

HITCHIN FORUM

Caring for our Town

NEWSLETTER

November - December 2022 No. 171

Judi Billing MBE

Judi Billing was a very active and committed local councillor and long-term member of Hitchin Forum, unique in her long and passionate work in our town, and widely appreciated. We were shocked to hear of her sudden passing, just a few days after seeing her at a meeting. Tributes to her have mentioned her work in Bearton ward and she clearly influenced issues across the town and district. We recall that she was chair of Hitchin Committee when there was a discussion about the poor access to councillors, so she set up the Town Talk, a meeting before the Hitchin Committee when the public can raise questions and seek answers from their elected representatives. Our most recent exchange with her was over the prospects of extending the 20mph limit in town and also the potential road link from the industrial area to the Stotfold Road, both of which she had championed, but had met a brick wall at the County Council. She will be sadly missed and we extend our condolences to her family and colleagues.



Image: North Herts Labour

Thoughts from the Co-Chair

Well, not a lot has happened recently, except the prime minister got it totally wrong and moved on, inflation went up, recession was ushered in, everyone feels poorer and is likely to feel colder, the Putin war continues, Cop27 fizzled out with barely any hope left to avert a climate disaster. Cannot say much more about that, other than to express utter horror.

And in Hitchin? Our AGM has happened and we hope you have looked at the circulated minutes and the Plastic Free report. Do send us comments on any of that, we really need to know what you think.

The Local Plan has been adopted by North Herts Council - Neil has summarised that. If you missed watching it, and have an evening or two to spare, there is a link to the recording of it on YouTube via the minutes of the Council meeting of November 8th (a very useful service provided by NHC). Bill has successfully organised another litter day and reports on that – some more photos are on our website and Facebook page. He also reports on the Luton Airport Inquiry, which should now be finished, but a date for the conclusions is uncertain.

Stuart has added to the information on solar panels. He has spared the general readership a very detailed and searching analysis of the calculations he has made, but that is available via our website. He also mentions the Council's deliberations about the Great Wymondley solar farm at its planning committee, the recording of which is available on their website.



Valerie has somehow lightened the mood by describing a tour of the ghostly experiences recounted around Hitchin. I don't believe in such stuff, though cannot quite explain how on October 31st (my late mother's birthday) some years ago, we found a bat flying around a bedroom in our house. Very eerie...

We have close connections with the Friends of Butts Close and admire their vigilance for that valuable green space. Its specialness has even attracted the attention of Dr Who, who should be visiting next year! Watch that space!! Their newsletters can be found via our [website](#).

It seems too early to say so, but we may not have another chance to say it - so we hope everybody has a peaceful and relaxed Christmas (and as our town centre manager would remind us, having supported our local businesses by shopping locally!).

Mike Clarke - Co-Chair

Adoption of Local Plan by Extraordinary Meeting of North Herts Council on 8th November 2022

During the discussions over the years regarding the Local Plan, Hitchin Forum has been at pains to object to it, on the grounds of what were perceived to be a number of serious flaws, and had written to all Hitchin Councillors, expressing that view. We were unable to attend the adoption meeting on November 8th in person, but before the meeting, following a request for further guidance, the Forum wrote to Cllr Ian Albert, indicating an acceptance that, despite its flaws, it was likely to be approved, and that having the Plan was better than it being refused. In its reply, the Forum stated that it would hope to work with the Council to prioritise brownfield sites over Green Belt, emphasise the need for a high proportion of affordable and rented housing, and for a high standard of construction including insulation and solar panels.

The meeting began with five-minute statements from 10 individuals. These included representations on behalf of various groups. 9 speakers objected to the proposals to build on Green Belt land, while one appeared to welcome them. Objectors from Cockernhoe and Mangrove Green, who are opposed to the 'East of Luton' scheme, were particularly insistent that the process for their area was seriously flawed. They and other objectors asked for the plan to be approved, excepting their areas.

The Council's Strategic Planning Officer advised that the entire plan had to be approved as it is or not at all, so, for example, East of Luton cannot be excluded. He advised that each site would still have to go through the planning process. He also said that the plan would be reviewed to bring it up to date.

Some 28 of the 40 councillors who were present spoke. Some were outright against, but the majority said they would vote 'for' 'with a heavy heart', because without a plan there would be loss of control of development, and decisions would be forced on the council by hostile developers and by government inspectors. They urged a rapid start on the review process, 40% affordable housing and updating of town centre strategies. The vote was 30 for approval 8 against with two abstentions.

