

## NEWSLETTER

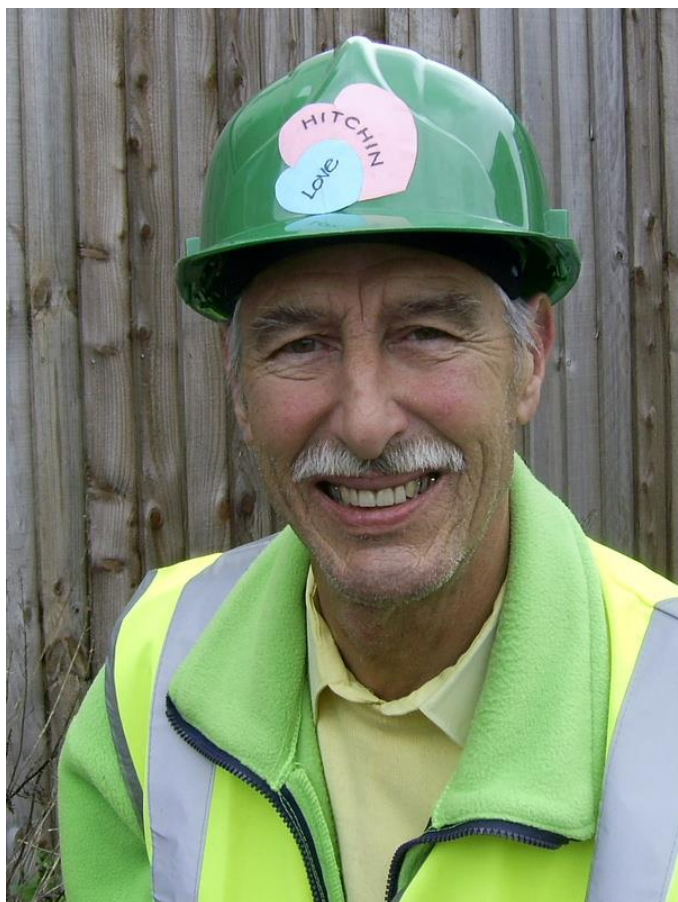
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### Chris Honey – a Tribute

Chris was a colourful character, particularly in yellow or purple – or both! He had talent and enthusiasm for good design and combining colours, and Hitchin Forum benefitted from his skills for over 20 years. He died peacefully in his sleep at the beginning of March.

He joined Hitchin Forum early on; we became aware of his skills when he spearheaded, with a few friends, major refurbishments between 1998 and 2001 at Woodcote House where he lived. Following Chris's gentle persistence, Woodcote residents were persuaded they really did want colourful front doors – each one different. These wholesale renovations improved the view from St Mary's tremendously. But he didn't stop there – the grounds were also overhauled, creating a lovely ambience for residents and those who came to visit.

Chris joined our Steering Group in 2001 and his practical skills were really useful. He designed banners, promotional materials and the Hitchin Forum logo, and made placards for protests. He decided the colour scheme for our website and yes – blue and orange really did work!



He was a great team worker, always enthusiastic, supportive, and willing to help.

No issue was too big – he was involved in Hitchin Vision which went on for years, literally. He chaired the Forum's Town Centre group from 2004 until 2011, with the police, Hitchin Committee Chair and town organisations attending. He was interested in all things environmental, 'green' issues. He was into recycling before anyone we knew. Chris was keen on traffic reduction and gave advice on sustainable transport proposals in Council consultations. He challenged our thinking on design and investigated planning applications for Hitchin Forum for several years, drafting our responses to the Council.

And, no issue was too small - he joined in every litter day we organised. He advised the Council on litterbin designs! He was persistent – it took many months but he got signs posted on the riverside green by St Mary's asking people not to feed the ducks or pigeons because they were actually feeding the rats. Chris had a lovely gentle sense of humour.

He was a long time member of the Historical Society and was one of the team which produced the book on Hitchin Arcade in 2007. The photo of the book launch shows him in top hat and pink jacket – always the

showman. More recently he provided the brilliant closing chapter for 'Discovering More About Hitchin', describing the evolution of town centre buildings in the 1960s, with a good summary of what they replaced. Typically he made mention of Woodcote House describing it, despite its flaws, as "exuding the bold optimistic look of the early 60s" - a bit like Chris himself.

