

HITCHIN FORUM

Caring for our Town

NEWSLETTER

November - December 2021 No. 165

Thoughts from the Co-chair

It is hard to think of anything apart from COP26, writing this on the planned last day of the Glasgow summit. Was it blah-blah-blah, or have some firm commitments taken root? Reducing fossil fuel has been high on the agenda.

One of the many issues is the future of air travel. Bill Sellicks expands on concerns about Luton Airport's plans and the implications of that. Is it nimbyism to worry about Luton Airport's hope for expansion, or is the issue of climate change so important that we need to reconsider what has become part of our way of life, jetting off here or there? Think global, act local is a message I like, which does mean challenging our own expectations.

Very local is the current discussion about Charnwood House, on which Bernard Eddleston reports. Charnwood, or the old Hitchin Museum building, was built in 1825 and gifted to the town by the Moss family. It opened as a library and museum in 1939. With the building of the North Herts Museum the Hitchin Museum closed in 2019. Since then, it has been a store for museum items, but its future use is now being considered. The Charnwood Community Management Association was set up in 2015 with the aim of retaining the building for community use – a community hub for Hitchin residents. Hitchin councillors seem keen for it to be retained for the use of residents, and Bernard describes the recent action. No decisions yet, but we hope that the house will be used for the community's benefit.

And we had a Zoom Annual General Meeting (AGM). You will have received the reports and seen what the Steering Group has been doing over the past year. There has been no change in that group, all were re-elected, and we will continue to keep an eye on local matters, reporting back via newsletters, Facebook, Twitter, the website and even Hitchin Comet (which has been a welcome add-on). There was only one matter which was raised which was not included in the AGM agenda, and that was Churchgate. The lease for Churchgate is currently up for sale. We also know this from comments at Hitchin Committee, and that NHDC is interested in purchasing the lease. In addition, an investor has looked at the Churchgate Resurgence website, made contact with one of that group, and then did a walk around the town and talked about the Resurgence ideas (see their excellent ideas at <https://www.newchurchgate.org/>). It seems there is no timescale for the conclusion of any agreement, but we look forward to progress and some inspiration for that dilapidating area.

Mike Clarke
Co-chair

Date for your Diary

Hitchin Town Talk and Hitchin Committee

Tues. Nov 30th: 6.30 & 7.30pm School Hall, Tilehouse
Street Baptist Church.

Nature on our Doorstep – Hill End Chalk Pit

Hill End Chalk Pit (pictured below) was previously owned by the Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust but is now in the hands of North Hertfordshire District Council (NHDC) since the Trust could no longer meet the cost of maintaining it. Laudably, NHDC now has a Greenspace Action Plan (GAP) in place for the site: <https://tinyurl.com/3kayk9wy>.

Easily accessible via the B651, which passes by the Pit, it is to be found off the track leading from Hitchwood Lane to Hill End Farm Lane. (TL197239). There is a car park on the opposite side of the B651 road that is also used to access Hitch Wood. An information board is usefully located here, giving you directions to this somewhat secluded and unique pit.

Described as a 0.7 hectare nature reserve, it is renowned for its fossils and flowers. The photo (below, left) - showing part of the information board that is located at the site - illustrates this very well. In addition, it is the habitat of all three species of woodpecker due to being surrounded by mature woodland.



The photo (above, right) depicts the great spotted species.

Furthermore, the Pit is said to have the largest known colony of *Azeca goodalli* snails in Hertfordshire, while plants include viper's bugloss, cowslip, marjoram, common twayblade and knapweed. There are also butterflies to be found such as the common blue, gatekeeper and the orange tip.

As regards fossils, several types have been found at Hill End, many of which are in the Natural History Museum or held by the British Geological Survey.

According to: "A Geological Conservation Strategy for Hertfordshire", published by the Hertfordshire RIGS (Regionally Important Geological Sites) Group in 2003, the area dates to the Turonian age of the late Cretaceous, around 90 million years ago, and was formerly a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). However, it lost its SSSI status due to becoming degraded.