Neil Dodds - Member of Steering Group

Approval of 88-hectare Solar Farm at Great Wymondley

At a meeting of North Herts Council Planning Committee on 17th November 2022, local objectors were uniformly against the proposals. The councillors, however, narrowly approved the scheme, as recommended by the Planning Officer. The solar farm, which has a contractual life of 40 years, must revert to agricultural use at the end of this term. This approval may well open the way for the go-ahead of the nearby solar farm scheme at Redcoats Green and others such as those at Lilley Bottom and Bygrave.

During the debate it was pointed out that in general the optimum location for solar farms is within green belt areas simply because they are close to centres of population, hence suitable national grid connection points. More remote locations, on the other hand, require expensive, inefficient and long interconnecting cables.

One aspect of the impact of the Great Wymondley solar farm and solar farms in general is discussed later in the newsletter.

Neil Dodds - Member of Steering Group

Hitchin Forum's Autumn Clean-up

Our most recent litter pick attracted over 120 volunteers, and once all returns from the various locations were counted, nearly 90 bags of rubbish were collected. Sadly, we have had to abandon efforts to separate out recycling, but many participants were prepared to take home things like cans and bottles to add to their grey bins.

We were joined by the members of the Bubbleworks Run Community. This is a running group which also enjoys beer, and is based in the Beer Shop in Hermitage Road. They were able to fill some gaps by working on some of the roads between our usual sites, and did an excellent job. As in the spring, a lot of participants felt that there was less litter this time, which is a tribute to North Hertfordshire's contractors, Urbaser and John O'Conner. The Dell, as usual, was cleared by a team of 22 Guides, leaders and parents based at Holy Saviour Church. Since the start of the Covid pandemic, a very frequently found item was, of course, the discarded mask. I am pleased to say that very few were found this time. There has been, however, a worrying development. No fewer than 12 empty large catering cylinders of nitrous oxide (laughing gas) were found in Woodside car park, with others being found elsewhere. The Town Centre Rangers had recovered a similar number a few days before. These seem to be replacing the much smaller ampoules of the same gas (which is inhaled to produce a 'legal high'). This is of concern because there is evidence which suggests that the gas is a good deal [more dangerous than previously thought¹](#), especially when inhaled in large volumes. Not only that, these cylinders contain the gas at high pressure – inhaling it direct from the cylinder will cause burns due to the low temperature achieved when the gas is released. If you come across these cylinders (picture overleaf), North Herts Council recommends that they are reported as a street cleansing request. Empty, they are not inherently dangerous, so normal removal times under their contract are acceptable. They can be reported either by phoning the Council or using the [online form²](#) on the North Herts Council website.



Butts Close's newest recruit

If you would like to take part in the Forum's event to be held on Sunday 26th March 2023, please email hflitterpick@gmail.com.

1. Laughing gas 'can cause paralysis', warns Wales' top doctor
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-54527395>
2. North Herts Council street cleaning request
<https://www.north-herts.gov.uk/report-street-cleaning-problem>



Some of the Bubbleworks crew



Catering cylinders of nitrous oxide found recently in the town centre

Bill Sellicks – Co-Chair

Folklore on our doorstep - Haunted Hitchin

By the time you read this piece, Halloween 2022 will be but a memory - hopefully not a too frightening one! However, at the start of writing, Halloween was just around the corner. Also, still fresh in my mind, was the renowned Hitchin Ghost Walk I had recently taken part in. Then, coincidentally, a spooky musical Halloween card dropped on the doormat, all of which I took to be a sign that tales of Hitchin’s hauntings should be the topic of this article.

Our Hitchin, a medieval market town, known to have existed since at least the eighth century AD, has fortunately retained much of its historic character. Thus, steeped in history and being one of the oldest towns in Hertfordshire, it is a ghost hunter’s paradise. So much so that over many years, local historian and author Derek Wheeler hosted guided tours that took groups to discover Hitchin’s ghosts and reveal the town’s most atmospheric and infamous haunted places.

However, during the Covid lockdowns, Hitchin’s Ghost Walks were put on hold and since they restarted, they have new hosts. These are Adrian, a former pupil of Derek Wheeler’s, and Glynn who, kitted out in black top hats for the occasion, warmly greeted the group.

Setting out from the Information Office, the first stop was St. Mary’s churchyard which, surprisingly, we were told was not haunted - much to the relief I daresay of the vicar, the Rev. Chris Bunce. Our purpose there was to wonder at two skulls and crossbones engraved on a headstone (photo below). It seems that they were placed there to remind us of the inevitability of death, poignant now as the community recently remembered Hitchin’s fallen at the Cenotaph next to St. Mary’s.



From our position near the headstone we were able to look up to an attic window of a room in Churchyard Walk where the famous, Hitchin born etcher [Frederick L. Griggs¹](#), had worked before he became disenchanted with Hitchin and moved to the Cotswolds. However, it appears that his spirit has never quite left the town as he can still be heard muttering in his old room.