In an understated way Chris was larger than life, a colourful and exuberant character and always kind. Totally unique. We will miss him.

**Ellie & Mike Clarke**  
*(Mike is a Co-chair and Ellie a Forum member)*

## **Planning and The Green Belt**

In the last Newsletter I wrote about the draft Local Plan not yet being approved and the confusion over the number of extra dwellings needed for North Hertfordshire, in part arising from a reduction in the forecast from the Office of National Statistics. At the time of writing the Local Plan is still with the Government Inspector for approval.

In the meantime, various large developments have been drawn-up, for sites which are currently Green Belt, but which their developers hope will be released from their Green Belt designation in the approved Local Plan. In accordance with government guidelines, NHDC has encouraged these developments because they contribute to the required number of extra dwellings. In accordance with planning guidelines, they include up to 40% affordable housing. Development sites currently in the Green Belt include :-

- Land south of Waterdell Lane, St Ippolyts – 67 new dwellings on farmland behind existing houses in Waterdell Lane, on the west side of the B656 London Road. The draft Local Plan of September 2016 gives estimated housing numbers for this site of 40, so there has been a considerable increase in overall numbers and housing density.
- Land north of Pound Farm, St Ippolyts – 84 new dwellings in what is now a green field to the east side of the B656 London Road. The draft Local Plan of December 2014 gives estimated housing numbers for this site of 67, but this was increased to 84 in the 2016 draft Local Plan.
- Land west of Crow Furlong and Lucas Lane and south of Oughtonhead Lane, Hitchin – 115 new dwellings on meadow land. The draft Local Plan of December 2014 gives estimated housing numbers for this site of 90, but this was increased to 115 in the 2016 draft Local Plan.
- Land east of Highover Farm, Hitchin – 700 new dwellings, plus school and shops, on what is currently farmland. The draft Local Plan of December 2014 gives estimated housing numbers for a portion of this site of 484, but this was increased to 700 for the full site in the 2016 draft Local Plan.
- Three sites in Ickleford – estimated 199 new dwellings in total. The draft Local Plan of December 2014 gives estimated housing numbers for the two smaller sites of 57, but the larger site for 150 houses plus primary school to the side of the Bedford Road, to the North of the village, was only added in the 2016 draft Local Plan. No allowance seems to have been made for up to 71 houses proposed for the 'brown field' Bowman's Mill site'.

Each of these sites has attracted local opposition from existing nearby residents, not just on the grounds of affecting their views and the inconvenience of construction, but also on the concerns of increased traffic on already congested roads and local schools being already oversubscribed. There is also loss of the Green Belt, which aims to keep towns and villages apart so that their individual character is maintained. Several of these developments do bring settlements closer together, for example Highover Farm will leave just one field between Hitchin and Letchworth Garden City. These Green Belt sites also provide habitats and pathways for wildlife – on brief visits to two of these sites I startled a deer and a buzzard respectively.

At the moment, Hitchin Forum has not supported any of these proposed developments, nor has it formally objected. We have raised serious concerns about traffic implications of the Highover Farm scheme, and we are aware of limitations on drainage and other infrastructure elsewhere. The time is fast approaching when

we must decide whether to support the Green Belt or more dwellings, for each of these sites. This is not a matter that can be left in the hands of the Steering Group; we need to hear from you, the members, as to what our approach should be. In the current situation, member meetings cannot take place for the foreseeable future, but you can email [planning@hitchinforum.org.uk](mailto:planning@hitchinforum.org.uk). None of these sites has planning permission yet - they are not a done deal - so letting us know your views could make all the difference.

**Neil Dodds (*Member of Steering Group*)**

## **Town Centre Update**

Over the past year we have all had to adapt quickly and come to terms with measures that have been imposed on a scale never seen before. Hitchin BID has been doing as much as possible to keep up to date with the fast-moving changes and announcements by the Government and communicating relevant information to the town's businesses on how and when they can access financial support. Although this is an incredibly challenging time for our town, businesses' ability to adapt and come up with innovative ways to continue trading has kept the town at the forefront of customers' minds. This situation has certainly highlighted the importance of our town centre community and how vital it is to have Hitchin BID as a voice for ALL businesses.

