

NEWSLETTER

January – February 2022 No. 166

Paul Clark

We were very sad to hear of the sudden death from COVID-19 last month of Paul Clark – North Hertfordshire Councillor for most of the years since 1995 and County Councillor since last spring. He was a long-standing member of the Forum and was on the Coordinating or Steering Group from 1995 until 2008. He was always very well informed about town matters, keen to discuss issues and to do what he could to improve the town. He had a friendly and welcoming manner and was always available to offer help and advice. He will be greatly missed.

Thoughts from the Co-chair

New Year, new hopes and resolutions? It has been said that there is nothing new under the sun, and you might think that about this newsletter with articles on Luton Airport, environmental pollution, litter, and unsafe roads.

Bill describes the recent planning process concerning airport expansion with increased aircraft noise and more pollution. He provides a sad account of the failure of the Luton Borough Council consultation to allow a fair hearing on those issues. Neil's account of our chalk streams describes the threat of even more sewage overflow and contamination (emphasised in the recently released Parliamentary Committee report on water quality in rivers) and one wonders how water companies have managed to pay out dividends to shareholders whilst failing to pay for the necessary improvements. Ken writes about experience with 'Living Streets' and the continued failure to make roads safer for pedestrians and cyclists. The articles provide more details of these happenings and perhaps challenge us to see how we can add to the public disquiet and outrage when the environment we live in is spoilt, or even ruined. Perhaps we need to find new ways to express our dismay, and to seek changes for the patch we inhabit.

But, trying not to be gloomy, stepping out, navigating the mud and puddles, and venturing to our remaining countryside is a good thing. Valerie has added a patch of sunshine with an account of a walk to Minsden Chapel, albeit along some muddy paths.

Muddy paths are also a problem on the south side of Oughtonhead Common. Once upon a time the paths were spread with chippings from bushes that had been cut down, but the policy changed, and the bushes are now cut and burnt. I think that change has led to the quagmire which has since developed. North Herts Council (NHC) has started a Greenspace Strategy 2022 – 2027 survey which asks what we would like to see in our local green spaces. If you have noticed issues such as muddy paths at Oughtonhead then do complete the survey and let the Council know what you think needs doing. They really do want to know, and the survey takes about five minutes to complete (<https://tinyurl.com/5aamvjdx>).

And, last but not least, Stuart explores the facts around tree planting, the means that are being provided by local councils and the Woodland Trust, and the ways communities can develop this, such as 'Dream for Trees'. We will not offset our carbon footprint by local planting, but it is a step in the right direction, and improves the environment, not least for the fauna, and that includes the humans!

Mike Clarke – Co-chair

River Pollution and Development

Thanks to many campaigners, pollution of our rivers has become a major news story. Fergal Sharkey, late of the Undertones pop group and now a leading fly fisherman, has appeared on TV and radio to protest against damage to chalk streams. This includes streams in our region which have been damaged due to discharge of sewage overflow.

As a recreational kayaker on the local rivers Lee, Bean and Ivel I enjoy seeing the wildlife, which needs clean unpolluted water. Also, the last thing I want is to capsiz into water polluted by sewage!

These considerations led me to listen to a webinar entitled 'Chalk streams, Planning & the Local Plan' given by Rosie Pearson, Chair of the Community Planning Alliance, which was pointed out to me by Valerie Schicker of the Steering Group.

Rosie Pearson explained that she had campaigned against three new townships in north Essex involving 43,000 homes, and succeeded in having one of them dropped due to highlighting drainage problems. She said that in many cases there is the assumption that the existing systems can cope with the cumulative effects of extra developments when the truth is that they cannot.

She had 10 'top tips' for campaigning :-

1. Form alliances - share resources and information.
2. Address the relevant decision makers for the stage concerned.
3. Assemble national and local evidence policies and data.
4. Make sure that you know what you are asking for.
5. Stay one step ahead - get in newspapers before the promoters.
6. Form sub-groups to address different aspects and work more efficiently.
7. Get media savvy.
8. Lobby - local and national, with an eye to forthcoming elections.
9. Time is your friend - don't give up. Delay if you can.
10. Be positive - put forward alternatives.

