

HITCHIN FORUM

Caring for our Town

NEWSLETTER

January – February 2020 No. 157

Thoughts from the Saddle

My mind has turned even more to cycling since my daughter suggested I get a mountain bike. This is a misnomer – they rarely get taken up mountains, so mine was renamed a molehill bike. And then I discovered the delights of the Letchworth Greenway – navigable even after heavy rain, much more so than the otherwise delightful hills to Pirton, Preston and beyond.

Much as I enjoy the off-road adventure, carefully sticking to the bridleways which radiate from the town, the big issue seems to be about how to improve the cycling experience on our local roads. One of the issues arising from the climate and air pollution concerns (and how to get a healthier body) is about how to get more people out of their cars and maybe on their bikes, and then how to make their journeys safer.

Some years ago I became aware of the '20's Plenty for Us' campaign – seeking a 20mph limit (for cars and bikes) on residential streets. My encounter with a long truck on Fishponds Road, which raced me to a narrow gap by a traffic island, spurred my interest in curbing traffic speed, and safeguarding myself, in town. Attendance at a County Council scrutiny review on this subject was somewhat disappointing – a speed restriction of 20mph was seen as awkward, as the police would not be able to adequately enforce this, and zones would require too many expensive traffic calming measures. The police were said to be unenthusiastic with the consequent difficulty in taking on such additional work. Maybe it is because they foresaw the reduction in their numbers which austerity brought in.

A small 20mph scheme in the Bearton Road area was welcomed, but it is a very small scheme compared with other towns and cities. The County's Urban Transport Plan of 2011 did sketch out a number of potential improvements for cyclists in this town, but they do not seem to have materialized. The County Speed Strategy of 2014 gave little impetus to change. A new County Speed Strategy was due out last month but is yet to be sighted.

Hertfordshire County Council (HCC) has just produced new plans for consultation – the North Central Growth & Transport Plan – with very impressive presentation on its website. This includes a statement that there is “a lack of safe and attractive cycling and pedestrian routes”, and “All new residential streets should have a design speed of 20mph. Where there is strong local support, or residential streets form a part of cross-town walking and cycling routes, consideration of a 20mph zone or limit should be brought forward.” All good intentions for the future. The consultation ends on March 20th. Look for more on our website in the weeks ahead.

Cycling UK campaigns on such things and amongst their messages for last year was how to raise awareness of the Dutch Reach – whereby drivers open car doors with their left hand, forcing them to turn and look at the road to their right. 35% of drivers do not look for cyclists when opening the door, leading to about 500 accidents in this country each year. Their campaign for 'Cycle Safety: Keep it Simple' divides into sections - Safe roads and junctions, Safe road users, Safe speeds, Safe vehicles and Safe systems (www.cyclinguk.org/) and provides a number of ideas which can only make cycling a better option. Potholes are a frequent hazard – HCC are very good at responding to reports and filling in holes, they just need to be told about it – easily reported on the HCC website.

I read that a bike first traversed the streets of Hitchin in 1869. I cannot work out how cars moved in and displaced the bikes. Can someone explain?

Mike Clarke

Our Town. Your Say

The contribution to this issue comes from our MP Bim Afolami. 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.

If you wish to contribute, please email the editor at: newsletter@hitchinforum.

Supporting our high streets

Hitchin boasts one of Britain's most idyllic and spectacular town centres. Whilst I am slightly biased, this is not just my opinion, Hitchin's reputable high streets are admired nationwide (having made it to the finals in the Great British High Street Awards 2019!), and I'm committed to keeping it that way.

Despite the amazing efforts of our local businesses, as with town centres up and down the country, the pressures of online shopping and large out of town shopping centres are still weighing heavily. Over the last few years there have been various national initiatives to rejuvenate our town centres, such as the Government's 'Towns Fund' of £350 million – a fund designed to support local areas' plans to level up high streets and town centres to be fit for the 21st century. However, we still have a way to go.

