



## NEWSLETTER

January - February 2023 No. 172

### Thoughts from the Co-Chair

A new year, some new opportunities, but some of the old problems.

The most recent of the opportunities concerns how the council will proceed with the Churchgate problem and what we can do to influence the design. David Howlett provides some good thoughts on how to approach its future development. As someone with an historical perspective he does include a positive retro view on the buildings, with an argument to upgrade the site, rather than demolish (I have a positive retro view about the Wilko building, possibly uniquely so, as it reminds us what was 'good' in 1976. One just has to ignore the tragedy of the destruction of the house that was there before....). An alternative view, available on [newchurchgate.org](http://newchurchgate.org)<sup>1</sup>, shows an exciting and wider redevelopment of Churchgate and the market area. So much has been thought about over the years ([see a timeline here](#)<sup>2</sup>) that it seems over optimistic to expect action soon, but we can but hope!

The Council's initial consultation ends on February 5th (get your comments in soon!), but we expect much more debate and developed ideas and plans in the months to come.

Neil has provided a planning update, with particular interest in the Crow Furlong plans. Bill has gone forensic on the planning reports submitted concerning the Highover Farm and Crow Furlong plans – often the devil of plans is in the details of the reports.

Now I will get personal – about the pothole outside my house. As last measured it was 50 x 70cm in area and 10 cm deep, and someone swerved to avoid it and clipped my wing mirror (expensive to repair!). I was engaged in trying to find out when the pothole would be repaired and getting familiar with the rules that govern an "unclassified" (but busy) road. Hello Herts CC, it's me again....

A helpful lady at County Hall sent me their 'DMA (Defect Management Approach) - Enquiry Guidance Notes' which is very helpful, but I am still puzzled why it is not directly accessible on their website.

I am told by our county councillor that pothole reports have increased sixfold in the past 12 months. They are everywhere! I have sympathy with HCC – the government's cutbacks on council budgets are causing cancellations, reduction and delays in services everywhere. But, glory be, 'my' pothole was filled in, very neatly, within the 20 day target. Well done HCC (and Ringway).

OK, now I've calmed down ... to Oughtonhead, where Valerie has described one of our local treasures. And it's where I join the Friends to do maintenance work – which is very satisfying and stress relieving!

Enjoy the read, and the New Year.

1. Newchurchgate website, concepts and drawings:  
<https://www.newchurchgate.org/the-opportunities>
2. Timeline of Churchgate – Hitchin Forum website:  
<https://www.hitchinforum.org.uk/revised-churchgate-timeline/>

**Mike Clarke - Co-Chair**

# Churchgate Policy – some comments

## Key Points

- Churchgate – and its Market component – is a vital contributor to Hitchin town centre.
- Decisions on its future (and finances) must be focused solely on the town centre's needs.
- Wholesale replacement is too risky: its best characteristics must be harnessed in refurbishment.

## Essential Background

Hitchin is the largest, most diverse and most resilient market, retail and service centre in North Hertfordshire; its catchment also includes a major portion of southern Bedfordshire. Despite significant change in town centres since the 1980s, Hitchin's role as a historic market town has, overall, adapted well. Recognition of these key facts, regrettably not reflected in recent North Herts Council (NHC) district plans, must be central in assessing any proposals for major change to, or development in, Hitchin, which is **the** and not just **a** town centre for the district.

## A Churchgate 'Problem'?

The Churchgate 'Problem' has undergone periodic review for over thirty years: no solution has yet been found. In retrospect this impasse is perhaps fortunate as a number of misguided proposals (such as wholesale replacement, the downgrading of the Hitchin Market space or the fanciful delusions of the Simons' Debenhams-Jewel scheme) have not been realised. Churchgate has survived de facto and continues to function in vital ways:

- Because of the uncertainties its lower rents/short leases have generally given high occupancy.
- It remains home to a wide range of smaller, independent and very useful businesses.
- Its structure provides key flexibility in unit size/amalgamation for independents.
- It provides a vital linkage between the main town centre core and the Market.

There is, however, some substance to the notion of a 'problem':

- Uncertainty and low rents have inhibited proper upkeep and incremental improvement.
- This has led to a somewhat shabby appearance in important aspects of the complex.
- Uncertainty has prevented the Market, which has survived well, from realising its full potential.
- To some people Churchgate is an alien 'brutalist' intrusion in the attractive 'historic market town' centre.

