



## NEWSLETTER

March - April 2023

No. 173

### Thoughts from the Co-Chair

This introduction is not literally all about litter, but it is topical. By the time you read this the Hitchin Forum Spring Clean Up will have happened. The Sunday before that the Times ran an article about the problems that some other litter-collecting groups have in negotiating with their local council and recycling centres about depositing their collected litter. "Oh no that's not your personal litter so you cannot bring it here", or "Oh no you need a licence before we can accept it from you" (forgetting that they might otherwise feel obliged to collect it themselves!). So, thank you North Herts Council for being sane and sensible and helpful in collecting our bags of collected litter.

Another thank you to the Council for clearing the A602 roadsides of the accumulated rubbish. And they did remove the mattress that had finished its life on the central reservation. And guess what? – motorists have started dumping their litter along this stretch already.

Perhaps the most awful part of my local walks is Willow Lane, having walked across Priory Field and past Charlton and heading into town. There is a narrow, partly overgrown footpath next to the cambered roadway; the wide mirrors of passing trucks make me duck away which is very unpleasant. So I was pleased to see that our MP has it on his list of to-dos. Whether a widening of the footpath into the adjoining wilderness or some traffic calming will be possible I wait to see, but action is overdue!

Churchgate is an ever-present topic – and Brent Smith has produced some thoughts to ponder after the historical angle in our last edition. Other thoughts have been aired over the years, and we do not know how the Council may formulate the next stage. The recent consultation was very open-ended and did not give much clue as to what may or may not be on the table, or ground. So, any more thoughts that you would like to air? Let us know!

As there is no further news from the public inquiry into the proposed Luton airport expansion to 19 million passengers per year, we will have to wait until a future newsletter for Bill's summary and assessment of the implications.

I have spent recent times finding out more about our unique British Schools Museum, and so been reminded how the need for volunteers is ongoing – from guiding to carpentry to the more central task of teaching in the Victorian methods. Beyond the town boundary, Valerie has travelled to Shepreth and brings back a reminder of the unusual and fascinating zoo which started as a refuge for injured and orphaned animals, but now has so much more to see, teach and enjoy. Read on.

**Mike Clarke - Co-Chair**

### Litter Pick

In advance of the litterpick, at one stage, we had approaching 150 volunteers. A couple of days before, a significant group pulled out and I had a few contact me to say that they were ill or had other commitments, so on the Sunday morning we were probably down to about 130. As you may remember, that morning was not at all pleasant, but I think about six people contacted me to say they were giving it a miss. Even then, two

of those actually braved the elements! When I arrived on King George's Playing Field at 10 am to give out day passes kindly donated by Archers gym and pool, everybody arrived on time and scooped-up the rubbish that had been extracted by Chris Hall from the bramble hedges around the fields. He had been there since 7 o'clock (in spite of the change in the hour). Chris, a former Hitchin resident now living in Stotfold has (among a welter



of other equipment which he brought along) a 10-foot litter picker which enabled him to remove, among other things, large quantities of aluminium foil that would otherwise have been inaccessible. He is a veritable one-man litter-picking army! It wasn't a day for photography, but here is one taken by Stuart Howarth on Butt's Close (Note the shiny clothing!). I'm finding it hard to work out exactly how many bags of rubbish we collected, but meeting a large number of enthusiastic people who just wanted to see the place looking cleaner and tidier left me with a warm glow as I battled round on my bike to try to keep an eye on things. They deserve massive thanks!

**Bill Sellicks – Co-Chair**

## Air Quality Update

### Some apparently good news

North Hertfordshire's most recent [Air Quality Status Report<sup>1</sup>](#) (the ASR - published last year) shows that progress has been made in reducing nitrogen dioxide (NO<sub>2</sub>) concentrations in both of Hitchin's Air Quality Management Areas (AQMAs).