Now there is more certainty around when and how businesses in the town centre can reopen their doors to the public, we have been working hard to plan and prepare a robust reopening campaign. Lots of projects are well underway and follow the 4 main reopening objectives:

- Reminding the public of what Hitchin Town Centre has to offer.
- Reassuring the public of the shop safety in place.
- Encouraging the public back to the town centre.
- Promoting Hitchin town centre's offer and its diverse range of businesses.

To meet these objectives, we have come up with a list of specific cost-effective projects and activities with the highest impact. Combining online promotions, printed media and eye-catching posters, banners, videos and publications, this reopening plan is the best course of action for Hitchin Town Centre.

It is now time to look forward and deliver a series of projects and initiatives to breathe new life back into our town centre. Hitchin BID is continuing to work hard on ensuring that Hitchin remains one of the most vibrant, clean, safe and well promoted market towns in central southern England. With the help and support of our local residents we will come out of this, together, a stronger and more resilient town centre.

**Tom Hardy (*Town Centre Manager*)**

## **On Walking into Town**

It had been quite some time since I walked into town with my husband, which is what I did on a Monday in the second half of February. As I live not far away from the centre, I often take the opportunity to pop down on my own just for a walk, but frequently it is to pick something up from a local shop. I do not know whether being with someone else drew my attention to the shops and the general feel as we walked around but it did feel so different.

And now I need to explain. We live on the south-west side of town and our slightly extended route took us along Willow Lane, under Park Way and down Old Charlton Road into Tilehouse Street. I continue to be surprised at the scale of the office block(s) on Old Charlton Road opposite the bungalows and alms-houses. It is an impressive building, hidden in part by the old Priory wall, but it does feel out of proportion with the surroundings. On our way we passed a lovely display of snowdrops in one of the copses; what a delight. Turning right onto Tilehouse Street and then left down Bucklersbury it all felt very quiet and lonely, yes lonely. Almost immediately I was struck not only by the closed shops but also the empty ones. It felt really desolate

and sad. However, one ray of light was that they have started work on the Hawkins site. I am sure I will be paying this little part of town regular visits in the coming weeks and months to see how things progress.

Onto the Market Place, where my husband sat on a bench and waited while I popped up The Arcade. Wow, what a surprise, even the Salvation Army shop was empty. As I returned to the square and beckoned him to follow me, my husband called me over and remarked how different it was for him to stop and watch the world go by. It is rarely the case that there is a bench to spare when I am in town and let alone a choice of positions and the time to enjoy the space. Note to self, to do this more often, especially as the weather improves – I hope!

Down Churchyard Walk past the closed shops, with a pause outside Groundworks deciding whether to buy a hot drink, and back onto the High Street. At this point I noticed the Garden House Hospice shop was empty too. I hope the charity shops will be back and that this is just to do with leasing arrangements. I did not do a survey of other charity shops but there were an awful lot of empty premises, empty pavements, empty parking spaces, and much less litter, as we wandered around. I have found my fellow townsfolk very considerate during lockdown, often managing a smile and a “Hello” as they, or I, make room to pass “at a distance”. Then, back home past the bottom of a deserted Windmill Hill and along Queen Street.

It did strike me very forcibly that the argument for a more compact town centre was compelling because it is just going to be too big for the number of businesses that can successfully operate in the future. Empty shops do nothing for the feel of the place. Having said that, I believe we can all play our part in reviving our town centre when the time comes, by supporting our local shops perhaps a little more than we have in the past.

I was so delighted to see workmen planting three quite mature sorbus trees on the verge near the Three Moorhens roundabout, replacing those felled when the new house was being built. This is thanks, in no small part, to Councillor Ashley. They will help to restore the feel of a little part of the town that had previously been very verdant. In that vein, the little planting on the triangle outside the Barns on Park Street gives me so much pleasure when I pass, especially when flowers are in bloom. Thank you!

I hope that things have relaxed somewhat by the time this Newsletter goes to press and shops will be starting to open again. I miss my vibrant town centre and the busy, or not so busy, folk that have filled it with life in the past. I can't wait to see them back!