She also said, do get involved in numbers and types of houses that are needed, but don't get distracted by issues of population.

For us here in North Hertfordshire, I think that many of the points made in the webinar are very relevant. The recently approved West of Stevenage development of up to 1,500 dwellings will impose a considerable extra load on Stevenage's existing sewage system, which involves a main sewer up to 1.25m in diameter, extending all the way to Rye Meads wastewater treatment works, 19km away in Hoddesdon. Initially, Stevenage's consultants said that the development would impose too big an extra load, but a later study reconsidered the parameters and concluded it is feasible. Nevertheless, in response to the actual plans recently passed by Stevenage, Thames Water stated that they had 'identified an inability of the existing foul water network infrastructure to accommodate the needs of this development proposal' and that 'reinforcement works are likely to be required to avoid sewage flooding and/or potential pollution incidents.' I am not aware of what needs doing to make the plans acceptable for Thames Water – I heard nothing about it in Stevenage's Planning Committee meeting which approved the West of Stevenage scheme.

North Hertfordshire's plans for up to 3,100 dwellings just north of Stevenage's new settlement would result in an increase in population more than double that resulting from the West of Stevenage plans. The waste for this development has to flow north, due to the topography. It would require a new main sewer going to a new plant or an upgrade of either Ash Brook's or Hitchin's existing treatment works to guarantee high quality treated water prior to discharge into the Rivers Purwell and Hiz, which are clear flowing chalk streams full of wildlife.

Neil Dodds - Member of Steering Group

Trees and Tree Planting for the Climate

One of the primary themes at the 2021 COP26 conference held in Glasgow was the connection between biodiversity and climate change, where experts cited deforestation as a key culprit in the current trend towards unacceptable global temperature rise. The cessation of this deforestation – which countries representing 90% of the world's forests have now pledged to do – and the planting of perhaps a trillion trees (see trilliontrees.org) is seen as one route towards restoring greenhouse gases to safe levels and restoring biodiversity to historical levels.

So, what can Hitchin residents do to help? One thing we can't hope to do is offset our individual carbon emissions by each planting trees. A rough estimate suggests that the population of Hitchin would need to plant a broadleaf forest on otherwise barren land the size of Hitchin every 3½ years to come anywhere near offsetting our carbon footprint. Even then, the full potential of the forest to sequester carbon would only be realised gradually over the next century. Clearly the frequently quoted lifestyle changes – stop flying, eat plant-based food, improve building insulation and heating efficiency, reduce travel in general – are all far more effective than planting trees.

Figures used in the calculation of a Hitchin carbon offset forest:

- Population of Hitchin: 33000 – Office for National Statistics (ONS).
- UK individual's average CO₂e footprint: 6.8 tonnes per year – ONS (CO₂e is an estimate of the equivalent effect of all greenhouse gases combined when expressed as the quantity of CO₂).
- Area of Hitchin: 1563 Hectares – North Herts open space review 2017.
- CO₂e – positive contribution of 100m² of new broadleaf forest in the UK over its growth to maturity: 5 tonnes – (*How bad are bananas? Tim Berners-Lee, Profile Books, 2020 edition*).

When planted in huge numbers, trees are useful in our attempts to mitigate climate change, but at a more local and personal level there are plenty of other reasons that should motivate us to plant more. Their positive effects on biodiversity – compared to barren land – is obvious and it is clear that strategic planting of just a small number of trees in copses, and even in our own gardens, creates habitats and travel corridors for many species. The effect on mental health of the experience of being near trees has been studied in recent years and the positive benefits are well documented. Studies show that the mere sight of trees outside a hospital window can improve the mental and consequent physical recovery of patients.