The good news is that since 2018 there is a GAP in place, and on pages 3 to 7 of the Hertfordshire Geological Society Newsletter, Winter 2019/20 (<https://tinyurl.com/2w3t23hr>) there is a piece on the history of the Pit and the efforts of a working party, in June 2019, to remove a large amount of the overhanging vegetation and restore the chalk face to what it had been during the early 1980's. To further enhance the site, information boards have been added, such as the one illustrated previously and below you can access a very interesting short introductory video which alludes to the new signage. This was produced by Hertfordshire Geological Society: <https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=aSYQ-wkunR4>.

Valerie Schicker
Member of Steering Group

All photographs were taken by the author except the great spotted woodpecker, which is provided with the kind permission of Judy Howlett, RSPB Hitchin and Letchworth Local Group:(<https://tinyurl.com/apanm3c5>).

Charnwood Update

Charnwood was discussed at the NHDC Hitchin Committee meeting on the 12th October this year.

Back in December 2020 NHDC Cabinet agreed they wanted Charnwood to be a community hub for use by the people of Hitchin. Charnwood Community Management Association (CCMA) welcomed this decision and expected matters to proceed with some urgency during 2021. We have therefore been disappointed with the lack of progress this year. After some nine months, and with pressure from CCMA, a public consultation and open days were held at Charnwood at the beginning of September. There were over 200 responses to the questionnaire. This demonstrates the passion of residents for The Community Hub to become a reality.

The matter was discussed again at the Hitchin Committee meeting with a recommendation that the NHDC Cabinet meeting in December should decide to go out to the community and ask for proposals to turn Charnwood into a community hub. This could of course have happened several months ago. However, Hitchin Committee, whilst approving the basic recommendation, added a proviso that they wanted the Council to carry out a further 'options' review. This would include the possibility of NHDC directly managing Charnwood as a community hub or undertaking a collaborative effort with the Library. This has the potential to further delay matters, although subsequent to the meeting the Chair of Hitchin Committee has confirmed that it is the intention to complete this review prior to the December Cabinet meeting. CCMA still believes that the community should manage and run Charnwood as a community hub and is very concerned at the potential for further delays.

CCMA is also concerned that thus far NHDC has failed to include any monies in their future capital budget for the refurbishment of Charnwood, even though it was clear following their decision in December 2020 that funding would be required following many years of neglect to the fabric of the building. We understand that such funding is now being considered in their current review of the capital budget this Autumn. We hope such funding will be adequate.

Prior to the Cabinet meeting in December 2020, CCMA submitted a detailed proposal to NHDC to use Charnwood as a community hub. This proposal had been assembled following a professional survey of the building to determine not only the cost of refurbishing it but also the modifications needed to turn the building into a useful community building. CCMA included detailed plans showing the internal modifications required, which were sympathetic to the history of the building and recognised its Grade 2 listing. CCMA also included a preliminary business plan which showed that operation of Charnwood as a community hub could be viable and sustainable over the long term. Such a plan would need to be revisited following the public consultation

and take account of how the pandemic may have affected the way community groups will operate in the future. However, we believe the fundamentals of the business plan are still valid.

We have indicated to NHDC that CCMA will not submit a further proposal if NHDC goes out to community groups to ask for proposals to refurbish and manage Charnwood. However, we have stated that we are willing to assist and cooperate with any bona fide community group which wishes to submit a proposal and share with them some of our background work. We believe that eventually any successful proposal from the community is likely to involve several interested groups combining and CCMA could provide a suitable vehicle to bring that about.

In summary, we are extremely disappointed with the progress over the past year and the potential for further delays. We are also concerned as to whether NHDC will fully recognize the funding that they will need to provide to restore Charnwood after many years of neglect. It is clear from the recent public survey that there is a strong desire for Charnwood to be returned to public use without delay and more urgent action is required from NHDC to make this a reality.

Bernard Eddleston
Member of Hitchin Forum, Chairman of CCMA

Hitchin Forum's Big Autumn Clean-up

We ran a near-normal Hitchin-wide clean-up this autumn. With a total of seven collection sites agreed with North Hertfordshire District Council, it was possible for volunteers to clear more areas than last year.