## A Churchgate Solution?

Devising a workable future for Churchgate and the Market is a critical aspect of sustaining Hitchin town centre. The recent acquisition of the leasehold by NHC should provide the opportunity for a rational long-term solution. That solution must, however, be both devised and implemented from a Hitchin focused perspective: there must be no temptation to utilise the site for a more general and ill-defined 'District return'. Any intelligent decision-making must give primacy to Hitchin's needs as these are in the wider interests of the District. The reality of the town's key retail and service role must be supported. If not, vital economic activity will be lost elsewhere.

The Churchgate solution should include the following elements:

- Accept the basic form of the complex as it is. By 1970s standards it is not such an affront to the historic town centre as it might have been. For example, the range of small units on Churchyard Walk works well and does not impinge unduly on St Mary's Church; the Market Place frontage and mural are remediable; and the centre's overall 'mass' is not too heavy in its nestling within the town's historic core.

- In fact it may now be time to appreciate Churchgate as a token of its time and part of the constant evolution of the town centre. Very few such small scale early 1970s shopping centres survive, so it would be worth restoring it well to make the most of its retro-character and individuality.
- Crucially, the retail function of the complex must be preserved and that function must also have a central role for smaller independent retailers/providers. Such local businesses remain key to Hitchin town centre and provide much of its distinctive character bringing in shoppers and visitors alike. There is absolutely no point in framing plans a-la-Simons which could see the relocation to Churchgate of key existing town centre multiples such as Boots or W H Smith as this would merely boost blight in areas of the historic core which small businesses would find it hard to occupy.
- In overhauling the retail element of the complex its internal flexibilities of size and form - which have so far allowed businesses to achieve their best fit within it - must be preserved.
- It is vital that close working with Hitchin Markets (which, correctly, is locally managed) is achieved to increase footfall through Churchgate to a refurbished market area beyond. Close working is also needed with businesses adjacent to but not actually within the Churchgate/Market curtilage. Careful thought is also needed about the improvement/capacity of the adjoining areas of key car parking.
- Any augmentation work should be fitted within the overall form and character of the existing building. Examples could be: a limited amount of 'residential above' provided by conversion of underused upper space along the main spine; improvements to the appearance and function of that main spine including enhancements to the shopping environment (such as glazed atrium roofing and space for seating/eating spaces, community pop-ups and hand-cart type small retailers, which could link well with the Market). Previous Hammersmatch proposals do cover some of these examples.
- Very careful consideration must be given to the needs of existing tenants during any augmentation/refurbishment works, for example, ideally, by phased work allowing 'shuffling' within the centre or discussion with local landlords to allow very temporary removal elsewhere in the town centre.
- A critical and central element for the long term will be some form of financial envelope for the refurbished complex. This must not be dictated by a crude local authority 'return on investment' approach: it has to recognise that the mix of smaller businesses needed for the future of Churchgate cannot be treated as a local authority cash cow in the way, for example, Hitchin car parking revenues have been. Obviously, the leasehold has been purchased by the District Council but the financial plan for the centre must be framed for Hitchin's needs. The context of this point is the consequence of recent district plans that have not accorded the town its due retail/service importance, which would have allowed a more nuanced and rational approach to the management of district resources within it. A Hitchin-first focus must be accepted: without it the risk of town centre failure will be increased and, as noted, this will lead to the wider loss.
- At all stages it will be essential to involve the specialised retail/service/marketing knowledge of the Hitchin Bid/Hitchin Initiative, other reflective civic groups such as Hitchin Forum, and also to provide for meaningful and responsive public participation.

## **Concluding Remark**

Churchgate has recently celebrated 50 years and has provided a real contribution to the diversity and economic well-being of the town centre. This role, along with that of the Market, must be consolidated and continued for the future. And this must be done in an imaginative, locally focused, carefully managed, long term and consistent way to achieve the very best outcome for the town and wider district.

*David Howlett – Member of Hitchin Forum*

## **Airport Update**

The inspectors have not yet published their conclusions following the inquiry into Luton Airport's attempt to increase its passenger cap from 18 to 19 million passengers per year. More news is likely before the next newsletter is published, so I hope to provide details at that stage.

***Bill Sellicks – Co-Chair***

## **Planning update**

Following adoption of the Local Plan for 2011-2031 on 8 November 2022, the first planning application for land which was formerly in the Green Belt, was for land to the west of Crow Furlong, referred to by North Herts Council's Local Plan as HT6. We were pleased to see that the developers had taken note of our previous points, including reducing the number of dwellings, pulling the houses back from the edges of the site, and leaving the woodland in the southern half of the site untouched. However, we still had objections, including to the loss of trees and hedgerows, and to the extra traffic and resulting increase in air pollution at the junction of Grays Lane and Upper Tilehouse Street, from HT6 and adjacent site HT5. We also found what appear to be errors in the technical submissions for both traffic and pollution, which we have brought to the notice of the Council. See the following article, which addresses concerns we have about the quality of the technical submissions.

