDC and Hitchin Town Hall (HTH) Ltd and HTH Finance Ltd to have their say. The Report was prepared and then presented at the NHDC O&S Committee on October 23rd. Both the Report and the O&S Committee’s decisions about it are available on the Council’s website (<https://tinyurl.com/tewpnde>). The Report recommends that ‘dedicated Project Management is put in place that is adequately resourced’. It recognized that Officers can be overworked and (due to austerity imposed by central government) under resourced. Officers seemed to insist that as they complied with ‘Prince 2’ (**PR**ojects **IN** **C**ontrolled **E**nvironments) protocol everything was hunky dory. But somehow that came over as a tick box exercise. Mediation was another focus of the Report – personalities, differing aims and definitely different readings of the protocols (including whether minutes of meetings should accurately reflect the agreements made?) – all came up, but not enough was done to bridge the divide.

A major concern from the Committee was that the ‘Leadership Team’ of Chief Executive, his Deputy and the Strategic Directors had added an appendix defending their Officers’ actions and basically questioning anything that could be construed as critical of the Officers. Sadly defensive, and easily interpreted that they are not in the business of learning how better to perform their public duties.

And so HTH Ltd did not eventually take on management of the Town Hall on behalf of the community, but their efforts did stop the Town Hall from being managed by a private operator for profit. They also procured a much better frontage for the Museum. HTH Finance did act as middlemen and saved that frontage from a developer and did eventually persuade the Council to buy it. It was surprising that the Hitchin based Chair of the Review Panel and the Hitchin Councillor on the panel were not aware of HTH Ltd representing the community, as I believe they did. Hitchin Initiative set up HTH Ltd and I thought the Directors had made good efforts in informing the public of what they were doing with press releases to the Comet (which NHDC criticised).

Maybe we all need to try harder, next time. The NHDC Cabinet meets to discuss all this on December 17th. Look out for the agenda and reports on its website.

Mike Clarke

Members' Meeting following the AGM, 4 November 2019

A presentation was given by Stuart Howarth and Bill Sellicks about NHDC's Cabinet Panel on the Environment, and "Net Zero 2050", a conference convened by Bim Afolami MP on 20th September at Rothamsted, Harpenden.

At the NHDC Annual Meeting on 21st May 2019, the Council agreed to declare a "Climate Emergency". A "Cabinet Panel on the Environment" was created to advise the Council on an action plan to attain zero carbon emissions by 2030. In practice, however, this may need to be "net" zero emissions.

The meetings of the Panel are intended to be held in public, and the first was held on 11th September. Seven environmental groups were allowed to speak, covering a range of issues that the Panel was recommended to consider. Five further meetings are now proposed, as follows:

1. 15th October, to discuss Planning issues,
2. 28th November, transport and air quality,
3. 9th January 2020, waste management,
4. 5th March 2020, biodiversity,
5. Date and subject to be decided.

The Rothamsted conference had three main keynote speakers, and was intended to

- a. focus minds on policy changes that may be needed,
- b. develop a practical set of medium-term proposals for government consideration, and
- c. ensure that the public voice is heard.

The first speaker was Baroness Brown of Cambridge. She discussed how carbon emissions are measured, and explained that "territorial emissions" (as opposed to a country's "carbon footprint") are used as they are identified by the country of origin rather than through imports etc. Emissions from the UK have substantially reduced in recent years, but the trajectory of reduction, although close to target, is at present not yet sufficient to attain net zero by 2050.

The main producers of carbon emissions were identified as transport 31%, business 27%, residential 22%, agricultural 10%, waste management 4%, and exports and "other" 3%. It was noted that transport and its emissions are currently increasing and this is an urgent focus.

Baroness Brown drew attention to the importance of peatlands. As a statistic, UK peat moors lock up more carbon than all the UK and French forests combined, and reinstatement and preservation of these moors is therefore vital. If they dry out or burn, the carbon locked in can escape.

