



## NEWSLETTER

September - October 2022

No. 170

### Thoughts from the Co-Chair

Strange to be writing this when, at the time of writing, the past week or so has been so dominated by the death and funeral of Queen Elizabeth. Enough has been written elsewhere about her life, but it's good to see reminders of her Hitchin visits in the local media.

In this edition of the newsletter (or should it be 'broadsheet', or 'Forum Facts', or '????' – see Bill's comments at the end) there is a fascinating thought for Hermitage Road – could it be tree lined again? Refashioning our streets comes up repeatedly – reducing speed limits, introducing cycle lanes and finding some way of diverting the metal recycling trucks from residential areas come quickly to mind. Returning this street to its former glory is an attractive proposition – what do you think?

Within that article Brent Smith mentions a walk devised by our local Quakers. That tours the town centre and is a reminder of the wonderful contribution that they have made to the life and amenities of Hitchin. It can now be found on the ['About Hitchin'](#) section of our website.

Not news, but Stuart has continued his investigation of the facts surrounding solar farms and the impact on our Green Belt. Surely this is one of the hottest topics with the continued threat of energy shortage and climate change (and life is likely to get much hotter). Is the government really going to expand fossil fuel use, or be more energetic in pursuing carbon neutral sources? We hope for the latter, of course, but at what cost?

The Luton Airport planning saga continues with the Public Inquiry due. Bill has again dug into some of the facts and explains more about the study of flight paths, which could affect us even more. We liaise with LADACAN (Luton And District Association for the Control of Aircraft Noise), which is a community group that sits on the Luton Airport Consultative Committee to represent members' views, and fights for better recognition of the community perspective. Their website is extremely informative and well worth visiting.

Valerie has been wandering further afield and describes a visit to Shaw's Corner – part of our local history.

We have not yet looked closely at the Inspector's Final Report on the Local Plan, which has finally arrived and is on the North Herts Council website, but this will form part of our work in the near future.

Our **Autumn Litter Pick** will be on Sunday October 16th - all volunteers welcome. More details will be provided soon. And after that we have an **AGM** – the first face to face meeting for some time. Do join us at the Lucas Lane Sports Club on November 9th. Full details will be circulated soon.

1. Hitchin Forum's 'About Hitchin':  
<https://www.hitchinforum.org.uk/about-hitchin/>

*Mike Clarke - Co-Chair*

## Our Town, Your Say - Hermitage Road Trees

A group led by David Morgan (assisted by Brent Smith and Mark Wearne) has been promoting the idea of planting trees in Hermitage Road, thereby restoring the look and feel of the original Hermitage Road, which was lined on each side by rows of box trees.



*Visual of proposals by Mark Wearne*

Hermitage Road has improved over recent years but would benefit from having better pavements and trees set out into the roadway to break up the lines of parked cars. It is of generous width and can easily accommodate this.

The street has an interesting history, linked to the generosity of Frederic Seebohm (1833-1912), one of the town's Quakers. The Quakers played an important role in the development of the town, the evidence of which can be seen in the [Hitchin & The Quakers Trail<sup>1</sup>](#).

Seebohm lived in The Hermitage, a very large house fronting onto Bancroft. Although born in Bradford, his mother was from Hitchin and his family settled here. In 1874 he gave part of the extensive gardens to the



*The Hermitage (Courtesy of Gerry Tidy's postcard collection)*

town for the building of Hermitage Road to provide better access to the railway station from the centre of the town. In 1907 he donated the site on Windmill Hill to allow the building of the Girls' Grammar School, and his



daughters gave the rest of Windmill Hill to the town in 1921 as public open space. There had been a windmill there, owned by another Quaker, James Hack Tuke, until it burnt down in 1875.



*The rear of The Hermitage with its tennis court. (Hertfordshire Archives and Local Studies DE/So/F5/1)*



*Hermitage Road before the development in 1926 showing The Hermitage and the row of box trees. (Courtesy of Gerry Tidy's postcard collection)*

Hermitage Road was developed into what we have now by John Ray Ltd. The Hermitage was demolished in 1929 as part of the redevelopment but the corner building which replaced it is in a mock Tudor style as a



reminder of it. The wonderful Hermitage Cinema was built in 1932 but demolished in the 1960s and the horrid row of shops constructed.

There are political and technical issues which will need to be overcome before we can implement this scheme of tree planting. As part of a nationwide strategy the Government has a policy that supports urban tree planting. This is from their [press release](#)<sup>2</sup> of March 2022

*“Over half a million trees set to be planted in our towns, cities and countryside. Almost 680,000 trees will be planted in towns, cities and rural areas to increase access to nature and boost health and wellbeing. Trees make our towns and cities healthier and more pleasant places to be, helping to moderate temperatures, reduce pollution, decrease flood risk and improve people’s quality of life.”*



*View from Windmill Hill showing the remaining garden of The Hermitage and the Waters House that was demolished to build the Safeway Store (now Wilko). (Image edited from an open source file.)*

Grants for schemes of planting are available from the Local Authority Treescapes Fund and the Urban Tree Challenge Fund, but all projects supported through the Treescapes Fund must be led by a local authority. There are other funding sources, but we would be looking at planting so few trees that their environmental benefit would really mostly be their visual enhancement and this might exclude us. However, we would be making a positive case that could lead to larger schemes around the town and elsewhere.