We also reviewed a proposed housing development on land east of Bedford Road, between the Priory School and River Oughton. We objected, on the grounds that this land is still Green Belt and was not designated for development in the Local Plan.

Bowman's Mill, Ickleford, is to be demolished and replaced by a development of 71 dwellings. Note that the green field to the south side of the River Oughton is to remain and will not be built upon. We had previously commented favourably on this 'brown-field' scheme, and have checked that the proposed development complies with our comments.

These larger housing developments generally include 40% 'affordable dwellings'. In view of the difficulties for young and first-time buyers, this seems very desirable. However, there is no common agreement on what affordable means, in practice.

Another 'brown-field' site, at Whinbush Road, involves 8 flats on a vehicle maintenance garage site. We made no representation on this.

At the behest of neighbouring residents, we have previously objected (on grounds of appearance) to a number of high 'monopoles' and ground cabinets, requested by 5G telephone networks. These have generally been the subject of many neighbour objections, requesting they be located away from housing. In Cambridge Road, Hitchin, however, a 20m pole and associated wrap-around cabinets, to replace an existing 10m pole, was erected without consultation, under a General Permitted Development Order.

We will endeavour to review all planning applications in Hitchin. However, please let us know if you are aware of any nearby, including in the villages.

***Neil Dodds - Member of Steering Group***

## Fit for whose purpose? What is the quality of the reports that underpin planning applications?

In December 2019, a number of Forum members, together with members of other Hitchin community groups, attended a meeting organised by Rapleys about the proposed Highover Farm development (Planning Application ref no. 18/01154/OP). We had many questions. Among them, I wanted to know why, for 2021, the predicted annualised daily traffic count figures for various locations were often significantly lower than the 2017 baseline figures. For instance, the figure for Cambridge Road eastbound was 17487 in 2017, but just 14564 in 2021 (with no development) or 14719 (with development). The developer's representative scratched his head. 'I can't explain that' he said. However, he did promise that he would try to find an answer, which came a few weeks later, the key part of which is below:

*"You are correct that the annual averaged daily flows on some arms do reduce between the base year and the future modelled year. However, due to the nature of the strategic model that HCC have developed to inform and underpin the North Hertfordshire District Council's Local Plan, the large modelled area and the assumptions/development that is included within the model ultimately impacts on route choices, and therefore flows will reduce on certain roads in the forecast future year."*

Fundamentally, it is the difference between the **'2021 With Development'** and **'2021 Without Development'** scenarios that indicates the impact of the proposed development, and it is this difference that is considered and used to assess the proposed scheme.

I could accept that, particularly the last point about the comparison between the 'with' and 'without development' scenarios being the key point. However, the reply mentions the assumptions on which the model was based, which were not disclosed. I take the reply to mean that assumptions that are fed into the model include details of other proposed developments in the area. These developments will generate their own traffic. Motorists will therefore react by changing their routes in order to avoid any congestion caused. The size of such an assumed development, or perhaps the number of dwellings it provides, may change significantly between the time at which the model was run and the time at which the development becomes operational. It may not even go ahead at all. Why are we not able to interrogate those assumptions, I wonder?

Fast forward three years and I examined the [Air Quality Report<sup>1</sup>](#) (to which I will refer from now on as 'the Report') which was submitted to support the application to build on the land to the west of Crow Furlong (application number 22/03092/FP). Again, it was the predicted traffic flow figures in **Table AII.2 2020 Traffic Data** for Upper Tilehouse Street which attracted my attention. There is no hiding behind a model this time (although the model's assumptions are equally opaque and not open to scrutiny). The predicted figures suggest lower traffic flows after the housing has been built (the so-called 'do something' scenario) than if the development does not go ahead. This is at the very least counter-intuitive! Such a reduced traffic flow would result in a reduction in all exhaust-derived pollutants in the Paynes Park Roundabout Air Quality Management Area (AQMA). This prediction would then feed into the overall conclusion that the development will have negligible impact.

In fact, the Report turns out to have a number of defects. I am sure that somebody more expert than I would be able to find a few more, judging by the obvious flaws that I have identified. I concentrated only on sections dealing with the operational phase – rather than the building phase - of the development, and then only on the nitrogen dioxide (NO<sub>2</sub>) emissions.