The second speaker at the conference was Dr Ben Caldecott, an Oxford academic. He discussed the subject of "stranded assets", being assets that are reduced in value because of changes in legislation, regulation, social norms etc. Examples are coal mines that used to be extremely valuable, but the product is no longer wanted; houses that were valuable but lack modern insulation etc. The principle applies to the whole range of assets, including infrastructure, agriculture, and property. There is a resistance to change called "optimism bias" in part driven by a natural desire not to waste the asset – "loss aversion".

Dr Caldecott posed the question of how long it will be before renewables take up all new demand and reduce the need for fossil fuel. Exxon have indicated that it will be 49 years, and Statoil (another American petrochemical company) suggest 3 years, so opinions are widely at variance.

The third speaker was Dan Meredith of E.ON, who discussed the need for power and its production. He suggested that attaining net zero by 2050 would need a 15-fold increase in renewables, and considerable improvements in energy efficiency. Heat pumps for property are extremely efficient, but at present there is insufficient expertise by most installers to maximise benefits, and installation costs are high.

Another alternative is to mix existing gas supplies with hydrogen, although the problem with this is that hydrogen is extremely difficult to contain and will find any possible leakage. Hydrogen is easily produced by electrolysis of water using electricity from renewable sources. A pilot study using a 10% hydrogen/90% natural gas mix is currently being carried out at Keele University.

Mr Meredith posed the question of who should pay for innovation. Currently, any research and innovation is paid for by consumers through their gas and electricity bills, which includes the lowest paid in society. He suggested such work should be funded by central taxation, as that is levied on a progressive basis through tax bands.

There were further points raised for discussion. Should OFGEM have a role on climate, and not just be limited to financial matters? Shouldn't people know and understand their carbon footprint? Can bio-energy plants be used to remove atmospheric carbon?

The conference produced two thoughts that Bim Afolami MP will take to the Chancellor. One is the suggestion that there should be an Air Passenger Duty on internal UK flights, which should be ring-fenced to public transport provision, and the other is that there should be graduated VAT levied on different building materials dependent on their carbon footprint.

It was in all a thought-provoking presentation, which your reporter only hopes he fully understood!

Andrew Wearmouth

The Big Hitchin Autumn Tidy Up

Once again, our October litter day was very successful. The statistics: 215 volunteers, half of them youngsters, worked on 15 different sites, collecting 105 bags of rubbish and 60 bags of recyclables. For the first time, "ploggers" – joggers picking up litter – linked in with our event and were so pleased with the results that they hope to do this on a regular basis. And the weather was remarkably kind, given the almost continuous wet and windy conditions during previous weeks.

The most interesting items found included a metal moneybox from a local coffee shop which had been burgled a few days earlier. Amongst the usual shopping trolleys, car tyres and chairs, there was a lawn mower, a bike, a retirement home sign, a full-sized lamp post and a samurai sword in its sheath which was handed over to the police (who just happened to be passing by on patrol!).

Some fly tipping occurred at one site overnight and thanks to a very sharp-eyed volunteer who had photographed and recorded things meticulously, we were able to clear up the misunderstanding with the council's contractors that we hadn't left a fridge or buggy etc. It is perhaps surprising that in seven years of running these events, there hasn't been more of this and discussions will no doubt follow on how to discourage it in future.

Once again, we had tremendous support from external organisations. Clean Up Hitchin provided 'treasures' to be found on the family friendly sites which was very well received by both children and parents once again! North Herts District Council have given us 75 pickers to hold exclusively for Hitchin use and these are being stored, along with over a dozen hi viz vests, by the Hitchin Initiative office. As in previous litter days, the Council provided us with rubbish and recycling bags and once again promptly collected the results of our efforts the following morning. Hitchin Initiative provided us with insurance cover and for the first time we were able to use their office in the town centre as the equipment depot. Less Waste Hitchin also provided practical and logistical help and hope to do so again. As the event has grown, so has the external support, which is most gratifying.

But the real measure, from our point of view, is that it was enjoyed by everyone and particularly families once again; it really seems to be a lovely morning activity for young families and is incredibly satisfying for everyone. An event that is great fun, immensely sociable, educational for youngsters and improves the town's environment – what's not to like? A photo gallery is available on the Forum website at <https://www.hitchinforum.org.uk>.