*Hitchin's Air Quality Management Area Monitoring Equipment at The Three Moorhens Roundabout and the Library Roundabout*

Annual concentrations of NO<sub>2</sub> in both areas have declined for a number of years. The Stevenage Road AQMA, with its monitoring equipment at the Three Moorhens roundabout, has seen decreases with no readings above the Air Quality Objective (AQO) of 40µg/m<sup>3</sup> (microgrammes per cubic metre) over the period 2017-2020, compared with no readings greater than 90% of the AQO from 2018-2020. That improvement would probably have been enough to recommend that the AQMA be revoked, but the period includes 2020 when, due to the pandemic, traffic levels were much reduced. Monitoring was therefore continued for 2021 and 2022. There will be a recommendation to revoke the AQMA if no result is higher than 90% of the AQO. We will know more when the next ASR is published later this year as it will include the 2022 figures. The situation for Paynes Park - with its monitoring equipment in front of the library - is slightly different, with results in 2017 and 2018 being above the AQO. Again 2020 was anomalous. Monitoring is therefore due to continue until all results are consistently below 90% of the AQO before revocation is recommended. At both AQMAs there will be a review of the monitoring locations within and near to the sites.

## And there's more

Although high NO<sub>2</sub> levels were the reason for the declaration of the AQMAs, the ASR also comments on particulate levels. Motor vehicles produce particulates as a result of burning diesel (or petrol, but generally to a lesser extent) but also from their brakes and tyres. Particulates don't only come from motor vehicles. They may travel a long way from their source – smoke from forest fires, dust from the Sahara or particles resulting from the reaction of ammonia (from manure) with other airborne chemicals. Particulates are much bigger than NO<sub>2</sub> molecules – even the smallest (ultrafine particles) are about 100,000 times larger in diameter than NO<sub>2</sub>. North Hertfordshire only monitors two types of particulates based on their size. Those up to 2.5µm in diameter are referred to as PM<sub>2.5</sub> and those up to 10µm – called PM<sub>10</sub>. Again there has been a general decline in the levels of these in both AQMAs and those levels have been well below the AQOs of 40µg/m<sup>3</sup> for PM<sub>10</sub> and the (non-statutory) 25µg/m<sup>3</sup> for PM<sub>2.5</sub>.

This decline appears to be in line with national trends. Concentrations of pollutants in outside air have decreased considerably over the last 100 years, and the rate of reduction may have increased recently. According to the [Chief Medical Officer's \(CMO\) Report 2022](#)<sup>2</sup> "It is estimated that (hospital) admissions for childhood asthma due to air pollution in London have reduced by 30% since 2016".

## How dangerous are particulates?

Whilst this would all seem to be good news, it isn't that simple. Breathing both NO<sub>2</sub> and particulates can have serious health impacts. Since the Stevenage Road AQMA was first declared in 2012, research on the health effects of PM<sub>2.5</sub> in particular has continued apace with large scale studies in several countries. Whilst particles larger than 10µm are mainly deposited in the nose or throat, particles smaller than 10µm pose a greater risk because they can be drawn deeper into the lungs. PM<sub>2.5</sub> can reach the terminal bronchioles, and ultrafine particles (diameter less than 0.1 µm) can enter the alveoli, with a small proportion able to cross into the blood stream and reach other organs. As a result of recent research, the impact of these particles on other serious health conditions is becoming more widely acknowledged. Whilst it is unsurprising that respiratory illnesses are exacerbated, it is less obvious that particulates would lead to various forms of dementia, for example, and the mechanism by which they do so is not understood. The impact on the human brain has even been claimed to be detectable in the performance of [chess players exposed to very low levels of particulate pollution](#)<sup>3</sup>. The CMO's report includes a welter of detail on a range of medical conditions and the way in which pollution impacts vulnerable groups such as young children and the elderly. It is well worth reading. To give an idea of the danger of PM<sub>2.5</sub> in particular, the Report says that "Modelling estimates suggest that a reduction of 1 µg/m<sup>3</sup> of PM<sub>2.5</sub> in 2017 in England could prevent 50,900 cases of coronary heart disease, 16,500 strokes, 4,200 lung cancers and 9,300 cases of asthma in people aged over 18 years by 2035." These are long term effects, but the same report also identifies short term impacts, which have the potential to be fatal for those with vulnerabilities. There is thought to be no safe lower limit for PM<sub>2.5</sub>.

## Adjusting the targets

It is not surprising, therefore, that there is a push to drive down particulate levels by setting AQOs, or targets. As a requirement of the Environment Act 2021, the government recently set a target for fine particulate



matter in Regulation 4 of the Environmental Targets (Fine Particulate Matter) (England) [Regulations 2023](#)<sup>4</sup>. The target is to ensure that the annual mean concentration of PM<sub>2.5</sub> in ambient air is equal to or less than 10µg/m<sup>3</sup> by 31st December 2040. This seems rather unambitious when compared with the World Health Organisation's suggested interim target of less than 10µg/m<sup>3</sup> by 2030, with the ultimate target of 5µg/m<sup>3</sup>, although it is not clear when the WHO advocates that target should be achieved.