Trees enhance our lives. A great example in Hitchin is the Indian Bean Tree, a species introduced to England in the 18th century from the southern United States, in St Mary’s churchyard. Ours was only planted in the mid-1970s but has become part of the life of the town. We would obviously be looking at much smaller trees for Hermitage Road with limited mature size.

Some external sources of information:

- This [report from 2013](#)<sup>3</sup> examines the barriers against planting and the benefits of having urban tree planting.
- There is an excellent [Urban Tree Manual](#)<sup>4</sup> in this pdf.
- This is the government [Highway tree management: operations note 51](#)<sup>5</sup>, Published July 2019.

Urban trees have sometimes been perceived as a problem, mostly due to leaf fall. This came to a head in Sheffield where trees were removed as part of a PFI contract which led to a public outcry. The [Sheffield Tree Action Groups](#)<sup>6</sup> state that 5,500 of Sheffield's street trees have been chopped down in the last five years –



*Hermitage Road (date unknown, probably 1940s, but prior to the demolition of the medieval buildings). Mr. Hore-Belisha introduced his famous beacons in 1934, the zebra stripes were not added to crossings until 1951. It shows the Hermitage Cinema built in 1932. (Courtesy of Gerry Tidy's postcard collection)*

another 12,000 will go over the next 20 years unless the project is curtailed: a council resolution last year has reduced the target number to be taken down.

There are specialist firms who undertake urban tree planting, mindful of the special circumstances presented by a busy road. The following section is taken from a presentation by GreenBlue Urban Ltd showing [how the below ground planters are constructed](#)<sup>7</sup>.

#### *LVC Tree Pits – Low Volume Contained Tree Pits*

*These tree pits are designed with root management - to prevent paving damage, an irrigation system, a small volume of soil cells and a root containing perimeter barrier. This tree pit design is frequently the only way of getting a tree into a very congested urban situation, with below ground space priority being given to service providers.*

*LVC Pits have a role to play in getting smaller trees into our streets and urban areas. In our experience these can achieve good results and give a tree in a managed situation, unlikely to create problems around but also restricted in how much it will grow and for how long.*

*It is important to have the trees growing from the pavement level rather than being in raised planters which destroy the feel that we would be seeking to achieve. We envisage peninsulas of paving extending into the carriageway with the car parking spaces set between them. This keeps the trees far enough away from the buildings and stops the road looking like a car park whilst retaining its parking provision.*

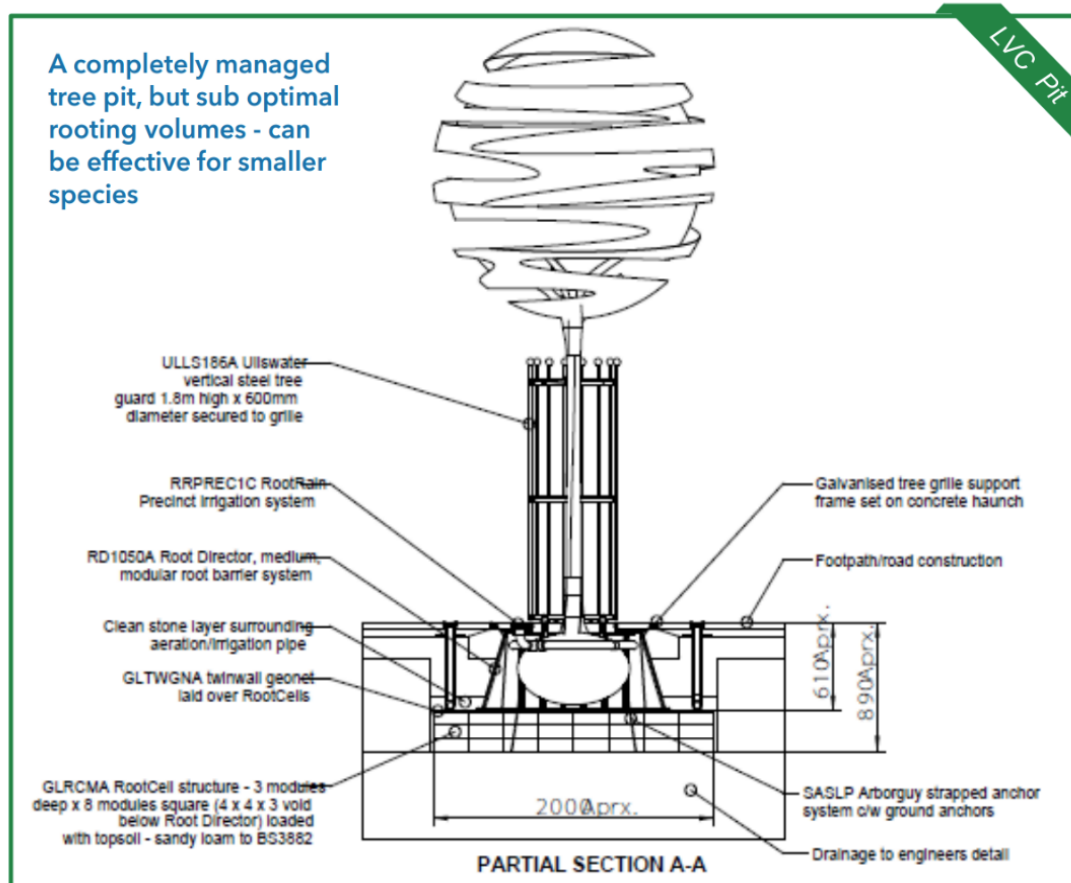


Diagram of Tree Pit from GreenBlue website

We would need expert advice on the type(s) and size of tree selected, disease resistance and maintenance. In England there is a resistance against the pollarding of trees which is done so successfully in continental Europe.