Holy Saviour Guides with their haul from The Dell

We still cleared the sites we always clear, such as Windmill Hill and Butts Close, but people were keen to suggest new hotspots and we supported that where possible. The total number of locations which were cleared was fifteen. I am very grateful to the 120 or so volunteers of all ages who worked mainly on the Sunday morning (some who couldn't make that did their area on the Saturday) and collected well over 100 bags of rubbish. As some of you will know, I am no fan of social media, but I have to say that the popularity of the event is boosted by several who advertise it using what I consider to be its dark arts, and to whom I am most grateful. An interesting trend is that many of the volunteers now have their own equipment and are clearly using it on a regular basis. In fact, North Hertfordshire has introduced its own 'Adopt an Area' scheme designed to capitalise on this energy and commitment. See (<https://tinyurl.com/y6erx7va>) if you would like to get involved.

The next event will be in March 2022, just as the weather is getting warmer and before new growth starts. The date is yet to be decided. If you would like to take part, please email hflitterpick@gmail.com to be added to our circulation list.

Bill Sellicks
Co-chair

A Noisy Sunday Morning

There is nothing like experiencing aircraft noise at close quarters to remind one of what it must be like to be exposed to it every day. At almost exactly 9.59am on Sunday 5th September, flight WUK 4471 took off from Luton airport bound for Tirana. Eighteen seconds after leaving the ground it passed over the otherwise tranquil Lye Hill, south of Breachwood Green, at a height of 470m (1537ft) and about one mile from the end of the runway. I was there to take the picture and was deafened by the noise. Thirty-four seconds later, it registered a maximum noise level of 73.4dB over the static noise monitor west of Stagenhoe at a height of 780m (2564ft). It was the 32nd flight that had passed over Lye Hill since we started walking at 7.45 that morning. The airport's tracking app¹ can provide a surprising amount of information.



Some context

The aircraft was an Airbus 319 operated by Wizz Air. According to The National Air Traffic Service (NATS)², at an altitude of between 1000 and 2000ft, an aircraft of this type would produce a noise level of 85 - 93dB on the ground. Few people would be prepared to put up with that repeated every few minutes. The frequent over-flights marred what was otherwise a lovely walk. We had a choice; we did not have to do the walk. The residents of Lye Hill have no choice, and the noise they experience with every flight is far louder than anything we had heard. As far as I can tell from the noise contour map of the airport's Annual Monitoring Report for 2020³, Lye Hill lies within the 61dB noise contour for day and night flights. That figure is an 'average' for all events during a typical 24-hour period. How frequently repeated intense single events translate to these 'average' figures is complex and understood by very few. Not only that, but there are at least three different time periods over which averages are calculated.

Impact

The World Health Organisation⁴ quotes research that indicates that 11% of the population will experience sleep disturbance at average levels of 40dB and above. There is evidence of serious health related impacts of such noise; susceptibility to cardiovascular disease, cognitive development in children and mental health to name three.

How many people are affected?

Aircraft noise is relatively localised and affects those living close to airports but particularly those living directly under the flightpaths. In 2019, the European Environment Agency⁵ estimated that whereas over 4 million people were exposed to aircraft noise levels of 55dB and above (averaged over 24 hours) over 110 million people were exposed to a similar level of noise from roads alone. According to Luton airport's Annual Monitoring Report for 2020³, those subjected to an average noise level greater than 60dB over 24 hours numbered less than 4,100. Pre-pandemic, in 2019, it was 8,300. Clearly, airport managers regard this as a comparatively small number of people who suffer in order that everybody who wishes, and can afford to do so, can enjoy the benefits of flying. They would point out that each year, they provide £100,000 worth of assistance to residents exposed to daytime noise greater than a certain limit (not published – it changes each year) in the form of acoustic double glazing.

Surely the government must be doing something about aircraft noise

In a statement on 6th September⁶, Robert Courts, Parliamentary Undersecretary of State for Transport, announced the winding down of the Independent Commission on Civil Aviation Noise (ICCAN), a body which only started work in 2019. The purpose of the Commission was in his words

'...to help ensure that the needs of local communities are properly taken into account when considering the noise impacts of airport expansion, and to help ensure that noise impacts of airspace changes are properly considered.'