## Measurement and what to do

Achieving targets for particulates is dependent on accurate and reliable measurement, together with being able to control emissions. In the case of NO<sub>2</sub>, quantitative measurement is relatively straightforward because the gas is a single substance. Where particulates are concerned, a sample will contain a wide variety of different substances, leading to a number of problems, which reduces the reliability of any measurement. As previously noted, particulate pollution can travel a long way. The dust from the Sahara, the 2010 eruption of Iceland's Eyjafjallajökull volcano and the drifts of smoke from fires caused by Indonesian farmers using slash and burn to clear forest are just three of many examples of particulates crossing international boundaries. Often nobody is responsible. In such incidents, the best that can be achieved is often to issue public health warnings and warnings to aircraft.

## What should be done about particulates in Hitchin?

There has been very little particulate monitoring anywhere in North Hertfordshire other than at Stevenage Road (the PM<sub>10</sub> monitor sited in the library grounds was moved to Stevenage Road in 2016). That which has been carried out assumes AQOs, one of which (for PM<sub>10</sub>) is based on outdated knowledge, and the other (for PM<sub>2.5</sub>) is non-statutory, and fails to reflect the growing understanding of the harm that particulates can do. Assuming that the Stevenage Road and Paynes Park AQMAs are revoked soon, I wonder if any thought has been given to locations where the particulate monitoring equipment could usefully be re-sited. I think that there are several locations where particulate pollution should be investigated in Hitchin. These should be in areas that are most affected by HGVs travelling to and from the metal recycling centre on the industrial estate. These roads are often congested and include many dwellings that are particularly close to the road. As well as particulates from their diesel engines, tyres and brakes, there may also be a contribution from the loads carried by these vehicles. My first suggestion would be Fishponds Road between Wilshire-Dacre school and the roundabout at the junction with Bancroft and Ickleford Road. Locations with similar characteristics are not hard to find - Verulam Road or Nightingale Road approaching Starling's Bridge would be good examples. Since all of those routes converge at the Starling's Bridge roundabout, the number of HGVs using Grove Road must be even greater.



*Bunyan Road end of Fishponds Road*

In spite of the limitations of the detection technology, the concerns about PM<sub>2.5</sub> in particular must make it worthwhile to carry out some preliminary studies on these and similar areas. To do so, even with relatively crude equipment, could at least provide some comparative figures, which could identify problem locations for targeting once more effective measuring devices become available.

Photographs taken by Stuart Howarth.

1. North Hertfordshire Council Air Quality Status Report 2022:  
[https://www.north-herts.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2023-03/ASR\\_NHC\\_2022\\_final.pdf](https://www.north-herts.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2023-03/ASR_NHC_2022_final.pdf)
2. Department of Health and Social Care. Chief Medical Officer's Report 2022: Air Pollution:  
[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/1124738/chief-medical-officers-annual-report-air-pollution-dec-2022.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1124738/chief-medical-officers-annual-report-air-pollution-dec-2022.pdf)
3. Chess players perform worse when air quality is poor – and other high-skilled workers could be affected too. The Conversation:  
[https://theconversation.com/chess-players-perform-worse-when-air-quality-is-poor-and-other-high-skilled-workers-could-be-affected-too-199221?utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=Latest%20from%20The%20Conversation%20for%20February%208%202023%20-%202537725499&utm\\_content=Latest%20from%20The%20Conversation%20for%20February%208%202023%20-%202537725499+CID\\_36157bb0e2281c19067c7d9451c4d603&utm\\_source=campaign\\_monitor\\_uk&utm\\_term=Chess%20players%20perform%20worse%20when%20air%20quality%20is%20poor%20%20and%20other%20high-skilled%20workers%20could%20be%20affected%20too](https://theconversation.com/chess-players-perform-worse-when-air-quality-is-poor-and-other-high-skilled-workers-could-be-affected-too-199221?utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Latest%20from%20The%20Conversation%20for%20February%208%202023%20-%202537725499&utm_content=Latest%20from%20The%20Conversation%20for%20February%208%202023%20-%202537725499+CID_36157bb0e2281c19067c7d9451c4d603&utm_source=campaign_monitor_uk&utm_term=Chess%20players%20perform%20worse%20when%20air%20quality%20is%20poor%20%20and%20other%20high-skilled%20workers%20could%20be%20affected%20too)
4. Environmental Targets (Fine Particulate Matter) (England) Regulations 2023:  
<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2023/96/note/made>

*Bill Sellicks – Co-Chair*

## Proposals for Hitchin Market Relocation to Portmill Lane and Bancroft

This is an article submitted by a Hitchin Forum member and contains a personal view not necessarily reflecting the views of Hitchin Forum or its steering group.