The selected trees should have low pollen loads, be types which filter and extract particulate and gaseous pollutants, plus be adaptable to the effects of climate change.

My choice would be the Bird Cherry but there is an historical case for having Box Trees (which would need to be disease resistant). We would need to source semi-mature trees as in such a public location it is not reasonable to plant twigs and wait for ten or more years for them to have a positive impact.

1. Hitchin & The Quakers Trail:  
<https://www.hitchinforum.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Hitchin-Q-Walk-revised-2022-1.pdf>
2. Government policy on tree planting:  
<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/over-half-a-million-trees-set-to-be-planted-in-our-towns-cities-and-countryside>
3. 2013 report on barrier and benefit regarding tree planting:  
[http://www.tdag.org.uk/uploads/4/2/8/0/4280686/btp\\_barriers\\_and\\_drivers\\_final\\_report\\_march\\_2013.pdf](http://www.tdag.org.uk/uploads/4/2/8/0/4280686/btp_barriers_and_drivers_final_report_march_2013.pdf)
4. Urban Tree Manual:  
[https://cdn.forestresearch.gov.uk/2022/02/7111\\_fc\\_urban\\_tree\\_manual\\_v15.pdf](https://cdn.forestresearch.gov.uk/2022/02/7111_fc_urban_tree_manual_v15.pdf)
5. Highway tree management, operations note:  
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/highway-tree-management-operations-note-51/highway-tree-management-operations-note-51#engineered-highway-solutions>

6. Sheffield Tree Action Group:  
<https://savesheffielddtrees.org.uk/>
7. Tree planter design:  
<https://www.greenblue.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Tree-Planting-in-Paved-Surrounds.pdf>

**Brent Smith – Member of Hitchin Forum**

## Solar Farms – just one aspect: The Green Belt

Following on from the last newsletter where the relative area of local industrial buildings and the proposed solar farms was discussed, this time we look at the question of whether the Green Belt should be used for such developments and summarise the situation surrounding two current applications where the use of restricted land is proposed.

In the 1955 Green Belt policy it is stated:

*"Inside a Green Belt, approval should not be given, except in very special circumstances for the construction of new buildings or for the change of use of existing buildings for purposes other than agriculture, sport, cemeteries, institutions standing in extensive grounds, and other uses appropriate to a rural area." [Underlining not in the original]*

From this it seems clear that any decision to build a solar farm within the Green Belt would be because its contribution to renewable energy generation targets and the good of the community falls into the category of either "very special circumstances" or "uses appropriate to a rural area". There is an interesting briefing note by [Farrar and Co<sup>1</sup>](#), a legal advisory company, on what is generally considered to constitute very special circumstances. It details a number of acceptable and unacceptable proposals, but is not definitive for solar farms.

Some solar farms have been approved on Green Belt land, such as one at [Gedling<sup>2</sup>](#) in Nottinghamshire. For the developer to gain approval, it was argued that the facility is adjacent to existing development, does not contribute to urban sprawl, can still be grazed, will be used as an educational facility, and will be temporary, with a planned life of 25 years. Here they seem to be targeting the "very special circumstances".

A perhaps more extreme example is that of [Southill Community Energy<sup>3</sup>](#) (SCE) in Oxfordshire, where the project is in an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) rather than 'just' Green Belt. This is a community benefit society – similar to a cooperative society but it benefits the whole community rather than just its members. It exists to provide environmentally-themed grants to the local community, but shares a percentage of its profits with the 400 members. Clearly the community involvement convinced the planners that this is a desirable development and overrode the view that the solar panels are unsightly or inappropriate. Perhaps an installation such as this would satisfy the "uses appropriate to a rural area" criterion.

The above are just two examples of successful applications to install solar farms on protected land. Many others have been rejected, possibly due to a lack of community involvement and sharing of the financial benefits, and possibly because they are considered by too many people that they are too much of an eyesore to be tolerated.

Our job as a community, led by our councillors, is to weigh up all the factors and provide well-justified decisions on each of the candidate schemes presented to us.