ICCAN's functions have once again been taken over by the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA). ICCAN held meetings with community groups and aviation industry bodies⁷. Among other things it reported on the confusing and inconsistent ways in which aircraft noise is measured and made proposals to establish best practice. It drew attention to the sparse and poorly funded research into the health impacts of aircraft noise and made recommendations on what to do about it. It evaluated approaches to noise insulation offered by different airports, highlighting inconsistencies and the, sometimes sub-standard, products installed in such schemes. It prepared a corporate strategy for 2021 to 2024⁸. It apparently did not expect to be disbanded. The Review of its performance⁹ highlighted issues such as its interpretation of its remit (which differed from that of the Department of Transport), its perception by stakeholders (all had expectations, some conflicting, which it was unable to satisfy) and its independence (it was seen as being too independent by the Department of Transport). One wonders why, after 46 years, the government felt the need to set up a separate, independent body to respond to the needs of local communities. Why, two and a half atypical years later, during which ICCAN, the Report acknowledged, moved debate about aircraft noise forward, did it decide that the services of that body could be dispensed with, its functions subsumed once again by the very body that, by implication, appeared to be failing just a few years earlier.

The elephant in the room

On the 5th of September, the noise was obvious, but we couldn't see the carbon dioxide emitted from the aircraft as they climbed over North Hertfordshire. It is estimated that 80 - 95% of the world's population have never flown¹⁰. The other 5 - 20% are people on higher-than-average incomes. In the UK, around 50% of us fly in any one year. The COP26 negotiations should remind us that many people are paying for our emissions, often without experiencing many of the claimed benefits of aviation.

The Chair of the Committee on Climate Change, Lord Deben, in a letter to Grant Shapps written in September 2019¹¹, called for measures to manage demand in order to limit aviation emissions. By contrast, Rishi Sunak has just halved air passenger duty on domestic flights to stimulate demand post pandemic. His comments during an interview¹² on the BBC were revealing about the way in which pro-aviation politicians and the aviation industry seek to reassure us about the carbon emissions of aviation. In saying that 'aviation in general only accounts for about 8% of our overall emissions', the Chancellor implied that this is comparatively insignificant.

For the purposes of reporting on the UK's carbon emissions, the Office for National Statistics allocates emissions to 9 sectors¹³. Transport is responsible for the biggest contribution at 27% of total. Agriculture (10%) is comparable to aviation. Four other sectors, including waste management and industrial processes, make individual contributions of less than 8%. If 8% is nothing to worry about, why are these sectors not let off the hook of reducing their carbon footprint as is aviation when they too are recovering from the damage caused by the pandemic? Rishi Sunak went on to claim that of that 8%, 'a fraction - just 4 or 5% comes from domestic aviation', so it is a 'tiny part' of our emissions'. It was unclear exactly what emissions he was counting. Did these include the emissions that are produced during an aircraft's flight, for instance – by far the most significant, but, for international travel, not included in the calculation of a country's carbon emissions? The International Council on Clean Transportation (ICCT) figures on departing flights¹⁴ are interesting. They show that UK aviation is the third highest carbon emitter in the world after the USA and China, and well above those of the fourth highest emitter, Japan. Many domestic trips could be undertaken by road or rail. The ICCT estimates that per passenger emissions from short haul flights account for a third of all emissions from aviation. Of the 3 phases of an aircraft's flight, take-off and landing produce more CO₂ per

km than cruising. For short flights therefore, those phases represent a greater proportion of an aircraft's flight than in long haul flights. Why is it that there has been no attempt to support rail travel in the same way? A domestic flight produces the equivalent of 254g of CO₂ per km per person), a private car with 4 passengers 43g, a rail journey 41g¹⁵, and a coach journey just 27g. The price of an air ticket for a domestic journey is often lower than, or comparable to, that for the equivalent rail journey (possibly involving multiple changes). It is sadly understandable that people may prefer to fly.