### Introduction

These proposals have been prepared in collaboration with Michael Collins. Michael and I are both passionate about markets and have visited many in Britain and abroad. They are the lifeblood of communities. Michael is currently working on a [study in Edinburgh<sup>1</sup>](#) which is due to be part of an exhibition and a city-wide consultation. The challenge of his research was to define what a 21<sup>st</sup> century market should be.

With NHC having bought out the Hammersmatch lease and now carrying out public consultation, we felt that it would be a good idea to put our ideas into the mix. We hope to organise an exhibition of these proposals, including a digital 'fly-through' model, later in the year.

Our town centre is subject to the same threats that face all High Streets – changes in shopping and recreational habits, the ease of supermarket shopping, out of town retail centres and increasingly our love of online shopping and direct to home delivery of goods and now meals. We in Hitchin have been alive to these trends and, as retail has diminished, restaurants and other services have taken their place, but the town centre needs daytime footfall to remain vibrant.

Hitchin is bearing up relatively well compared with many other towns. This is doubtless in part due to the efforts of Hitchin Initiative, the Business Improvement District (BID) team and other local institutions. However, we have problems that need to be addressed. We believe that the most important and certainly most urgent of these are the support and refurbishment of the market, and visual improvement to our prime retail frontages.

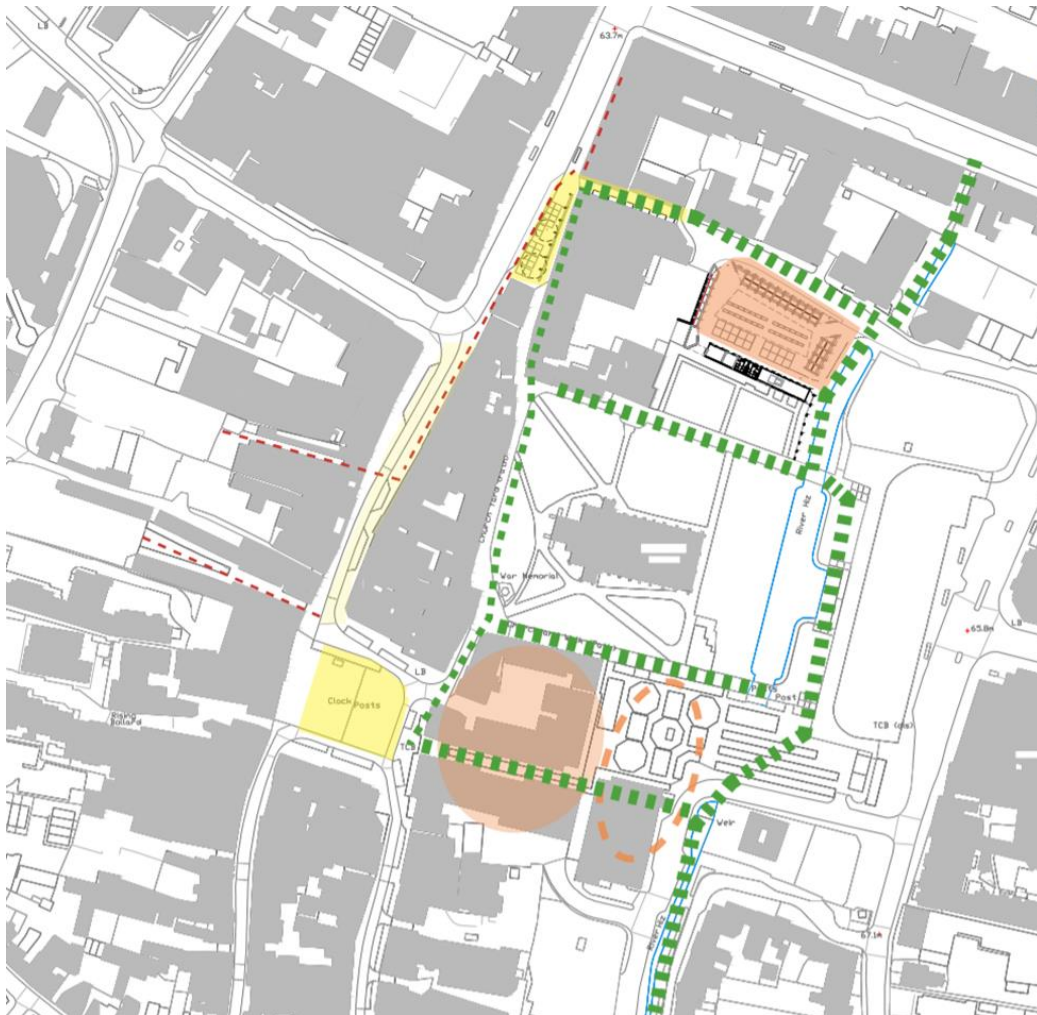
The market infrastructure is not fit for purpose. The town centre is shabby, mostly due to the poor condition of its pavements. Hitchin Initiative carried out a detailed survey of the town centre pavements four years ago and prepared reports. These were submitted to our county councillors but so far with no response. Good quality voluntary work should not be disregarded in this way.