Walking out of the churchyard gate into Churchyard Walk, a right turn took us to the short straight alleyway leading to the High Street known as Aram’s Alley. This is where, after dark, the ghost of Eugene Aram is said to pace up and down. Eugene committed a murder in Yorkshire and was on the run for some time before his sin finally caught up with him and he was hanged.

Finding ourselves in the High Street the group came to a halt across the road from the original Hitchin Woolworth's site, now Boots Chemists. Apparently, when Woolworths moved a few doors down in the 1960s to the former site of Perks & Llewellyn (lavender growers), strange stories started to emerge of people smelling lavender in the store and of a woman dressed in Victorian attire mounting a non-existent staircase. Furthermore, it was reported that two ladies in old fashioned clothing walked around the store amongst the public and notably so in the area of the Pic n Mix!



From the High Street we progressed to West Alley (adjacent photo) which has been in existence for over a thousand years and where a Quaker meeting house once stood. It was on this site that the ghost of an elderly Quaker gentleman had been witnessed sitting peacefully reading a book.

West Alley is important in its own right as it is partly the *raison d'être* for the formation of [Hitchin Forum²](#), 30 years ago in 1992, when, due to planned development, the Alley was threatened with obliteration and there was also a real danger that Hitchin British Schools could be bought and demolished.

Running parallel to West Alley, the Arcade was naturally our next port of call, at the rear of which had previously stood The Swan, a 16th century coaching inn. It was in this area that we were directed to a window high up that we could see wasn't quite closed and which, it was related, flies open from time to time for no reason anyone can explain.

Next on the agenda, and also dating back to the 16th century, was The Sun Hotel that is said to have several ghosts, the most legendary of these being that of the gambler, Lord Havisham, who died by suicide in one of the rooms and who still manages to terrify by parading in the ballroom. In addition, the old coach entrance to The Sun is reputed to be haunted by the spirits of three robbers who held up a coach there and were hanged as a result of their misdeed.

Finally, no ghost tour could be complete without a visit to Hitchin Priory (photo below) which dates back to the 14th century and is renowned for more than its fair share of ghostly goings on. As we gathered at the Priory we were told the tale of the headless horseman, supposedly Goring the Cavalier. A royalist, Goring was killed by the Roundheads during the civil war, and is said to ride on a white steed from High Down House to the Priory on the night of June 15 every year, possibly to rendezvous with his sweetheart, thought to be the mysterious grey lady that has been observed floating above the stairs on the top floor of the building.



On trying to research these stories I found that, as is mostly the case with folklore, accounts tend to vary in their descriptions although the core of the story usually remains the same. Also, I might add, I haven't attempted to cover every haunting referred to on the tour, which I was told was fully booked up for the rest of the season. However, Adrian and Glynn assured me that they had by no means exhausted the tales of Hitchin's hauntings and should I book a future tour it would reveal further Hitchin ghost stories. Therefore, I don't feel I have acted as a spoiler by writing this account and would encourage you to follow in my footsteps if you wish to know more about the haunted aspects of our town.

1. Frederick L. Griggs
<https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/art-artists/name/f-l-griggs-ra>
2. Hitchin Forum origins
<https://www.hitchinforum.org.uk/about-us/history>

(All photographs were taken by the author with the exception of West Alley which features on the Forum's website. Some doctoring has taken place and a silver tone filter has been used to create an aged and ghostly effect!)

Valerie Schicker - Member of Steering Group

Luton Airport update

At the time of writing, the inquiry resulting from the call-in of Luton Borough Council's decision to allow Luton Airport to increase passenger numbers to 19 million passengers per annum (mppa) is coming to an end. I have to confess to finding the sample of video recordings of meetings that I have looked at difficult to navigate, and there are, as yet, no available written records which might have made it easier to follow what was actually happening. I did find the session on November 11th, on conditions and obligations, more accessible, probably because I felt more confident that I had a grasp of the issues, so I will use it to give a brief flavour.

The exchanges involved Counsel for LADACAN questioning one of the airport's experts about the track record of the airport in rapidly expanding to the extent that noise conditions were breached in 2017. Questioning focused on several issues which we have noted in the past in our submissions on the matter of noise controls. Why, given that the airport was so wrong in its growth predictions to the extent that it breached its agreed 2028 passenger cap (18mppa) 10 years early, should its projections about future growth be given credence? How reliable are its current predictions about operators moving to quieter aircraft, when similar predictions made in 2013 were not fulfilled? Exactly how would the airport prevent increases in night noise due to factors at the departure airport delaying aircraft scheduled to land during the daytime?