There are several options available to us if we want to get involved and plant more trees. As individuals the simplest thing is to buy trees and plant them in our gardens. The local nurseries and garden centres all sell them, and it is possible to receive free trees from several online organisations. If you are interested in contacting any of them, and particularly if you have knowledge of suitable land, just search online using relevant terms taken from the following list of useful resources and contact points.

- The Woodland Trust is the UK's largest woodland conservation charity whose vision is "a UK rich in woods and trees". They regularly supply packs of saplings to schools and other organisations.
- The Community Volunteers, in association with OVO Energy, offer organisations free trees to be planted on publicly accessible land, but not on private domestic property.
- Eforests is an organisation that supplies free trees, ideally in quantities greater than 500, to wildlife and other groups willing to plant and manage them to maturity on publicly accessible land. Eforests also offers a way to offset our personal carbon footprint by funding the planting of trees, or even by dedicating a tree to someone as a gift – certificate included.
- The National Trust runs a simple scheme where you can donate money for a sapling for as little as £5 in the name of someone.

Last year Hertfordshire County Council (HCC) secured 2,910 trees to plant in areas that have historically lacked trees or where trees have been lost due to pests or disease. NHC ran a scheme in 2021 to provide 10,000

trees to individuals. We anticipate similar initiatives from HCC and NHC this year. Do keep an eye open for this.

One particularly interesting scheme is run by Dream For Trees in association with Tinyforests. Here is an introduction by one of the volunteers working on the three developments currently under way in Hitchin:

“Dream for Trees was set up just over a year ago by a few friends in North London who were passionate about making a positive impact on the environment. We decided to focus on planting native trees in a dense fashion to maximise the potential to increase biodiversity and sequester carbon. Our first site planted was on a Thames Water site in North London. The trees have thrived, and the local community have been very supportive.

This dense planting method attempts to follow the Miyawaki Method where the young trees compete for light and grow more vigorously than traditional planting methods. The first couple of years require some maintenance and then the forest is left to fend for itself. Species are native and selected so that the space is filled with trees and shrubs of different heights.

Bruce Parker contacted us with the view to growing our dense forests on his land in Ickleford. He kindly donated 3 sites near the disused railway line to add to the thin strip of woodland growing along the old railway embankment. Bruce has opened up the space for the local residents to enjoy. We have funding for the project and plan to plant before the spring. As Muntjac deer are keen tree eaters we will be planting Hawthorn hedges around the sites to offer some protection. When the forest is mature enough to cope with the grazers we will thin out the hedge to reveal the dense woodland.

We would love to work with the local community and welcome volunteers to help with planting and maintenance. For more information about us please go to our website (<https://www.dreamfortrees.com/>).”

Nick Moss

Finally, for those who use a computer, by far the easiest way to contribute to reforestation is to switch to using the Ecosia.org search engine. Ecosia looks like most other search engines but differs in that every search contributes to advertising profits, most of which are then used to fund and promote tree planting around the world.

Stuart Howarth – Member of Steering Group

Luton Airport – An Exercise in Asymmetric Democracy

Just as I completed my article for the last Newsletter, notice was issued that Luton’s Development Management Committee would, following two meetings on 30th November and 1st December last year, adjudicate on the application to relax noise conditions and increase the 18 million passenger per year (mppa) cap to 19 mppa.

In mid-November, a lengthy and detailed report by Luton’s Head of Development Management, David Gurtler, was posted on the Committee’s website along with the meeting agenda. The report argued that, in spite of Luton Borough Council having declared a climate emergency, it was not a local authority’s role to take into account any arguments based on emissions because the government had ruled that climate change was a national issue. It should be noted that the government had previously rejected the Climate Change Committee’s recommendation that demand-led airport expansion be constrained.

On noise, the report attempted to suggest that any increase would be imperceptible to those under the flightpath despite the figures showing a significant increase in the number of those exposed to noise with the potential to damage health. Luton Airport’s customers are more likely to travel there by private car than to any other UK airport, and a significant proportion of those passengers come from the east of England (and therefore drive through Hitchin). There was, nevertheless, no mention of any collaboration with either HCC or NHC to seek a public transport solution to the problem. The report strongly urged that the proposals be permitted.