Hitchin has had a market for over a thousand years and it remains of great importance to our town. Since being run by the volunteer directors of Hitchin Markets Ltd (a subsidiary of Hitchin Initiative) it has outperformed other markets, but all markets are struggling. Its location behind the Churchgate Centre is poor and its stalls are worn out.

NHC are considering the future of Churchgate. It is difficult to see what would work there; Hitchin does not currently need additional retail space. Community facilities and/or a cinema would be welcomed but are unlikely to be viable financially. If high rent retail space were to be proposed (as was shown on the [outline scheme<sup>2</sup>](#) produced by the Shearer Property Group), this could only lead to two possible outcomes - either the scheme would fail due to not being able to attract the high rent tenants required, or it would succeed but only by enticing the existing major retailers that we have in the town, thereby killing the rest of our town centre. Shearer Property Group's scheme also suffered by moving the market even further away from the remainder of the town and the whole process of major refurbishment would disrupt the market for a considerable period. Markets are delicate and not well placed to deal with disruption, as is being experienced currently in Northampton.

The removal or relocation of the market during the demolition and construction of a large development such as Churchgate would put enormous stress on it and there is the fear that it would not survive.

## The Proposals



Our proposals are that:

- A new market be constructed on the Lower (West) Portmill Lane Car Park.

- A prominent entrance is formed over Portmill Lane onto Bancroft – the location of Hitchin’s highest footfall, and fold-out stalls provided in Portmill Lane to link the market to Bancroft.
- In the future the width of the roadway in Bancroft could be reduced and a paved piazza and lighting standards formed which would accommodate market stalls on Saturdays and other special events. Our proposals are designed to be consistent with such alterations to Bancroft but are not dependant on them.



The advantages of these proposals are:

- The market would be in a much better location than at present and this should ensure not only its survival but should allow it to flourish.
- It only involves land owned or controlled by local authorities and does not require complex third-party negotiations and acquisitions.
- They could be carried out quickly with minimal disruption.



- They must be the cheapest available solution and could hopefully be part funded by grants and by the freeing up of other land for development. Bancroft is in desperate need of repaving anyway and the market stalls are worn out and in need of renewal – they are nearly 50 years old and have had their day.
- The moving of the market would release a net gain of some 30 parking spaces in its current location, more than would be taken in the new location.
- The market would be sustained by moving into a new, purpose built market in a better location than it currently occupies. It would also gain flexibility by having a permanent core which then expands through Portmill Lane and onto the paved area formed in Bancroft. This removes the 'empty stall' problem – the market has always suffered from people noticing how many stalls are empty rather than being pleased by how many are full.
- There would be no temporary relocation of the market or disruption to it during building works. It could even move during its non-market days of Wednesday and Thursday and reopen without missing a day.
- The poor view of the rear of the shops facing Bancroft would be partly obscured by the proposed tensile structure roof.
- The craft and farmers' markets would continue to occupy the riverside paving and would spill out onto the Memorial Garden from time to time as at present.
- The café in the Cloisters would give a good sustainable use to this important structure and add to the vitality of the riverside. The repair and regeneration of the Cloisters, arguably one of the best sites for a public function in Hitchin - situated on a river front, at the key point of arrival for many, and overlooking St Marys - is pressing given its general neglect. This represents a building at risk which would be saved and put to very good use.