It is very obvious to anyone who cares to look that the Report is out of date or at least subject to incomplete revision. As an example, despite being dated March 2021, para 4.1 of the Report claims that there is only one Air Quality Management Area (AQMA) in Hitchin (Three Moorhens Roundabout, Stevenage Road) and that:

*"NHDC has concluded that concentrations of all other pollutants considered within the AQS (Air Quality Strategy) are currently below the relevant AQOs (Air Quality Objectives) and as such no further AQMAs have designated."*

**This is untrue** - the [Paynes Park Roundabout AQMA<sup>2</sup>](#) was declared in 2017 and includes Upper Tilehouse Street, which is very close to the proposed development and would potentially be impacted by it. It was declared due to measured NO<sub>2</sub> concentrations exceeding the AQO - 40µg/m<sup>3</sup> (micrograms per cubic metre of air) - the standard set to be protective of human health - in Parkway and Upper Tilehouse Street. According to North Hertfordshire's latest [Air Quality Status Report<sup>3</sup>](#), the AQMA has not been revoked.

Furthermore, the Report assumes that the development would have been operational by 2020, further suggesting that it was compiled some time before that date, rather than March 2021, which is the date given on the Report's title page.

The Report includes almost contradictory statements about air quality trends. **Para 5.2 of the Main Report** asserts:

*"Air quality is predicted to improve in the future."*

whereas **Appendix 2** casts doubt on this:

*"There is current uncertainty over NO<sub>2</sub> concentrations within the UK, with roadside levels not reducing as previously expected due to the implementation of new vehicle emission standards."*

I wrote to the Planning Officer, together with members of the Planning Control and Hitchin Committees, early in the New Year to express our concerns. I suggested that an up-to-date version, which has been properly proof-read, should be submitted before the application is determined. I am expecting to find that the version drawing my criticisms vanishes without trace, although at the time of writing it has not.

The Report's conclusion is that the air quality impact of the proposed development will be negligible. If the work is done properly, that may still be the outcome, although I doubt whether it will be sufficiently transparent for the likes of you or me to judge because the models and methods used are not open to scrutiny. However, given that the Report must have been compiled in its current form some time before March 2021, and maybe as early as 2017, the mitigation sum proposed of £44,693.42 appears inadequate considering the range of mitigation measures needed to encourage walking and cycling by the future residents of the development. Not only that, it takes no account of inflation since then.

I am sure some would question why I am exercised about this – mistakes happen – perhaps it would have been picked up in any case when it was discovered that an early draft had been submitted. My view is that, yes, this looks like a mistake, but one which at least indicates a lack of care in preparing the document for submission as part of the application, a level of care which is surely what we should expect of professionals. Time and again we hear that the planning system is slow, being part of the burden of 'red tape' that developers and many of our politicians love to bemoan. Cynics would say that the Report was fit for the purposes of the developer to be speedily granted planning permission, and of the consultants to receive their fee for minimum effort. If councillors and officers have insufficient time to scrutinise them, errors in such reports might escape notice. In many cases, the effects of these developments are profound. Local people are entitled to expect that, if allowed, the effects of developments are properly evaluated and the developer is made to pay for their mitigation. If planning permission, or mitigation, depends on such carelessly prepared assessments by those supposed to be experts, we should all be worried.

1. Air Quality Assessment Report  
[https://documentportal.north-herts.gov.uk/PublicAccess\\_LIVE/Document/ViewDocument?id=BD61192E9E4043C591CCE088E788A985](https://documentportal.north-herts.gov.uk/PublicAccess_LIVE/Document/ViewDocument?id=BD61192E9E4043C591CCE088E788A985)
2. Payne's Park roundabout, Hitchin: The AQMA Order formalising this decision was completed and sent to DEFRA in January 2017  
<https://www.north-herts.gov.uk/air-quality-management-areas>
3. 2021 Air Quality Annual Status Report NHC  
<https://www.north-herts.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2022-02/Air%20Quality%20Annual%20Status%20Report%202021.pdf>

**Bill Sellicks – Co-Chair**



## Nature on our doorstep – Oughtonhead Common

With flu and Covid cases being prevalent, one of the best ways to activate your immune system, boost your energy levels and top up your vitamin D, is to go for a winter walk. You may also find that it will lift your mood, not to mention the number of calories it will burn, thus helping to deplete any extra weight gained due to excesses indulged in during the festive period.