I will continue to work closely with the Government to see what we can do to help develop Hitchin town centre (including the renovation of Churchgate). The aim is to attract more people to Hitchin's high streets and support our local businesses by increasing the amount of money that is spent in the area. A better connected, digitally enabled, more sustainable high street needs to emerge. However, the best results for our local town centre will come from local people, that's why it is important that we shop locally and support our High Streets.

Bim Afolami MP

Butts Close Update

On March 29th Butts Close will make a tiny contribution to reducing the UK's net carbon emissions. A party of Friends of Butts Close, local families and other green-fingered people will plant over 100 saplings on the Close as part of the Woodland Trust's commitment to increasing Britain's population of trees. As their Director, John Tucker, said:

"Tree planting has never been higher on the social and political agenda. From school children to MPs, people are waking up to the message that trees are a big part of the solution to tackling climate change. Trees absorb carbon dioxide and produce oxygen, as well as filtering out other harmful pollutants from the air that we all breathe. Quite simply we need more of them."

Since 2010 the Trust has sent out over 9.6 million free trees to schools and community groups, so planting our 100+ saplings along the west-facing edge of the Swimming Centre is just one miniscule action. But for us there will be three additional outcomes:

- increasing the overall biodiversity of Butts Close,
- improving the amenity value of the Close by creating a green hedge line which will complement the existing hedge to the south of this perimeter,
- deterring the painting of graffiti on the existing wall surfaces – perhaps...

Friends of Butts Close will be sending out more details after a planning meeting in early February, so get ready to wash your gardening boots and clean off your spades!

Tony Riley for Friends of Butts Close

Big Hitchin Spring Clean

Brian Sykes and I are taking over the organisation of the twice yearly Hitchin tidy-ups on behalf of Hitchin Forum from the indefatigable Ellie Clarke.

We are sure that you would want to join us in thanking Ellie for her contribution in starting the litter picks back in 2012, and working so hard, firstly with Judith Gurney, then Lynn Maylin and, more recently, along with Rachel Campbell of Clean Up Hitchin and Anni Sander of Plastic Free Hitchin. The events have grown to make them a popular and fun family activity for many in Hitchin.

The spring event this year will be held on Sunday 29th March from 10am to 12 noon.

We have set up a dedicated email address for litter-picks so that we can automate some of the process. If you would like to get involved and have not taken part before, please drop us an email to: hflitterpick@gmail.com.

Bill Sellicks



Membership Reminder

Many thanks to all the members who paid their subscriptions so promptly or decided to complete standing order authorities, and a gentle reminder to those who have not yet got round to paying, that subscriptions are due each November 1st.

If your renewal form has gone out with the Christmas wrapping paper, you'd like to make a direct bank transfer, or if you can't remember whether or not you have paid, please get in touch with me on: membership@hitchinform.org.uk.

We recently asked members to let us know if in future they would prefer to receive newsletters in electronic format only. Just under half have now decided on this option. We shall continue to have some copies printed every time; if at any time you wish to change your choice, please let me know.

Ken Chapman (Membership Secretary)

Highover Farm Development

Some background

In its response to the Submission Local Plan, Hitchin Town Action Group (HTAG), incorporating Hitchin Historical Society, the Hitchin Society and Hitchin Forum, guardedly accepted the inclusion of Highover Farm amongst the strategic housing sites. One reason for our acceptance of the development was because it would be subject to the preparation of a site masterplan. HTAG urged that there should be early involvement of local people in the development of the plans.

Subsequently, following an exhibition in June 2017, Hitchin Forum submitted some comments about the proposed development, comprising 700 houses, a primary school and other buildings, on what is presently Green Belt land. Our comments highlighted traffic issues (both safety and congestion concerns with regard to local roads), station access, and what we perceived to be the premature nature of the application given the status of the Local Plan at the time. We urged that broad consultation with a number of bodies and residents needed to take place in order to produce solutions to the problems highlighted. In the autumn of 2019, we were contacted by a representative of Rapleys – the Consultancy acting as agents on behalf of the owners (Bellcross Homes) and the applicant (Gallagher Development Group) - and invited to discuss our concerns with them.