- The open space under the tensile roof would be available for evening events.



The proposals shown for the southern end of Bancroft would:

- Enhance our prime retail frontage and this should give it its best chance to survive and flourish.
- The new piazza could contain elements that celebrate its historic importance, provide lighting, assist wayfinding and participate in the seasonal life of the town through applied banners or signage. These proposals aim to enhance the potential of the current space as a pleasant and safe space to dwell as well as move through both during the day and in the evening.
- Traffic circulation in Hitchin could be improved, but this is outside the scope of these notes. Traffic could be rerouted so that the roadway in Bancroft becomes a single lane towards Brand Street, which would also allow increased (end-on) parking in Brand Street.



## Summary

We need to take account of market trends and make sure that Hitchin will continue to flourish. We must end the fixation with the future of Churchgate Shopping Centre and look at the whole town. Improvements to the market and to the southern end of Bancroft are urgent if we are to maintain the vitality of our town. This will free up the Churchgate site for a comprehensive redevelopment.

We look forward to all comments. Please send to [brent@walden7.uk](mailto:brent@walden7.uk)

The images are the copyright of Michael Collins Architect LLP.

1. Edinburgh market study:  
<https://www.dropbox.com/s/8kjgwaan313wstu/Edinburgh%20Market%20%26%20food%20hub%20study%20EXEC%20SUMMARY.pdf?dl=0>
2. Shearer Property Group outline scheme:  
<https://www.hitchinforum.org.uk/churchgate-survey/>

***Brent Smith – member of Hitchin Forum***

## The Zoo on our doorstep – Shepreth Wildlife Park

With the break for Easter coming up, many of you will be looking for places to visit especially if you have school age children or grandchildren. I don't have either but was motivated to visit our local zoo (it has an SG postcode) for reasons that will become apparent later. If you haven't visited already I can recommend it as an interesting trip out as well as an educational experience with keeper talks included in the price. From 7th – 10th April there is also an Easter Egg hunt. Visitor information can be found on their [website<sup>1</sup>](#).

For people living in Hitchin and the surrounding area, the park is easily accessible by car, train and bicycle, taking about 30 minutes, one hour and two hours, respectively. A conservation charity since 2012, Shepreth first started out in 1979 as a private sanctuary, opening up to the public in 1984 when it was known as Willers Mill Wild Animal Sanctuary. It is a family concern whose present interests lie in native and global conservation, education and research. [This link<sup>2</sup>](#) gives a deeper insight into its past history and work with endangered species over the last ten years:

Located in natural surroundings, with an informal layout on a nine-acre site (see picture below), it can be accessed by wheelchairs and pushchairs along the tarmac paths that make up the majority of the pathways.





In addition, the park is home to the renowned Shepreth Hedgehog Hospital, which also forms a part of the Shepreth Wildlife Conservation Charity (SWCC). For information about the hospital and its work, I recommend [this account](#)<sup>3</sup> of a visit there.

The range of inhabitants that can be found at Shepreth is surprisingly wide. However, my favourites include the meerkats - made famous by a well-known ad campaign - the endangered red panda and, the primary reason for my motivation to visit, the Scottish wildcat, critically endangered and said to be rarer than the tiger.



To me the Scottish wildcat is not only strikingly handsome and powerful, but is the very essence of a wild predator - see adjacent picture of the pair at Capel Manor. Unfortunately, the Shepreth pair were hidden from view on each occasion I had hoped to see them. However, along with other inhabitants, their progress can be followed on [Shepreth Park's Facebook page](#)<sup>4</sup>.

Large, thick set and tabby-like, Scottish wildcats now barely survive in the wild in Scotland, having been pushed to the edge of extinction. Shepreth Wildlife Park and Capel Manor Zoo are just two of over 30 zoos, wildlife parks and private collections that have come together in a [conservation breeding programme](#)<sup>5</sup> to help them.