Finally, having organised this event for seven years, I am pleased to report that in future Bill Sellicks will take on responsibility for it, with support from Brian Sykes. It is pleasing to know that it is now a Hitchin fixture and will continue, under the Hitchin Forum umbrella, with growing support from external groups and organisations.

Ellie Clarke

'Future Luton' – Plans to Increase the Capacity of Luton Airport

Statutory Consultation

London Luton Airport Limited (LLAL) has started the process of Statutory Consultation on its proposals to increase the capacity of the airport so that it is able to handle 32 million passengers per annum (mppa) by 2039. It went through a process of consultation in 2018, but this was not required by law. The result of that process was that it reduced its original capacity number from 38mppa to 32mppa.

Unlike the process by which the current phase of expansion (to 18mppa) was ultimately approved in 2014, approval of the plans will not be decided by Luton Borough Council (the owners of the airport), but by the Secretary of State for Transport, since the expansion is on a sufficiently large scale that the project is regarded as a 'Nationally Significant Infrastructure Project' (NSIP). Once the current Statutory Consultation is complete, there will be a period of further engagement and feedback review in early 2020. It is intended that the application will be submitted to the Planning Inspectorate in mid 2020, with the final decision resting with the Secretary of State for Transport, following a recommendation from the Inspectorate. Permission, if it is granted, will be in the form of a Development Consent Order (DCO) and is anticipated in 2021.

Main features of the proposals

The proposals have the aim of maximising the capacity of the airport by creating a new terminal and other alterations, wholly within the existing footprint of the airport. This is supported by a programme of road modifications to ease anticipated increases in traffic, both during the construction phase and afterwards during completion and operation of the Luton Direct Airport Rail Transit (Luton DART). There will be additional car parking. There is no intention to build another runway.

The issues

The airport's main justification for continued demand-led expansion is that its activities are central to the economic well-being of the area. Members will make up their own minds, but it is clear that if implemented, the proposals come at a considerable environmental cost, which the airport is keen to persuade us will be mitigated as far as is possible. I will focus on just three of those environmental issues, but there are many other areas of concern ranging from local air pollution to impacts on the Chilterns Area of Outstanding National Beauty which will be significant to many.

It does not take an in-depth analysis of the projected carbon emissions figures to see that about 80% (which result from take-off, cruise and landing) will not be mitigated. The impacts from these emissions will only be reduced if operators switch to more efficient aircraft (which is not happening as quickly as the airport said it would prior to 2014) and use more sustainable fuel (some airlines are using fuels derived from waste). LLAL admits that it has no direct control over the activities of the operators.

Noise will increase. We have recently seen how the airport prioritises profit over well-being and quality of life in its attempts to relax a key noise condition because it has failed to control the rate of increase in flights. Complaints about noise from Hitchin residents are on the increase - from 21 complaints in 2012 to about 70 in 2018. Changes in flightpaths could mean that aircraft fly within narrowly defined 'tubes'. This could have the result that residents in some locations could experience more frequent over-flights, whilst others notice hardly any. Flightpath changes will be decided by a completely separate process, so there is currently no way of anticipating who might be affected.

The focus on providing efficient public transport for passengers and employees has completely ignored the needs of the approximately 12% travelling through Hitchin by private car. This will impact on Hitchin's two Air Quality Management Areas. The only road modifications proposed for Hitchin are road widening to extend two lane approaches to the Three Moorhens, library and A505/Pirton Road roundabouts.

How to find out more and have your say.

There are a number of exhibitions which are being held in the coming weeks, although Hitchin's was held on Tuesday 5th November. There is another chance to see the exhibition at The Broadway Hotel, Broadway, SG6 3NZ on Tuesday 26th November between 4pm and 8pm. Even if you do not attend an exhibition, all documentation is available online at <https://futureluton.llal.org.uk/>. **The consultation will finish on Monday 16th December.**

Scrolling through the documents, you will find a page that is headed '**Main Statutory Consultation documents**' of which there are four, all listed with links. I have found the '**Guide to Statutory Consultation**' the most useful of these. A feedback form is included, although Hitchin Forum's response will be in the form of a letter. For those who wish to scrutinise more technical documents, these are available on a page headed '**Detailed technical documents supporting Statutory Consultation**'. Perhaps the most helpful of these is the **Preliminary Environmental Information Report Volume 1: Main report**. When we have finalised the Forum's response, it will be available on the Forum website.