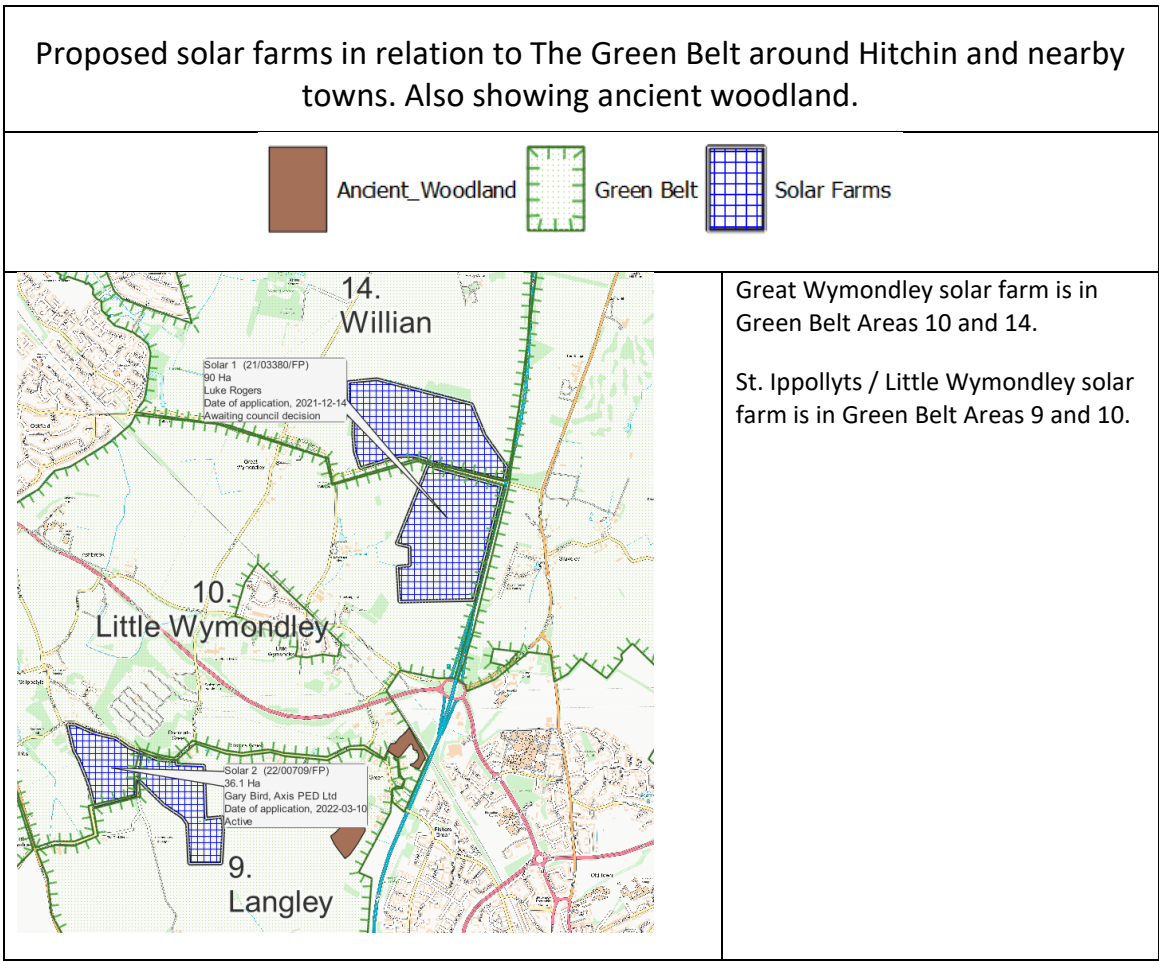
On the subject of the visual impact of solar farms, it is interesting to consider what was in the minds of those who drew up the 1955 policy. At that time there were no solar panels or wind farms (and certainly no 5G masts), but electricity pylons and their associated transmission cables were common. Evidently these were deemed not too much of an eyesore to be excluded from the countryside – perhaps they were welcomed as representing technological progress despite their cluttering and blighting of thousands of otherwise open views. Perhaps they were considered "uses appropriate to a rural area". I think what is more likely is that they had already entered into the public's collective blind spot along with telegraph poles, suspended phone lines and the thousands of pointless road signs. We can already see that wind farms are slowly disappearing into the blind spot, so perhaps these will be followed by solar panels.



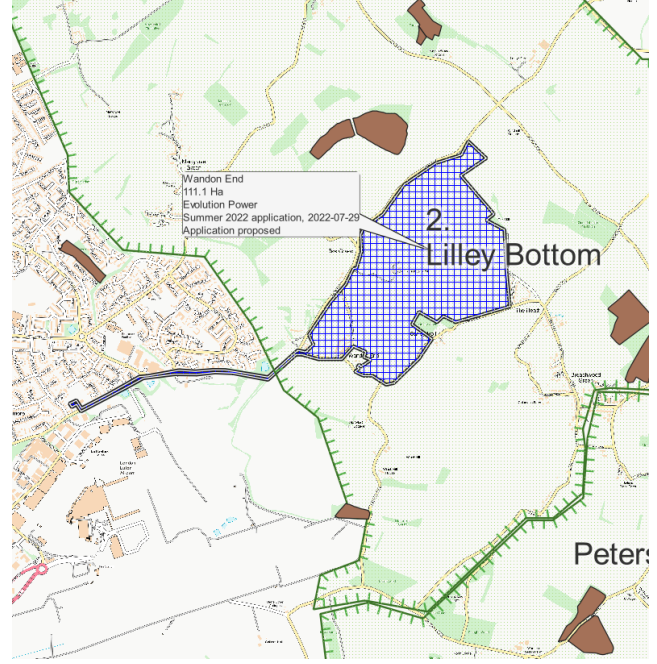
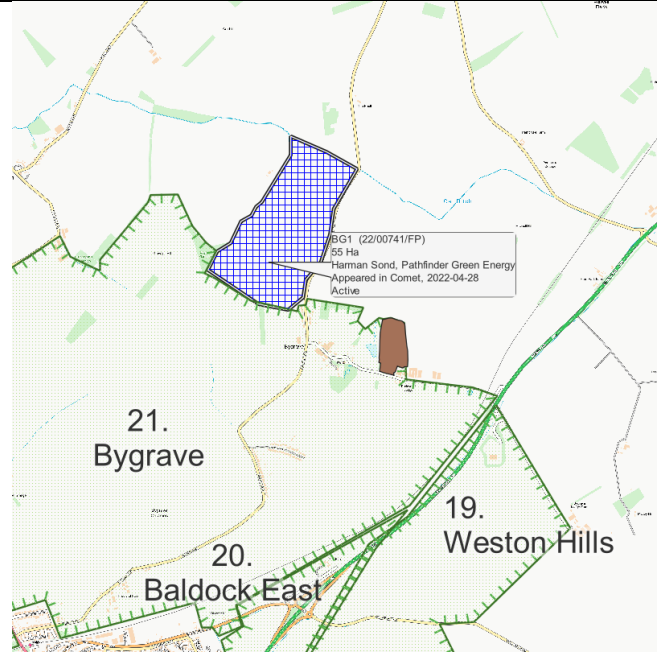
There is no conclusion to this article as it is intended simply to inform debate and to help us as a community to make the ‘right’ decisions on each of our candidate solar farms.