No ambiguity

In its consultation on 'Jet Zero'¹⁶, the government's 'vision' for the way in which it expects aviation to achieve net zero by 2050, everything is end-loaded. Aviation is to be allowed to increase its emissions until 2030, which implies that passenger numbers will be allowed to increase. Apart from improvements in engine technology and airframe design, the hopes for emissions reduction are pinned on sustainable aviation fuels, electric powered flight and the use of hydrogen, with offsetting as an interim measure. Not only is the feasibility and effectiveness of these contested, but the most achievable (sustainable aviation fuels) could have a damaging effect on the environment by using land which would otherwise be used for food production. At a time when urgent action on the country's emissions is deemed essential, the review period of every 5 years is dangerously generous. When the next review takes place and the hoped-for 'breakthrough' on technologies doesn't happen, the industry will, I suspect, continue to argue that it is too economically important for its expansion to be constrained.

Luton expansion

With the signals from government firmly in favour of expansion, it is little wonder that Luton Airport would again appear to be about to try to relax the passenger cap and noise controls to which it agreed in 2014. In a letter to which Hitchin Forum is a co-signatory, Luton and District Association for the Control of Aircraft Noise (LADACAN) has written to Michael Gove to request that this application be called in. The airport intends to resurrect its 'Future Luton' plans to increase passenger numbers to 32 million per year by 2041 (which it describes as 'sustainable'). I admit that I am a pessimist, but hope I am wrong in saying that I think the airport is likely to get its way on both counts.

Bill Sellicks
Co-chair

References

- 1 Luton TraVis <https://travisltn.topsonic.aero/>
- 2 Aircraft Lmax data. <https://tinyurl.com/42wrafck>
- 3 Annual Monitoring Report 2020 <https://tinyurl.com/nrwdkthx>
- 4 WHO noise guidelines for the EU <https://tinyurl.com/v8jmactn>
- 5 Number exposed to noise levels ≥ 55 dB <https://tinyurl.com/su7r7wtd>
- 6 Robert Courts <https://tinyurl.com/drr3n7wz>
- 7 ICCAN Our work; Our Progress so Far <https://iccan.gov.uk/iccan-our-work/>
- 8 ICCAN Corporate Strategy 2021 - 24 <https://tinyurl.com/zxn7j3xm>
- 9 Review of ICCAN <https://tinyurl.com/y3d568c3>
- 10 The Aviation Environment Federation <https://www.aef.org.uk/what-we-do/climate/>
- 11 Letter from Lord Deben to Grant Shapps <https://tinyurl.com/cxb7ehn5>
- 12 Budget: domestic air passenger duty <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-59062696>
- 13 2019 UK Greenhouse Gas Emissions <https://tinyurl.com/t33p8fsz>
- 14 CO₂ Emissions from Commercial Aviation <https://tinyurl.com/3xd4fc58>
- 15 Should you fly, drive or take the train? <https://tinyurl.com/hbs5hajc>
- 16 Jet Zero Consultation <https://tinyurl.com/8n3krema>

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 Vice President, a trustee, a director of its trading company and, for 8 years, treasurer of "Living Streets", the UK charity for everyday walking. He is our Treasurer and Membership Secretary.

Contact: treasurer@hitchinform.org.uk or membershipsecretary@hitchinform.org.uk.

Mike Clarke - is one of our two 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@hitchinform.org.uk or chairman@hitchinform.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 examines planning applications for the Steering Group.

Contact: planning.appl@hitchinform.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 two 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@hitchinform.org.uk.

Bill Sellicks - is a retired chemistry teacher who moved to Hitchin in 1984 and is one of our two 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@hitchinform.org.uk.

Andrew Wearmouth - was born in Hitchin and has always lived locally. He is a retired 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.

Valerie Schicker - worked abroad for multinationals before returning to the U.K. to study. She came to Hitchin in 1986 and embarked on a career in teaching. On retirement she gradually became involved with a number of organisations in various capacities, Hitchin Forum being one of them. She is passionate about the environment and keeping Hitchin special.