Bill Sellicks

Our Town. Your Say

The contribution to this issue comes from member David Borner. We would like to remind members that the views expressed in this feature are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of Steering Group or the Forum as a whole. We welcome replies from other contributors.

A Hitchin Bypass

Jeremy Burrowes' article in the last newsletter (Transport Issues in the 2020s) contains a good discussion of the pros and cons of building a Hitchin southern (A505/A602) bypass and concludes that one should be built. As the article states, building a bypass would be controversial. Presented with the same evidence, others might conclude that a bypass should not be built, and it is this opposite side of the argument that this article explores a little further.

Building a bypass can sometimes reduce congestion, sometimes not. A good general discussion can be found in **Bypasses Don't Work - Campaign for Better Transport** (produced by The Campaign for Better Transport - <https://tinyurl.com/yq39st7p>). The question for us is what the impact of a Hitchin southern (A505/A602) bypass would be.

Hitchin's congestion problem is not a simple one where any one project, even spending over £50m on another bypass, is likely to provide anything other than a partial and temporary solution. A southern

bypass would only deal with the A505/A602 route, whereas the town has six major roads entering and leaving.

Beyond Transport Infrastructure: Lessons for the future from recent road projects (Final Report for CPRE and the Countryside Agency, 2006 - <http://pages.today/transport2>) contains some interesting case studies. The following extract is probably pertinent to the problem in Hitchin.

“In towns with bypasses, such as Newbury and Polegate, the new roads did significantly reduce the town centre traffic levels. However, these reductions were not as large as originally forecast and there has been subsequent re-growth in traffic levels on the bypassed roads. The net effect in combination with the new road is generally a considerable overall increase in traffic.”

This phenomenon is often called induced traffic, and results from the tendency of drivers to fill new capacity with extra journeys rather than allow the initial reduction in congestion to persist.

You no doubt have your own views as to whether this is likely to be the result in Hitchin, views which are probably as accurate as the complex, expensive and inaccurate computer modelling undertaken to justify road-building schemes.

The effective long-term solutions to congestion are well known, but all too rarely implemented: restriction of road vehicle use by means such as congestion-charging, good (and cheap) public transport, proper cycling infrastructure and a pleasant environment for walking. While our government and councils often pay lip service to these things, progress is often virtually indistinguishable from doing nothing.

However, there are some hopeful signs. Hertfordshire County Council is consulting on enhancements to the bus network. Our new Thameslink train service allows fast and easy access to central and south London, Surrey and Sussex. Further afield, the Nottingham workplace parking levy is helping to fund better public transport and could be replicated here.

With new technology, it is perhaps the simplest things which have the most potential. The e-bike is now a common sight on the streets of many European towns and cities but has yet to make much impact in the UK. We need to catch up.

A (second) Hitchin bypass is not a new idea, and one of the reasons it has never been built is that there is not a good place to put it. The likely routing would carve through particularly attractive green belt land. Worse, the road might need to be funded by development in the same area, or lead to development at a later date. We have all driven along bypasses edged with urban sprawl and warehouses. Is this what we want?

Attitudes are changing on urban pollution and climate change, with North Herts District Council and Herts County Council both declaring climate emergencies. In that context, and with a low pollution vehicle fleet many years away, it makes little sense for them to be adding to road capacity and traffic. In the meantime, if the highways engineers have some spare time on their hands they could always build the North Herts Cycle Network planned back in 1999.

Finally, an interesting study of ways to reduce congestion and pollution in urban areas can be found in **Urban Congestion Inquiry for Parliamentary Transport Committee by Smarter Cambridge Transport, 2016** (<https://tinyurl.com/ycjq9q5k>). This cautions against one-hit heavy engineering projects, including new roads, which are likely to be a disappointment.

David Borner