**Jennifer Piggott (*Member of Steering Group*)**

## **Town Centre Spring Clean**

Could you volunteer your time in April to help get the town ready for reopening? Hitchin BID are looking for volunteers to help with Hitchin's 'Spring Clean Up' on weekdays 9-4pm this April, focusing on painting bollards and street furniture. All materials are supplied by the BID, and anyone over the age of 16 is welcome to contact [info@hitchinherts.com](mailto:info@hitchinherts.com) with their availability. Whether you can spare a whole day or just an hour or two, any help is much appreciated to make the town look its best as lockdown restrictions start to ease!

## **Take a Little Ride Along the A602 – Part 1**

It is stretching the point to equate a cycle ride along the Hitchin bypass (Park Way) with the opening lines of the darkly threatening theme tune of the BBC's improbable drama 'Peaky Blinders' ('Take a little walk to the edge of town, go across the tracks'). For many in Hitchin, however, to attempt a trip along the bypass on a bike is to invite the consequence of the walk in the song - '.. you know you're never coming back'. Cycling on

this road is legal and plenty do it but it requires confidence, faith and the ability of both rider and bike to withstand vibration and sudden shocks! It should be safer.

When I started to draft this article, I wrote an account of the surface and other hazards encountered during the ride from the Three Moorhens roundabout to Bearton Road. I discovered that I could visualise every mini Grand Canyon between the bypass's prefabricated sections, the sinking drain covers and the poorly repaired potholes.



*The deepest Grand Canyon - best not to be in contact with the saddle when you hit this!*

*A favourite spot for overtaking, but the cyclist wants to move out to avoid the drain cover and patching.*

The account identified 19 separate hazards (which didn't include the rough surface of the Three Moorhens roundabout itself). I decided that few would read it, most having concluded that I had taken leave of my senses. In fact, about 10 years ago, a pedestrian shouted at me in Bedford Road to exactly that effect, and that I should ride on the pavement if I wanted to stay alive.

At present traffic levels, I find the trip an adrenaline rush at the end of one of my exercise circuits, especially with a following wind. With more traffic, it becomes a white-knuckle ride that I would generally avoid.



*Bedford road. The cyclist is too close to the parked cars if a door opens unexpectedly. The white van driver, whilst probably believing that he is being patient, is likely to be intimidating the cyclist by driving too close.*

## **Alternatives and their hazards.**

Of course, I could go through the town centre. Emerging from the Gosmore Road, the first hazard is the roundabout itself. Quite apart from the surface, finding a gap in the fast-moving traffic can be challenging at busy times. Once in town, traffic is slower, but there are plenty of other hazards. The chance of being hit by a car door opening is greater because there are more parked cars and roads are narrower, forcing cyclists to travel closer to parked vehicles to avoid oncoming traffic.

Beyond the town centre, Hitchin has roads which are hazardous for cyclists for a variety of reasons. Lorries and buses, relatively well-behaved on the comparatively wide bypass, become very much more threatening



in places like Verulam Road with its parked cars and central refuges. Bearton Road is a nightmare with the added hazard of the inattentive driver pulling out near the junction with Brampton Park and York Roads, having collected their take-away. Often at this junction, cars park so close to the turning that you cannot see what might be emerging from the side roads. More importantly, emerging drivers can't see you! Potholes and rough surfaces are a problem throughout the town.

### **Aren't there some cycle lanes?**

There are, but any attempt over the years to make the town more cycle friendly have been ineffective. The narrow cycle lane heading towards the industrial estate along Grove Road ends at the traffic lights at the Bury Mead Road junction. Its white line encourages motorists to pass cyclists closer than might otherwise be the case, because drivers see the line as the boundary of their territory. In fact, for many vehicles, the road is so narrow that cars have their off-side front wheels on the wrong side of the central line in order to avoid wandering into the cycle lane. At the time when the cycle lane first appeared (about 1997?) cars were not as wide. The cycle lanes on both sides of St Michael's Road are used as free station parking. The decision to create cycle lanes along St Michael's Road appears to have been tokenistic to me – despite the parked cars, it is one of Hitchin's safer cycling venues, cycle lane or not. The off-road cycle lanes along both sides of the Cambridge Road on the way to Letchworth are potentially better, but the surfaces are so poorly maintained that I would rather take my chances on the main carriageway.