And, what better place to walk than on Oughtonhead Common, an ancient grazing site to the west of Hitchin that sits on the River Oughton. Being only two miles from the centre of Hitchin it is easily accessible by bicycle or local bus (for example, the 81 from Bancroft, Stop G) or, if you are feeling energetic, you can walk there in 45 minutes. It has lots of paths - some of which are wheelchair friendly - sitting places, lovely views and a diverse range of flora and fauna due to the variety of habitats that range from rare chalk stream to wet and dry grassland, wet ditches, hedgerows, bushes and woodland.



Sean Blackmore, who visits the common on a regular basis throughout the year, wrote in his article 'A Year at Oughtonhead Common' (Hitchin & Letchworth RSPB Local Group Newsletter 29, Winter 2022) that:

*"During the winter months large numbers of starling, goldfinch, redwing and fieldfare can be seen, especially around the bushes in the grazing area. There can be a large jackdaw roost in winter. Some of the other species which can be seen are barn owl, both types of partridge and*



*pheasant, and along the river, moorhen, water rail, kingfisher, mallard and, occasionally, mandarin ducks. Other birds to look out for are kestrel, skylark, linnet, yellowhammer and yellow wagtail. In terms of mammals, muntjac deer, fox, stoat, weasel and otter can sometimes be spotted and, unfortunately, at the moment there is evidence of mink on the site."*

In addition, at a recent meeting, Sean disclosed to me that water voles may be present. I was delighted to hear this, particularly as the book *The Wind in the Willows* by Kenneth Grahame was a favourite of mine as a child and who could not fail to love Ratty, one of the main characters popularised by the book?



Also to be found on the common is a small herd of longhorn cattle which, we are told, first arrived from a local farm in 1996 and, according to [The Great British Life website<sup>1</sup>](#), reside on the site in a fenced area throughout the year and are an excellent way of ensuring the maintenance of this important fen-type habitat, where a variety of rushes and sedges are present, as well as water mint, and in the wetter areas, reeds and hemp agrimony.

Along with the cattle, assisting in the maintenance of the site are volunteers who meet to do work on Oughtonhead Common on Tuesdays throughout the year, sometimes more frequently in winter and less



frequently in summer. The working parties are all arranged and confirmed by email. They welcome volunteers to join them and provide an induction briefing for any newcomers.. Further details can be found on the [Friends of Oughtonhead Facebook Page](#)<sup>3</sup>.

If any of the above has tempted you to venture forth to partake of the wintry sun, you will find an information leaflet on [The Hertfordshire GOV website](#)<sup>2</sup> that provides you with everything you are likely to want to know and includes a description of two relatively short walks which can be combined to form a longer walk. However, it is perfectly feasible to arrive at the common, which has several access points, and devise a walk of your own.

Spurred on by the forecast of good weather, after experiencing a miserable rainy weekend, it was at this point in my writing that I decided to grab some winter sun for myself and follow the River Walk - the suitable-for-all surfaced path outlined in the information leaflet mentioned above. This also gave me the opportunity to take some photographs of the place I have been extolling, some of which I have included here. Needless to say the walk did not disappoint.

Additionally, there is a 6.2-hectare area of mature alder and willow woodland running adjacent to the north bank of the River Oughton, which is managed by the Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust and, though it is not accessible to the public, it can be viewed across the river from the Common when on the River Walk. See photo below. For details refer to the [Herts wildlife Trust website](#)<sup>4</sup>.



1. Great British Life website, Longhorn cattle:  
<https://www.greatbritishlife.co.uk/homes-and-gardens/places-to-live/22580746.cattle-brought-back-manage-herts-meadows/>
2. Hertfordshire GOV website information leaflet:  
<https://www.hertfordshire.gov.uk/media-library/documents/environment-and-planning/countryside-management-service/places-to-visit/oughtonhead-common-leaflet.pdf>
3. Friends of Oughtonhead Facebook page:  
<https://www.facebook.com/friendsofoughtonhead>
4. Herts Wildlife Trust website:  
<https://www.hertswildlifetrust.org.uk/nature-reserves/oughtonhead>

All photographs were taken by the author except for that depicting the longhorn cattle, which was supplied by Mike Clarke.

**Valerie Schicker - Member of Steering Group**

## Dates for your Diary

Hitchin Forum Litterpick. At a site near you! Contact <a href="mailto:hflitterpick@gmail.com">hflitterpick@gmail.com</a>	10.00 am	Sunday 26 <sup>th</sup> March
Town Talk. Venue TBA	6.30 pm	Tuesday 28 <sup>th</sup> March
Hitchin Committee. Venue TBA	7.30 pm	Tuesday 28 <sup>th</sup> March
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/>