- 1. Very special circumstances - building on the Green Belt (farrer.co.uk):  
<https://www.farrer.co.uk/news-and-insights/very-special-circumstances-building-on-the-green-belt/>
- 2. Gedling: Midlands Green Belt solar farm approved | The Planner:  
<https://www.theplanner.co.uk/news/midlands-green-belt-solar-farm-approved>
- 3. Southill Community Energy:  
<https://southillcommunityenergy.coop/about>

To give some geographical perspective on the locations of our candidate solar farms, the maps below give a view of where they are in relation to the local Green Belt, as well as showing where they are relative to our local pockets of ancient woodland.





	<p>Lilley solar farm is in Green Belt Area 2 and extends along the road into the built-up eastern edge of Luton. This is for connection to the electrical grid and would not be visible.</p>
	<p>Bygrave solar farm is not in the Green Belt.</p>
<p><b>Map sources:</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. North Herts Council planning portal</li> <li>2. Ordnance Survey Open Data. Contains public sector information licensed under the Open Government Licence v3.0.</li> </ol>	

**Stuart Howarth – Member of Steering Group**

## Luton Airport Update

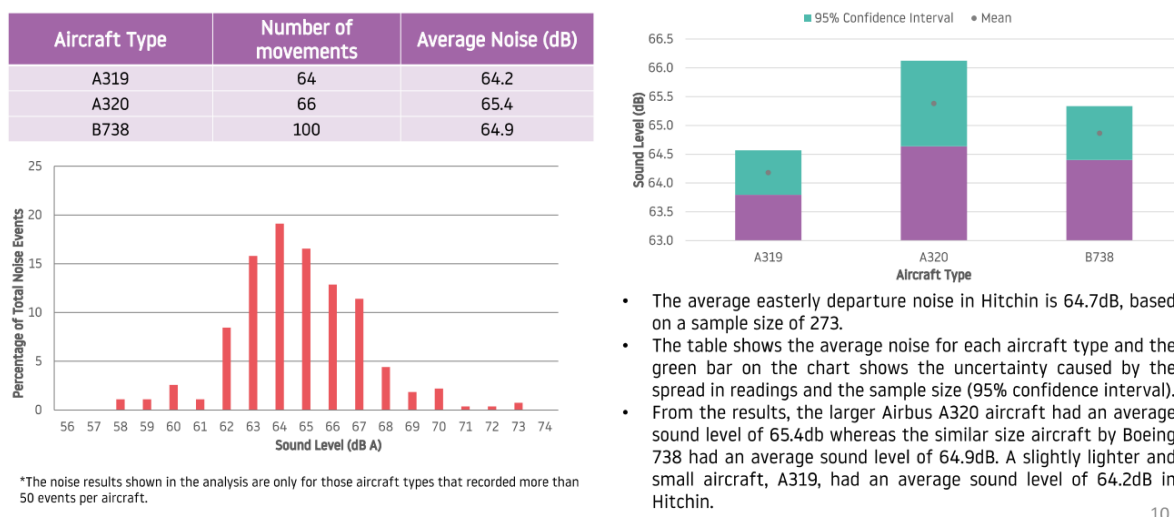
We are currently awaiting the Public Inquiry which has resulted from the call-in of Luton Borough Council's decision to permit the relaxation of both noise conditions and the 18 million per annum passenger cap to which the airport agreed in 2013. The inquiry starts on September 27th and is expected to take about 6 weeks. Meanwhile Luton Rising's (Luton Airport has rebranded itself as Luton Rising) proposals to expand to accommodate 32 million passengers per annum by 2032 appear to be stalled, amid a number of issues including the resignation of its

accountant, PricewaterhouseCooper, due to a disagreement with airport directors over the [valuation of the airport](#)<sup>1</sup>.

An interesting local development follows the installation of a temporary noise monitor in the garden of a Hitchin Forum member between 10th March and 5th May this year. In late August a report was published on the findings, a copy of which is available on the Forum’s website. Whilst the report is anodyne (it does at least avoid being self-congratulatory) the implication is that there is no problem. It is, however, revealing about aircraft noise in Hitchin, and the approach the airport takes in presenting the results of such investigations.