In addition to writing to Michael Gove to request the call-in* of the application on grounds of conflict of interest, Luton and District Association for the Control of Aircraft Noise (LADACAN) had made a number of submissions pointing to a variety of inconsistencies and errors in the report. Less than three hours before the meeting on November 30th, the airport's representatives posted a lengthy rebuttal to these points, to which Andrew Lambourne (Chair of LADACAN) hastily produced a counter document, which he submitted just before the meeting.

The 30th November meeting was devoted to presentations from objectors, of which there were about 20. At first sight, this would seem surprising, since, of the 1131 letters logged on the Development Control Committee's website, objections outnumbered letters of support by about 5 to 1. However, it becomes understandable when you realise that any organisation was allowed only one representative. An organisation such as LADACAN could easily be represented by 3 or 4 people, each focusing on different aspects of the application in detail, so this was a significant constraint. Quite apart from that, this was a busy time of year for many in the run-up to Christmas. I had to make my presentation from a hotel room in Norfolk during a long-arranged bird-watching trip, having re-written my previous script by hand in response to late notification of the 4-minute time allowance (most of us had understood we had 5 minutes).

A cynic would say that there was more than a hint that the management of the proceedings ensured that opposition views were stifled by implementing the short notice period, manipulating the timing of the meeting and the late notification of time allowances! One objector was not allowed to make his presentation on the 30th – LADACAN's Andrew Lambourne. He was not notified of that decision in advance. The meeting's Chair simply announced the end of the meeting at 9.00pm with Andrew making vigorous protestations via the online chat facility. The meeting was publicised with a finish-time of 10.00pm. There was no obvious reason why he could not have made his presentation and the meeting could have finished 5 minutes later, but still 55 minutes earlier than scheduled.

As it was, Andrew made his presentation at the start of the meeting on December 1st. This allowed an extra 24 hours for the points he had raised the previous evening (in response to the airport's late submission) to be considered by the airport's representatives. They were immediately refuted by the airport's Queen's Council and other representatives during presentations, for which they were allocated generous amounts of time. The word 'refuted' in this context meant little more than a bland assertion that Andrew's points were wrong without engagement in the substance of the argument. Little more was required since no objector had any right of reply.

Much of the airport's presentation was spent in exaggerating its economic benefits whilst playing down its impacts. It was suggested that, if the 5.5% increase in the passenger cap was not allowed, that would be a devastating blow to the local economy. By contrast the resulting increase in noise was described as 'imperceptible'.

As in Radio 4's panel game 'The Unbelievable Truth' in which participants try to 'smuggle' 5 truths past their fellow panellists during a presentation which is otherwise entirely false, some truths went unnoticed by Councillors. Given that the seven Councillors who voted in support of the proposal invariably mentioned increasing employment opportunities as a reason for their support, it was surprising that they appeared to take little notice of the admission that, although there would be an increase in jobs in the short term, many of these jobs would have disappeared by 2028 with improvements in technology. It was claimed that on average there would be an extra three flights a day. A simple calculation suggests that each flight would need to accommodate 913 passengers. The average number of passengers per flight from Luton in 2019 was 163! Its runway is too short to accommodate significantly larger aircraft, and hardly any of those currently in service would get near to that capacity in any case.

As I predicted in my previous article, the application was approved by a 7 to 2 majority. Encouraged by LADACAN's Andrew Lambourne, I, along with a number of others, wrote to Michael Gove, requesting that the application be called in on the grounds that the decision was based on a partial interpretation of poor-quality information which had not been properly interrogated and was therefore unsound. It took 16 days to receive an acknowledgment of the letter, and that following a reminder. However, just before Christmas, Luton

Borough Council was directed not to ratify the 19 million passenger expansion recommendation until the Department for Levelling-Up Housing and Communities decides whether to call in the application.