I consider myself a confident cyclist, but I am not reckless. I will not cycle under the Cambridge Road railway bridge. The road surface is poor, visibility inadequate, and drivers, often frustrated by having to queue behind lorries that are travelling under the bridge very slowly, or by hold-ups at the lights at Woolgrove Road, can be impatient and inconsiderate. With its one-person walkway, the bridge is a deterrent, not only to cycling, but to pedestrians, and contributes to higher levels of car use by those living to the east of the railway line compared with the west.

The next newsletter will focus on cycling. In part 2 of this article, I will discuss some of these issues further, examine differences in road perception between cyclists, pedestrians and motorists and discuss possible solutions. We are hoping for contributions from others on the same theme. Our editor, Jennifer Piggott, would be delighted to receive contributions – the deadline for these is Friday 14th May. Please email them to [newsletter@hitchinforum.org.uk](mailto:newsletter@hitchinforum.org.uk).

**Bill Sellicks (Co-chair)**

## **The Big Hitchin Spring Clean**

As you may know, our Big Spring Clean was to have taken place on Sunday 21st March. There had been a lot of interest expressed in the event, with our contact list steadily growing over the winter to 192 individuals and 8 organisations. Given the ongoing Coronavirus restrictions the spring event could not take place in its usual form, so we agreed to ask participants to collect rubbish and dispose of it in their own bags. We could not see a safe way of making our litterpickers or other equipment generally available to participants. Following discussion with an officer from North Hertfordshire District Council's Waste and Recycling Service, we agreed to spread the event over a period of 2 weeks to avoid the possibility that people would congregate in popular locations. At the time of writing therefore, the Spring Clean is still in progress with people working in household groups. It's probably not as much fun, but the town is getting a bit of a makeover, and people are sending in photographs to show their efforts.

You will be pleased to know that our collection of litter pickers has not been lying idle in my garage over the winter. Soon after the event in October, we lent them to Strathmore Infants School, and the children's efforts have been rewarded to the extent that the school has been awarded a Keep Britain Tidy Eco Schools Green Flag, which is proudly displayed on the school's flag post. A big well done to them!

**Bill Sellicks (Co-chair)**







## Thoughts from the Chair

Spring is here, flowers are blooming, and I am pleased to see that the squirrels have not eaten all of the garden bulbs. The frogspawn has appeared - we can rely on the tadpoles appearing at roughly the same time each year, but will the town resume its normal life and activities? The town centre is emptier than usual, but will it revive as Tom (and all of us) hope, and grow, or shrink a bit?? As Jennifer comments, the closed shops are not just a blight on the streetscape, dreadful for shop owners, but also for vital charitable services such as the hospice, which depends so much on charitable funding (and the hospice service was valuable for Chris Honey and is for many others).

We are reminded by Neil that new housing may shrink the green space around the town. Housing is vital, but so is access to the countryside. The lockdown seems locally to have shown the town centre as a valued social meeting place – open air coffee stops and picnics by the river are popular. Whilst pools and gyms have been closed, walking and cycling through our green surrounds have also been popular. Personally, I have taken to my bike much more. Bill's thoughts on cycling reflect mine – too many hazards. 20mph zones in towns are increasingly seen as a way to make cycling and walking around town safer, which is both a health and environmental benefit – action required! . . .

Litter dropping and fly-tipping are blights within and around the town. The cancellation of our usual clean-up campaign puts us back to individual efforts to clear our local areas. If only we could influence the litterbugs who put it there. Ideas and inspiration required! . . . Fly-tipping seems somehow more industrial – cycling around the local lanes I am amazed at the effort to which people have gone to dump fridge freezers and furniture in ditches and fields. Rogue builders and others offload their rubbish, tyres and whatever saves them time and money, to their shame.

Some things we can change, and other things we can just wonder at, but if you have thoughts on what we can do then let us know!

**Mike Clarke (Co-chair)**

### Keeping in Touch

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