The period in question was atypical in that 60% of flights took off in an easterly direction, which is double the normal percentage. It is worth saying that this is based on the information supplied in the report’s introduction (which is supported by an accompanying chart) – it goes on to contradict itself about this in its summary of findings! During the that period, there were 889 aircraft that took-off in the easterly direction flying what the airport refers to as the ‘Olney noise preferential route (NPR)’. A NPR is a route which avoids areas of dense population and which the aircraft must follow until it reaches a ‘release height’ of 3000ft during daytime (4000ft at night). The Olney NPR passes to the south of Hitchin, but after attaining the release height, aircraft may be directed over Hitchin so that they fly more directly to their destination. Not all flights over Hitchin are associated with the Olney route. Some flights will be arrivals when takeoff is in a westerly direction, and there will be some which originated at other airports. Both are outside the scope of the report.

A screenshot of the data which I will discuss is taken from the report and appears below.



The report was based on a sample of 273 aircraft, although the above charts use a smaller sample of 230 aircraft. The justification for this is that the three aircraft types chosen represent the most common – those for which more than 50 flights were recorded. We have no information about the 43 aircraft (nearly 16% of the sample) for which data was gathered, but which are not considered. Were these noisier aircraft? Whilst this may be consistent with accepted practice, I am not convinced that it is an entirely valid way to analyse the figures, and it may not reflect the experience of those on the ground.

The left hand chart above shows that perhaps 4% (my estimate from the chart) of all flights made by these three aircraft types generated single-event noise levels of 70dB or above, with a maximum at 73dB. Using data from Luton’s [Tracking and Visualisation website](#)<sup>2</sup>, it is possible to calculate that of the 1201 easterly departing flights for which data is available for July this year, 651 (54%) are logged as achieving a maximum noise level ranging from 72 to 75dB at the fixed noise monitor at Frogmore, which is about 4km from the eastern end of the runway. As somebody who has stood under the flightpath near to that noise monitor, I can assure you that it is not a comfortable experience. Assuming that the sample of 230 is representative, 4% of the total of 889 flights over the monitoring period would equate to 36 flights over Hitchin generating similar levels of noise. According to information in the report, noise levels of 70-74dB are comparable with a loud radio or city street. Noise in the region of 50-60dB is irritating and may mask speech. Long-term exposure to noise of 70dB and above is hazardous (the report does not make it clear that the information relates to long-term exposure).

To return to the nearly 16% of aircraft in the sample for which data is omitted, this represents 144 out of the total of the 889 flights during the survey period. From previous noise reports published by the airport (the format and scope of which tends to change with time, so direct comparisons are not always possible) certain aircraft attract a particularly high level of noise complaints. For instance, during 2021, the A306 (Cargo) attracted one complaint for every five flights compared with the A320, for which one complaint was received for [every 8 flights](#)<sup>3</sup>. Not only do aircraft vary, but it would be unsurprising if some operators were more assiduous than others in observing local procedures. Although not being strictly comparable, it is possible to get an idea of this by looking at the compliance level with Luton's 'continuous descent approach' protocol. This is designed to reduce noise and emissions on the approach to landing. Compliance levels in 2021 vary for named airlines between 98% and 79%, with 'others' taken together at 78%<sup>3</sup>.

Given the likelihood that some unusually noisy aircraft might be involved, and the willingness of some operators to ignore locally recommended practices, it would be surprising if the missing 16% did not contain some very noisy flights.

In conclusion, it is likely that my estimate of 4% of flights is an underestimate of the proportion of Olney route flights exposing residents to noise levels of 70dB or more in and around Hitchin during the survey. The way in which the report has ignored 16% of the flights for which data was gathered raises questions which could be avoided if all of the data were to be used for analysis. The airport would be well-advised either to justify its sampling method more fully, or to include all data.

1. Luton Rising apparently sinking as auditors resign:  
<https://ladacan.org/luton-rising-sinking-as-auditors-resign/>
2. Luton TraVis Display of acoustic parameters combined with relevant traffic data:  
<https://travisln.topsonic.aero/WebReport/mst.php?nmtid=1>
3. LLA Annual Monitoring Report 2021:  
<https://www.london-luton.co.uk/LondonLuton/files/b7/b75e4e24-300c-4f89-a189-efb82a8196c6.pdf>

**Bill Sellicks – Co-Chair**

## Heritage on our doorstep - Shaw's Corner



Whilst not strictly local to Hitchin – it is 10 miles away - Shaw's Corner, the beautiful Edwardian Arts and Crafts house pictured left, is our closest National Trust property and the only one in Hertfordshire.

For 44 years Shaw's Corner, as it came to be known, was the country home of the world-famous Irish playwright and controversial political activist George Bernard Shaw. It is likely that some of you may have visited there to watch his plays; plays in



which he used wit and satire to challenge the social and political inequalities of the day.



One of Shaw's most unusual and ever-popular plays, *Saint Joan* (1923), saw him reach the height of his fame and, appropriately, St. Joan is commemorated by a statue in his garden (just left of the two tall pines in the adjacent photo). Indeed after his death some of the ashes of Shaw, mixed together with those of his socialist wife, suffragist Charlotte Payne-Townshend, were scattered around the statue as well as other places in the garden, his writing hut being one of them.