This is a minor delay in an otherwise asymmetric struggle where all the cards are stacked in favour of the aviation industry. Aviation has succeeded in persuading successive governments of its economic benefits to the extent that the damage it inflicts on the environment and people should be ignored. I am afraid that I see the lack of urgency as an indicator that, even if called in, the decision will be rubber-stamped by central government.

Bill Sellicks - Co-Chair

** The Secretary of State has the power to direct the local planning authority to refer an application to him for decision. This is what is meant by a 'called-in' application.*

What About Pedestrians?

For many years town planners have prioritised vehicle traffic over pedestrians, whose movement had to be controlled to protect them from vehicles by various forms of fencing etc. This has led to many soulless townscapes with high-speed traffic separating people and communities from one another.

The Highway Code and planning policies are being rewritten proposing a new hierarchy with those users who can do the most harm having the greatest responsibility to reduce the danger and threat they may pose to others. This reverses the current priority list by placing large vehicles at the bottom and pedestrians at the top, particularly children, older adults and disabled people.

But what can be done to achieve this? During the pandemic many more people have been walking (and cycling). To keep this going, changes are needed in all our villages, towns and cities "... making active travel easier and safer for everyone ..." (to quote Grant Shapps, Transport Secretary). I must say I have noticed few changes in Hitchin making this true for our town.

For 15 years I have been involved with Living Streets, The UK Charity for Everyday Walking, as Vice President, Trustee, Hon. Treasurer and Director of the Charity's trading company. During that time, I think the things that concerned our members and supporters the most were prevention of pavement parking, improvement in pedestrianisation and increase in numbers of children walking to school, and the approval of lower speed limits. I will expand on each of these issues, all of which I feel would benefit pedestrians in Hitchin if put into effect.

Pavement Parking

Vehicles parked on the footway can cause an obstruction and inhibit the independence of many vulnerable people, especially older or disabled people with visual or mobility impairments. And when pedestrians, for example families with pushchairs, are forced into the road and into oncoming traffic, pavement parking is simply dangerous.

Pavements are not designed to carry the weight of vehicles and the cost of repairing them adds an unnecessary burden on already cash-strapped councils. It doesn't even achieve what I believe the drivers think they're doing, that is keeping the carriage way clear for other vehicles!

The practice is illegal in the Greater London area and in Scotland (although not until 2023) and is being considered by the Welsh Assembly! Why not more widely in England?

Speed Limits

Our urban areas need more 20mph speed limits to create safer streets and more vibrant communities where people live, work and shop. If a pedestrian is struck by a vehicle at 20mph they have a 97% chance of survival. Just 10mph faster it drops to 92% - all for the sake of arriving somewhere slightly earlier.

By introducing urban area-wide 20mph limits we could end the confusing patchwork approach to limits that currently exists in Hitchin, embedding a culture of slower speeds and reducing uncertainty for drivers. Lower speeds increase road capacities, as the bunching effect at junctions is reduced when traffic flow improves.

With 20 mph the walking experience is more pleasant, less noisy and felt by pedestrians to be safer (particularly on narrow streets with narrow pavements such as we have in Hitchin). When will Hitchin be a 20mph town?

Increased Town Centre Pedestrianisation

A controversial subject I appreciate, but I believe that increased pedestrianisation in the town centre would increase footfall and business. I have never understood why, for instance, when the High Street was pedestrianised, this was not extended to Sun Street and Bucklersbury. To be car free makes shopping much more pleasant and an encouragement to do it.

Hitchin is a small town and many homes are a short distance from the town centre. Improvements in the walkways from all areas would encourage many more to travel on foot rather than drive. When streets are regenerated to boost walking there is a corresponding beneficial impact on retail turnover. Well-designed projects have been found to boost footfall and sales by up to 30 per cent.

Nationally, more than 33% of car trips can be walked in under 25 minutes and 66% can be cycled in under 20 minutes

Walking to School

During the morning peak traffic times one in five cars are taking children to school, contributing to congestion, risk of accidents, air pollution and carbon emissions.