Meeting with HTAG representatives

The meeting took place on December 2nd last year and involved six members of Hitchin Forum, together with members of the other groups comprising HTAG, and representatives of Rapleys, Gallagher Developments, and Bellcross. A Planning Officer from North Hertfordshire District Council (NHDC) was also present. I think the general consensus was that our concerns, which were wide-ranging and detailed, were taken seriously. Indeed, some of our questions not answered at the time have received answers since the meeting. A full set of minutes of the meeting, which give more detail, will be available on the Forum website. What follows is an attempt to summarise some of the issues raised.

Access modifications

We learnt that the scheme has been modified since the exhibition; the proposal now involves access to what is to be the main development via a new roundabout on the Stotfold Road, but with a proportion of the houses being accessed via High Dane. The 30mph speed limit on Stotfold Road will be extended to the north. As originally envisaged, the estate will not provide a through route between High Dane and Stotfold Road, but there will be a 'bus gate' (which will also provide access for emergency vehicles).

Traffic issues

Transport studies involving a number of simulations have been completed. The (hardly surprising) conclusion of these seems to be that congestion at the junctions of both Stotfold Road and Woolgrove Road with Cambridge Road would not be improved by the development, but that differences between what would happen with or without the development would be imperceptible. We raised issues regarding anomalies in some traffic flow figures appearing in the studies and claims that accident statistics along the Stotfold Road were 'typical of those expected in comparable urban situations' (the National Speed Limit applies along much of Stotfold Road – it is hardly 'urban'). We have received a reply about the traffic flow figures in general terms, basically attributing the anomalies to the sophistication of the transport modelling which takes into account developments over a wide area beyond the site. It is impossible to say more about this without detailed knowledge of the assumptions and methodology of the modelling.

There was discussion of the bus service (the proposal is that routes 81 and 81a would be extended to travel through the site between High Dane and Stotfold Road) with concern expressed that it would not

be long before bus companies would claim that services were unprofitable. In an answer supplied after the meeting we heard that the intention is for services to be subsidised for 5 years.

In the plans, there is no mention of the access road from Stotfold Road to the industrial estate, which was the subject of an in-depth study by Hertfordshire County Council in 2017. The study indicated that it was feasible. If built, this could reduce HGV traffic elsewhere in Hitchin and possibly help to mitigate the impact of the additional 700 dwellings on nearby junctions with the Cambridge Road. Hitchin Forum's Steering Group has set up a working group which will investigate this.

Housing mix

The proposed housing mix was confirmed as 40% on-site affordable provision, comprising 65% social and 35% intermediate, amounting to 280 affordable units in total. In answer to a question about design standards, we heard that these would conform to building regulations, i.e. the required legal minimum, but which it could be argued, should recognise that NHDC has declared a climate crisis and therefore that the homes provided should be constructed to more exacting standards to ensure greater sustainability.

The status of Highover Farm

Highover Farm is owned by Bellcross and currently let to a tenant farmer. It could become available for a separate part re-development or conversion scheme as only the Barn is listed.

Timescale

There appears to be some pressure being applied for an early determination of permission by NHDC. The argument is that the outstanding issues in NHDC's Local Plan announced by the Inspector last autumn do not apply to this site, so the applicants consider that a hearing can be carried out by April this year. The developers argue that, since NHDC can only demonstrate 1.3 years' worth of housing supply, to delay would mean that there is a risk of unplanned development elsewhere due to pressure from speculative developers. Unlike other sites, Highover is under the control of one owner, so it is feasible for it to be delivered in the short term. The Council's position is that a timetable can be decided after the Inspector's final deliberations which appear to be scheduled for March.