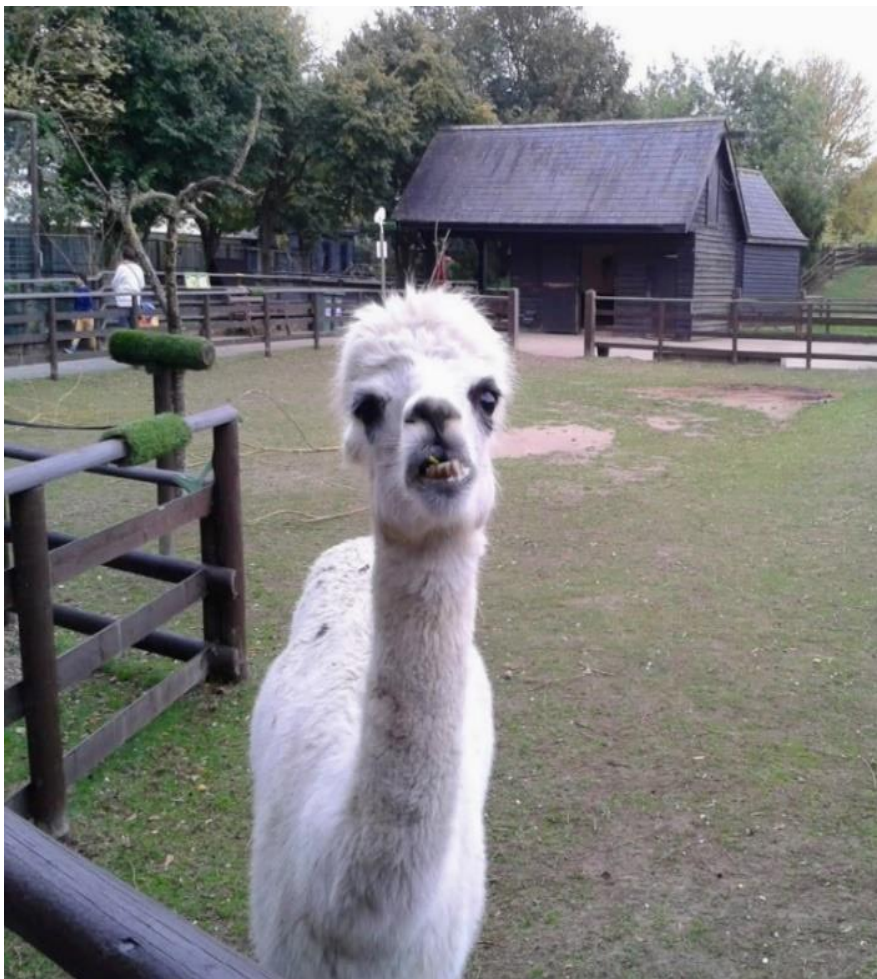
They are being threatened by hybridisation with domestic cats, being hunted as vermin, as well as immediate threats due to their remaining habitat being further destroyed for human exploitation of natural resources.



If you are brave enough, a visit to the [Nocturnal House<sup>6</sup>](#) at Shepreth is a must as you can walk through unimpeded with fruit bats flying fast and furious around you. An experience not to be missed! A word of caution though, you need to be careful not to step on any that may be on the ground.

If you prefer something less scary you can wander freely in the rabbit enclosure and you may even come across the White Rabbit from Alice in Wonderland!

To end this piece I would like to put a smile on your face by sharing my favourite photograph taken at Shepreth.



Do visit and support this charity if you can. You won't be disappointed!

All photographs were taken by the author.

1. Shepreth Wildlife Park:  
<https://sheprethwildlifepark.co.uk>
2. SWCC work with endangered species:  
<https://www.cambridgeindependent.co.uk/whats-on/shepreth-wildlife-park-marks-decade-of-work-with-endangered-9270253/>



3. Shepreth Hedgehog Hospital:  
<https://www.seheetheworld.com/visiting-shepreth-hedgehog-hospital/#.ZAzEfi-nz4Ap>
4. Shepreth Wildlife Park:  
<https://ne-np.facebook.com/sheprethwildlifepark>
5. Scottish wildcat breeding programme:  
<https://savingwildcats.org.uk>
6. Shepreth Nocturnal House:  
<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1022333238149623>

***Valerie Schicker - member of Steering Group***

## **Dates for your Diary**

Hitchin Councillor Surgeries. Hitchin Market Place.	10.30 am to 12.00 noon	First Saturday of every month
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### **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/>