It's been proven that children who do some form of exercise, especially a walk before school, do better in class because they arrive refreshed, fit and ready to learn. Walking improves interaction with other children, the development of social skills and helps to combat obesity.

As many may themselves remember, a generation ago some 70% of children walked to school. Now the walking figure is down to 50%, with a recent government target to increase this to 55%. The creation and enforcement of a 20mph zone around a school and on main routes to the school would help to encourage children to walk.

The crowds of parked cars around a school twice a day cause potential hazards. Parents who really need to drive their children to school could be encouraged to "park and stride" - park a 10-minute walk away.

Living Streets specialises in schemes to encourage children to walk to school and has policies and campaigns on this and the other issues I have inadequately addressed in this note. Much more detail can be found at www.livingstreets.org.uk.

Ken Chapman – Hon. Treasurer and Membership Secretary

History on our Doorstep – Minsden Chapel

If you are keen to walk off some of the excesses of Christmas and the New Year while taking in a bit of local history at the same time, then Minsden Chapel, a Scheduled Ancient Monument that is Grade II Listed (<https://tinyurl.com/mr44wkme>) is a quirky place to visit.

I first became aware of this somewhat isolated site and its woodland setting many years ago when out geocaching or 'treasure hunting' with friends. Sadly however, it appears the original cache (treasure) on this site has now been archived. So, if you were hoping to locate it you would be disappointed.

Built in the 14th Century, the chapel is all that remains of the village of Minsden, which was completely wiped out by the Black Death in the mid-fourteenth century. It is a relatively short walk from the small Hitchwood car park at the junction of Hitchwood Lane and the B651. From the car park you turn left onto the B651 and walk towards Hitchin for about 200 metres until you see a footpath sign on the left. This path, a part of the Hertfordshire Way, passes directly by the chapel. Muddy and slippery in parts at the time of visiting, the path can usually be seen clearly, especially in winter, as it follows the hedge on the field side of the B651 before turning left up the slope to skirt the right-hand side of the copse in the photo below, eventually reaching our still-hidden-from-view destination.



Whereas once of a day the chapel was fully accessible, at the time of my visit on January 7th this year, the entrance was fenced off, together with the rest of the copse, presumably due to the crumbling state of the building, in disrepair since the 17th century, and the danger it might pose. However, this had not acted as a deterrent to some because the wire fence at this point was considerably lowered and could be stepped over, though I would not recommend doing so. It is possible to get a good view of the ruins by walking a bit further along past the entrance to the spot where I took the photo shown below.



It seems that in bygone days that the chapel in its dilapidated, ivy clad state was attractive as a venue for weddings. It is reported that, in the last officially recorded wedding there in 1738, a piece of the roof

collapsed, knocking the service book from the curate's hands, narrowly missing his head on its downward trajectory, so beware if you are tempted to enter.

Depending on your sensitivity to such things, you might also consider avoiding visiting the chapel at night due to the many stories of paranormal happenings. Included amongst them are tales of a ghostly monk, sightings of a glowing cross on the wall, and the sound of distant music or the ringing of the stolen bells. I am told by Andrew Wearmouth of our Steering Group, that he camped out there with two friends circa 1965 hoping to see a ghost. However, no ghost appeared but there was a hole in one wall where the moon shone through which could have been mistaken for a ghostly event.

The reference in the paragraph above to 'stolen bells' ties in with the fact that the three bells of the chapel were taken and repurposed along with other items such as lead, oak fittings, the font and painted glass, much of the plundering taking place when the chapel was still being used as a place of worship. It seems that the villagers of St Ippollitts had an eye for the main chance, and it is believed that some of the carved stone tracery in St Ippollitts church came from Minsden Chapel.

Abandoned and left to its own devices the chapel continued to deteriorate. However, in the 1920s a Hitchin historian, Reginald Hine (1883-1949), took a great interest in it and leased the chapel from the vicars of Hitchin. In his attempt to preserve it he threatened legal action against those who would harm the site, even going so far as to suggest that after death he would continue to protect it 'in all ghostly ways'.