Amendments to the application

Clearly the pressure for a quick decision is mounting. At the time of writing, NHDC has just sent out notification that a further outline planning application has been submitted (dated 6th January 2020) which involves modifications to that submitted in April 2018. Members can view the Outline Application (18/01154/OP) with its accompanying welter of documents on the North Hertfordshire Planning website. All documents can be accessed by going to the 'Related Documents' tab, then clicking on 'view associated documents' and scrolling down. The most helpful in terms of understanding what is envisaged at a glance is the 'Illustrative Masterplan' identified as 'Plans - AMENDED PL1685-PS-008-03-S4-Illustrative Masterplan'. The 'Covering Letter from Rapleys' submitted in December 2019 gives details of some documents that are significant. The new documents are at least signalled as 'Amended' and you have to scroll down quite a long way before you find them!

Comments

We have 35 days from 10th January to submit comments and the Steering Group has been discussing a possible response. Please keep an eye on the Forum website and your email inbox for further information. We hope that as many members as possible will wish to contribute to the consultation.

Bill Sellicks

Tribute to Michael Ransom

We were saddened to hear of the death in December of Michael Ransom. Michael was Hitchin Forum's President from 1995 – 2010. He was no ordinary President, however, and already had a track record of supporting the community in Hitchin.

He supported and agreed to head up Keep Hitchin Green (KHG), a forerunner of Hitchin Forum, in its efforts to do just that, keep Hitchin green. KHG mobilised Hitchin residents to oppose the sale of parts of Ransom's Recreation Ground for housing to pay for an indoor swimming pool. A newspaper cutting from April 1989 shows him in the river with wheelbarrow and wellies, along with other KHG volunteers, clearing rubbish from the Hiz where it runs through Ransom's Rec. It was natural for Michael to support this initiative as his family had donated Ransom's Recreation Ground to the town in 1930. I personally got to know him because I had a plot at Ransom's allotments which was included in the land that North Herts District Council (NHDC) wanted to sell. Michael's involvement undoubtedly added greatly to the success of stopping NHDC building on both these open spaces.

He was Chairman of Hitchin's pharmaceutical manufacturing company, William Ransom & Son, for 30 years. The company donated £12,000 towards the creation of Hitchin's William Ransom Physic Garden which incorporated plants, past and present, used by the company. Over the years he continued to take an active interest in the garden and chemist shop. In 2015 he wrote a well-informed and fascinating introduction to 'The Physic Garden in Hitchin', published by Hitchin Historical Society on the Silver Jubilee year of the Physic Garden. He was pleased that William Ransom continues to be remembered in the town.

As President he was always interested in Hitchin Forum's campaigns to better the town. He was well informed and invariably brought humour and wit to our deliberations. Steering Group members have warm memories of the summer Steering Group meetings he hosted, beginning with a tour of his beautiful gardens and a peep into the orchid greenhouse, one of his passions.

He will be remembered as a warm, dignified, sensitive and gentle man who had a friendly enquiring interest in others, a special affection for Hitchin and who actively supported efforts to protect and improve it.

**Ellie Clarke, with thanks to Wendy Bowker, Maureen Carroll,
Neil Dodds, Chris Honey, Carola Scupham, Gerry Tidy**

Hitchin Forum Steering Group would welcome feedback on any of our published articles. Such feedback may form the subject of future articles or appear in a 'comments' section of the Newsletter. Please contact the editor at: newsletter@hitchinform.org.uk.

Diary Dates:

- Tuesday 3rd March: **Members' Meeting:** 7.45pm, British Schools Museum.
Derrick Ashley (Councillor) discusses Hertfordshire County Council's 'North and Central Growth Plan'. HCC is currently consulting on the plan and the meeting will enable members to have an informed view on which to base comments.
- Tuesday 10th March: **Town Talk and Hitchin Committee:** 6.30pm and 7.30pm respectively, Westmill Community Centre, John Barker Place, Hitchin.
- Sunday 29th March: **Big Hitchin Spring Clean:** 10am - 12 noon. All around the town.