Prolific and influential in his writing, winning the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1925 and an Oscar for *Pygmalion* for Best Screenplay in 1939, Shaw has been hailed amongst British dramatists as second only to Shakespeare. In total he wrote 56 plays, five novels and a quarter of a million letters.

Much of Shaw's later work and letters were written in his revolving hut, to be found at the bottom of the garden (photo below, far left), which he called 'London' and used as an excuse to escape unwanted visitors. Unfortunately, the hut

recently suffered storm damage when a Scots pine came down next to it and at the time of my visit on August 7th this year it was visible but not accessible.

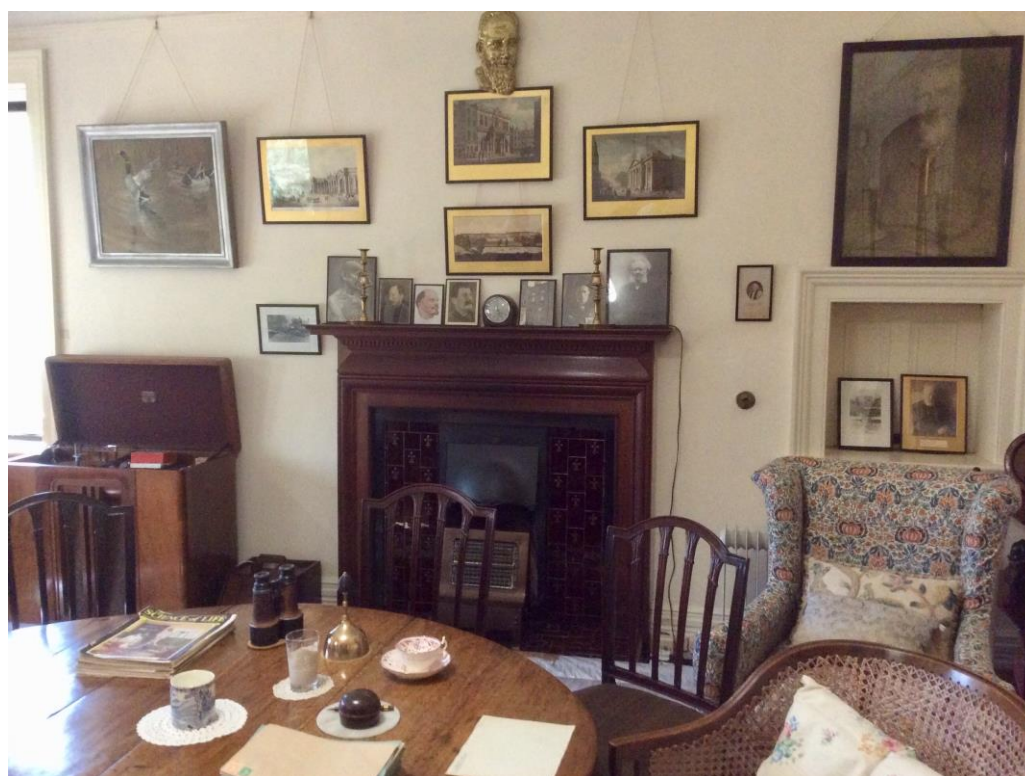


Before he died, aged 94, in 1950, Shaw left his home to the National Trust as he wanted his house to be a living record of his life and work. Thus, today, as you enter you can still see his Bechstein piano and his collection of hats and walking sticks, as well as his Jaeger suits hanging in the wardrobe, and even his typewriter sitting on his desk (photo left) with his glasses

next to it as though he had never left. Charlotte, on the other hand, who knew of Shaw's plans, said she did not want her possessions to be part of the collection.

In addition to their country abode at Ayot St. Lawrence, GB and Charlotte had a London flat where most of the treasures that now adorn Shaw's Corner came from. Not least is a bronze bust of Shaw created by the French sculptor Rodin and, it goes without saying, Shaw's Oscar.

Displayed in the picture below are Shaw's photographs. As well as that of his friend and neighbour, Antarctic explorer Apsley Cherry-Garrard (the subject of Hitchin Historical's September talk) one can't fail to notice those of Lenin and Stalin sitting on the mantelpiece. Our house guide explained that Shaw liked strong men. It seems that his admiration for both Stalin and Mussolini was fed by his belief that dictatorship was the only viable political arrangement.



As you will have probably gathered by now it is completely impossible to encompass the whole of Shaw the man here. However, even if you don't want to become a Shavian scholar, I'm sure that you would find a visit to Shaw's Corner fascinating and, if you haven't visited before, you definitely should. The three-and-a-half acre garden alone is worth it. You will discover much, much more than the sparse information given here (gleaned largely from my visit and the National Trust webpages). In addition, you will be treading the paths of many famous visitors such as Vivien Leigh, Danny Kaye, the Astors and Lawrence of Arabia. For entry details visit the [National Trust Shaw's Corner page<sup>1</sup>](#). One word of caution though, there is no public transport to this rural idyll and, though pretty, the lanes to get there are full of twists and turns. It seems that when Shaw left his incredible home to the National Trust, he didn't think about the practicalities such as visitor numbers and parking. Unfortunately, Shaw's treasured vegetable patch had to be demolished in order to make room for the car park. Being a vegetarian, it was one of the key features in his garden.