Although not buried in the chapel, Reginald's ashes were scattered at the site and his memorial stone is still to be found there. At the time of my visit, it appeared to be kept clear of overgrowth as can be seen from the photograph opposite.

According to an article in The Comet, May 11, 2017, the church had plans to sell off Minsden and there was a considerable campaign to stop the scheme led by the late Chris Parker of Keep Hitchin Special.

Unfortunately, without another champion stepping forward to its rescue, it is more than likely that this evocative ruin will, in time, disappear from the landscape altogether.

Valerie Schicker - Member of Steering Group

All photographs were taken by the author, while the historical information was gleaned from the excellent Preston Village website: <https://tinyurl.com/satwaywm>, which I strongly recommend visiting.

Dates For Your Diary

NHC Council

Thursday Feb 10th , 7.30pm. Council Chamber, District Council Offices, Letchworth Garden City.

Hitchin Town Talk and Hitchin Committee

Tuesday March 1st, 6.30 & 7.30pm. Venue to be confirmed.

Hitchin Forum's Big Spring Clean

Sunday March 20th, 10.00am to 12 noon. All about town. Email hflitterpick@gmail.com to join.

NHC Cabinet

Tuesday March 22nd, 7.30pm. Venue to be confirmed.

Signpost Improvements?

Hertfordshire County Council has recently been upgrading signposts on public rights of way. Footpath volunteers have been asked to provide details of the condition of signposts and the information they provide. An ideal signpost, we are told, is one which has a route number and description, a destination and distance. The one in the picture, at the western end of Brick Kiln Lane near what used to be the Windmill at Charlton, satisfies requirements. It has the route number, 96, which is the number designated on the Definitive Map* and the description, which in this case is “public restricted byway”. However, there are several other possibilities including a footpath, bridleway or byway open to all traffic (BOAT). The destination and approximate distance are shown. The arrow must be coloured. Signposts must have a Hertfordshire County Council logo and point in the right direction. Signs are only needed where the right of way leaves the road, and on un-metalled routes (so not urban alleyways). This is slightly puzzling as Brick Kiln Lane is metalled.



The requirements seem to me rather arbitrary, even rigid, to the extent that I wonder how useful the signs which meet them really are. Paved or tarmacked urban alleyways could often do with a signpost indicating where they lead. Details, such as the footpath number, are not much use without the Definitive Map. From the point of view of a user, particularly one without a map, a destination is probably the most useful piece of information. Suggesting a destination, however, can pose a problem because rights of way often turn at a junction, especially at a parish boundary, but there may also be a route straight ahead. There is no requirement for a signpost at such a junction (there may, however, be a way marker – normally just an arrow with no number) unless the junction is with a public road. If I were a user without a map, I would most likely apply the rule which says, ‘in the absence of information to the contrary, go straight ahead’, but this doesn’t always work unfortunately.



Perhaps with that in mind the Countryside Management Service has asked volunteers to fix stickers saying, ‘Where does this path go?’ and featuring a QR code which allows mobile phone users to access the definitive map. Whether that map is easy to use is another matter – I feel it needs some practice. The distribution of the stickers is at present patchy, depending as it does on the whim of the volunteer – I confess that I have mainly failed to remember to pick-up my roll of stickers on heading out.

Despite the shortcomings, I welcome anything which helps people to use rights of way responsibly. So far, I have reported on signposts near Pirton, Old Wellbury, Little Offley and the Tatmore Hills / Maydencroft area, but the list of those I have reported on is by no means exhaustive. If anybody notices a signpost in poor condition or which lacks the information required, please send details of its location and a picture to footpaths@hitchinforum.org.uk and I will pass them on.

Bill Sellicks – Co-chair

**The definitive map, together with the definitive statements, is a legal record of public rights of way in Hertfordshire. A web version is available at <https://webmaps.hertfordshire.gov.uk/row.htm>.*