You would expect me to be unimpressed by the expert's responses, which I was! What matters, of course, is how they are seen by the three presiding inspectors. We will not know about that until they report in 2023.

The inquiry ended with site visits and closing statements between 15th and 17th November.

Bill Sellicks – Co-Chair

Solar Farms – just one aspect: Climate Change Impact

To make an informed decision on the desirability - or at least acceptability - of the proposed solar farms in our neighbourhood it is well worth understanding how beneficial they are in terms of their effect on climate change compared with conventional farm crops grown for biofuels. More and more of such high energy crops are being used for vehicle fuel, so it seems a reasonable comparison to make. Of course, there is no completely fair way of making this comparison: how do we judge the benefit of elephant grass against rapeseed oil, cabbages, or electricity? This article attempts to go some way towards doing just that, but there is no guarantee it is correct, accurate, unbiased or fair!

In trying to establish a method of calculating the carbon balance I became rather bogged down by questions branching away from the original, leading down all sorts of online alleys, some blind, others with their own multiple branches and sources. So, to save presenting all the details that were used in the analysis, we present here just a summary. For those who wish to look in more detail at the assumptions, references and calculations, please see the [dedicated analysis document](#)¹. It would be very interesting to get feedback from members who wish to scrutinise, question and challenge the methods used, so that we can update it with improved confidence in its conclusions.

Conclusions

The calculations lead to the – initially surprising - broad conclusion that the annual global heating emissions from a solar farm of a given area are about **14 times more** than those of a conventional farm growing oilseed rape destined for vehicle fuel oil. On the other hand, the solar farm generates about **112 times more** usable energy when expressed in terms of how many vehicles could be run on their respective outputs. A VW Golf – diesel or electric as appropriate - was used as the benchmark for these calculations, but equally the conclusions could be expressed, for example, in terms of the number of households that could be supplied by the fuels.

The analysis presented covers only one of the many important aspects of the whole story. Even within this analysis no mention is made of other types of farming such as livestock farming, biomass farming, equestrian stabling, rewilding, biodiversity or wind farms. Each has its own story and would need to be considered on its own merits.

For further consideration...

...at the recent North Herts Council Planning Control Committee meeting held on 17th November we were given a completely independent set of conclusions regarding the effectiveness of solar farms. The video record of the meeting can be viewed on the [NHC YouTube²](#) channel. In it - at around 1h:01m of the meeting - it was stated that the 88 Ha Great Wymondley solar farm will – subject to final go-ahead - provide the electricity needed to power 32% of North Herts houses. Whilst this is a good, headline-grabbing figure, we should be mindful that it probably only includes current household electricity usage and does not take account other users such as factories and the transport infrastructure. We should also bear in mind that in the future, once gas boilers and other appliances have been replaced with their electrical equivalents, households are likely to use far more electricity than they do now.

1. Calculations used to justify carbon balance conclusions
<https://www.hitchinforum.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Solar-farm-carbon-balance-calculations.pdf>
2. Recording of NHC Planning Control Committee meeting 17th Nov 2022
<https://youtu.be/n9XdEylyJ3k>

Stuart Howarth – Member of Steering Group

Hermitage Road Trees – a follow-up

In the last newsletter there was an article by Brent Smith in which he presented ideas for improving Hermitage Road, including the planting of trees in dedicated planters. For those wishing to dig deeper into how urban tree planting can be carried out successfully there is an interesting file produced by [Greenblue Ltd¹](#). Furthermore there are schemes whereby tree planting can be used as part of flood mitigation, as shown in [this example²](#) in Marylebone, carried out by SusDrain.

1. Greenblue tree planting cost benefit analysis
<https://greenblue.com/gb/resource-centre/street-tree-cost-benefit-analysis/>
2. Susdrain flood mitigation
https://www.susdrain.org/community/SuDSAwards2020/SuDS_Award_entries/Small_retrofit/marylebone_len_2020_awards.pdf

Dates for your Diary

Town Talk. Hitchin Town Hall.	6.30 pm	Thursday 8 th December
Hitchin Committee. Includes 'Air Quality Update' and information on Churchgate development planning. Follows Town Talk.	7.30 pm	Thursday 8 th December
North Herts Council Extraordinary General Meeting. Agenda not yet revealed. Council Chamber, District Council Offices, Gernon Road, Letchworth.	7.30 pm	Monday 19 th December
North Herts Council meeting. Venue: check NHC website.	7.30 pm	Thursday 19 th January
North Herts Council Cabinet meeting. Venue: check NHC website.	7.30 pm	Tuesday 31 st January
Hitchin Councillor Surgeries. Hitchin Market Place.	10.30 am — 12.00 noon	First Saturday of every month

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