However, I would like to make the suggestion that instead of driving to Shaw's Corner you follow the National Trust's easy [walking trail<sup>2</sup>](#) to there, perhaps stopping off in the village for refreshments at the 14th Century [Brocket Arms<sup>3</sup>](#), which retains many of its original features.

Described elsewhere as the literary trail, this walk will take you through the lovely Hertfordshire countryside, starting in the pretty village of Wheathampstead. Also, as well as following in the footsteps of Shaw and visiting Shaw's Corner, you will see the old Station Platform and Lamer Park, home of Shaw's great friend Apsley Cherry-Garrard.



1. National Trust Shaw's Corner:  
<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/shaws-corner>
2. Shaw's Corner National Trust walking trail:  
<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/shaws-corner/trails/wheathampstead-to-shawandrsquo-s-corner-circular-walk>
3. Bocket Arms:  
<https://www.bocketarms.com>

All photographs were taken by the author.

*Valerie Schicker - Member of Steering Group*

## Beyond re-branding?

A member of our Steering Group recently suggested that it is time to reconsider the title of this Newsletter – perhaps its contents are not adequately described by the word ‘news’.

What is ‘news’ in the local context? We have a model in our local paper, The Comet. Main feature articles may involve crime, human interest stories or issues such as the potential harm to local businesses as a result of the pandemic and the cost of living crisis. Correspondents to the letters page often pick up these and other themes. There are also comment features – the Forum has contributed a number of these over the past year or so. Inside and back pages include stories which are often not earth-shattering, some might find them boring. These may be reports on local events such as fêtes, sponsored walks and sport. Whilst any of these may be of interest to a minority of readers, those involved, often stalwarts of the community, receive some recognition and free publicity for their events.

Quite apart from The Comet, members may receive local news through a range of social media platforms. The Forum is being more proactive in this respect – posting links to our newsletter and website on Facebook and Twitter, which brings the content of the newsletter to a wider audience.

There are several ways in which members, and others who might be our readers, may receive ‘news’, any of which may have a greater reach than our newsletter. Of course, The Comet, Facebook and Twitter provide the opportunity for readers to express their opinions. In terms of debate, I find the Comet’s letters page tends to be the preserve of those who wish to repeat the same points, often with no intention of consideration of subsequent counter arguments. Letters on the subject of solar farms, for instance, tend to repeat ‘obvious’ solutions (‘put them on factory roofs’) with no willingness to consider the problems involved with these solutions or other points of view. Facebook and Twitter appear to me to have similar characteristics, but with the increased possibility of unpleasant vilification.

So how is this newsletter different from a newspaper, or what might normally be posted on social media? I have not systematically analysed articles in our newsletter, but it seems to me that relatively little of their content could be described as ‘news’ in the way that it appears in The Comet, although we do include some details of forthcoming events (‘Diary dates’) which we feel may be of interest. ‘A view from the Chair’ contains snippets, often from personal observation. The articles we normally include may contain information which is possibly new to readers, but to classify it as ‘news’ would be stretching the point. I doubt that keeping members up to date is the main aim of those of us who write such pieces. The comment pieces which we have recently supplied to The Comet illustrate a clear difference between articles in our newsletter and those in a newspaper. These tend to be versions of articles which have previously appeared in the newsletter and are subject to the requirement that their content is approved by our Steering Group (as the original version in the newsletter will have been). The pieces in The Comet are shorter (they are limited to about 350 words, although that limit is not always rigorously applied). However, the key difference is that the newsletter versions tend to include links to the sources used to underpin the piece. Without that, points of view are in danger of becoming assertions. In the light of the epidemic of fake news, conspiracy theories etc., I think it is important



to share the evidence supporting anything we might say, so that others may examine it and make up their own minds.

The suggestion of a name change was partly in response to feedback from a number of members to recent editions. Broadly they valued the thought, research and analysis which often goes into articles, and were often keen to engage with their authors in further discussion and debate. The title 'Newsletter' doesn't really give a flavour of that. According to its constitution, one of the Forum's five objectives is 'to provide a forum for public discussion of ideas and problems...'. I think that articles in our Newsletter have the potential to initiate such discussion. This is particularly so since we have not held in-person meetings over the past two years.

With the increasing profile of the Forum's website, Facebook and Twitter posts, our articles have the potential to reach a wider audience. If we do decide to change the name of the newsletter, I hope that it can reflect the value of reasoned, rational and evidence-based debate, free of the ad hominem attacks which are the trademark of many public figures. Steering Group members have already briefly discussed some possibilities. We would, however, welcome suggestions from the wider membership for consideration – please contact [chair@hitchinforum.org.uk](mailto:chair@hitchinforum.org.uk) if you have ideas.

***Bill Sellicks – Co-Chair***

## **Dates for your Diary**

Autumn Litter Pick – details to follow by email

Sunday 16<sup>th</sup> October

Annual General Meeting – Lucas Lane Sports Club

Wednesday 9<sup>th</sup> November

### **LIKE US ON FACEBOOK!**

Please take a minute to LIKE our new Facebook page. The current page will soon be removed and, though we've done our best to save it, sadly it's time to start a new chapter. We'd really appreciate your help by liking and sharing our new page (link below) with your friends and groups to help us maintain all the followers we have at present:

<https://www.facebook.com/HitchinForum/>