

HITCHIN FORUM

Caring for our Town

NEWSLETTER

May - June 2023

No. 174

Thoughts from the Co-Chair

A date for your diary: amidst the coming Hitchin Festival is History Day on July 15th. We are joining a number of other local organisations to showcase our efforts for the town. The day is organised by the Historical Society and will include stalls for themselves, British Schools Museum, North Herts Museum, Hitchin Cemetery Volunteers and some other esteemed groups from some of our neighbouring settlements.

It is a time to reflect on what we have achieved, and what we could do. But all efforts require volunteers to join us to campaign for things that we value and want for the town.

One of our past campaigns has been to press for 20 mile per hour zones within the town. So far the only advance in the town has been the limits introduced in Bearton Road and a few connected streets. The County Council now says it is consulting on [extending the 20 mph areas¹](#) "to improve road safety, create calmer streets and encourage more walking and cycling."

We look forward to hearing more about priorities for Hitchin and hope that the environment in Grove Road and connecting streets can be improved, soon. One of the major problems in Hitchin is the metal recycling lorries which head for the industrial area, sometimes spreading debris along the route and generally making life unpleasant, particularly for residents. A petition by Grove Road residents a few years ago to seek an alternative route out of the industrial area onto the Stotfold Road was brushed aside as it would be very expensive – but a 20mph zone would be cheap. If there was only the will to introduce it...

Bill reports on a very successful Litter Day – and well done to all who joined in. I have recently noticed people collecting litter from roadsides at weekends – excellent! Just need to stop the droppers.

Valerie writes about RSPB at Sandy – a valuable national resource on our doorstep. I have recently enjoyed the sight of swallows, house martins and swifts returning for their summer break in this country, but feel sad about the ever declining numbers that we see.

Our recent members meeting was a great occasion with an excellent presentation and discussion from CPRE. It was very relevant as the green belt and the need for increased housing makes national news and local angst. For our next meeting... not yet sure, but if you have any thoughts about what would be interesting then get in touch!

1. County Council consultation on 20 mph limits:
<https://www.hertfordshire.gov.uk/services/highways-roads-and-pavements/roadworks-and-road-closures/major-roadwork-projects/20mph-programme.aspx>



Mike Clarke - Co-Chair

The Countryside Charity (CPRE Herts) Presentation

The first Forum members' meeting for maybe four years was a fascinating encounter with the CPRE Herts planning manager – Chris Berry. As a former planning officer for various councils he has long experience of how things work, or don't. He touched on the long history of CPRE influencing national policies since 1926 (see Wikipedia for the details) including the formation of national parks, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and greenbelts. He spoke about issues that confront CPRE, and all of us, at the present – maintaining the green areas around our towns, battling the developers who throw a lot of money at their projects to build on green spaces, producing affordable homes, including provision for essential workers who live in the countryside, and including sustainable energy systems. The latter led to a discussion of solar farms, the location of solar panels on buildings, onshore wind turbines and the gloomy future of disastrous climate change.

Perhaps the most daunting issue is how people can influence planning processes. House builders like making profits and building expensive houses, and pay a lot to planning lawyers who argue the case. Local councils have small planning departments with 40% less funding than a decade ago, and little money to match the silks. Local campaigning groups lack the impact when trying to rouse public interest and influence the planning inspectors.

Local Plans seem to set the rules for developments, but do not necessarily set the scene in concrete. Local plans for developments can be challenged. Some of the difficulties come from ill-advised and outdated government policies and inaccurate calculations of housing need – including the failure to recognise that the major need is for the affordable and social housing and not the nice expensive houses in green locations. But maybe we can push our local politicians to take issues more seriously, and for council planners to work for developments that benefit the local population and not the profit of fat cat house builders.

Chris did provide inspiration to think and work on such issues locally and to support CPRE Herts, and the national CPRE, in their ongoing battles.

Mike Clarke – Co-Chair

Litter Pick

In spite of the awful weather and the change of hour, there was another excellent turn-out for the Forum's Big Spring Clean on Sunday March 26th. Over 120 volunteers, including nearly 50 children (the youngest of which was 2) took part. I estimated that we managed to collect over 60 bags of general waste. Volunteers often take home material that can be recycled to put in their grey bins, which always adds uncertainty to the final tally. The overall downward trend in the amount of litter was again commented upon by participants, which was very pleasing. It is also possible that the bag total was down due to the installation of new bins for recycling in some of our usual locations, which volunteers will have used.

More local groups are offering to contribute to the efforts of our regular volunteers. A team from Hitchin Tennis Club did a great job in Bancroft Recreation Ground. This included extracting a car battery from deep in a hedge which had the potential to be a serious environmental hazard. A very well-organised group of residents from the Purwell area worked on the recreation ground and surroundings in their area. This is not somewhere that Hitchin Forum litter pickers have cleared before to my knowledge. The Dell, as usual, was cleared by Holy Saviour Guides, their leaders, parents and supporters. We are much indebted to former Hitchin resident Chris Hall, who now organises litter picks in Stotfold, and who brought along his 10-foot litter picker which enabled the removal of items from otherwise inaccessible brambles in King George's Playing Field. When I arrived on the scene to distribute Archers' Swim and Gym passes to participants at 10am, Chris had worked round all the perimeter hedges since his arrival at (I believe) 7am. Everything was left in neat piles for the other participants to collect. Some of that material must have been stuck there for many years.

Unusual finds have been taking on a rather niche flavour recently, with some participants vying with each other to find antique packaging which borders on collectable. I think the competitive spirit was dampened

(literally) by the weather this time. The most significant find was an orchid, which, if the initial identification had been correct, was one thought to be extinct in Britain. In the end it proved to be the relatively common bee orchid, but was still unexpected. The Council's contractors John O'Conner have been informed, and will be doing their best to ensure that it remains unharmed. I have promised not to reveal its whereabouts to avoid undue attention, but if you are lucky, the sharp-eyed among you may be able to find it. If so, please don't publicise its location.

An unexpected spin-off this year was an opportunity spotted by former Town Centre Manager, now Hertfordshire County Councillor and North Herts Councillor, Keith Hoskins. Taking advantage of the road closure in Willow Lane and Charlton Road for the Hitchin 10k run on Sunday April 30th, Keith organised a group of our normal stalwarts to do a clean-up concentrating on that area. For safety reasons, I have always had to say that we could not support such a venture under normal circumstances, so to deal with it when free of traffic was ideal. The pictures show just how thoughtless people can be in throwing away items such as fire extinguishers, electronic equipment and chemical containers. What is heartening is that so many people were keen to take the opportunity to come out and take part. Thanks are due to all concerned. Hopefully it can become an annual event.



Photographs courtesy of Jennifer Piggott.

The date for the Forum's autumn event this year is Sunday October 15th. If you would like to take part, please email hflitterpick@gmail.com

Bill Sellicks – Co-Chair

On our doorstep – The Lodge, Sandy

The Lodge in Sandy is the headquarters of one of the world's largest wildlife conservation organisations, The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB).

Perhaps, like me, you have been watching the recent [BBC Wild Isles¹](#) TV series, which was a wonderful opportunity to showcase nature in the British Isles, and definitely not before time, given that we are one of the world's most nature-depleted countries. Highlighted, amongst other things, was the global importance of fresh water, and how it is being polluted. This struck a particular note with me as 85% of the world's chalk streams are in the UK, several of which are in our part of Hertfordshire, notably The Hiz.

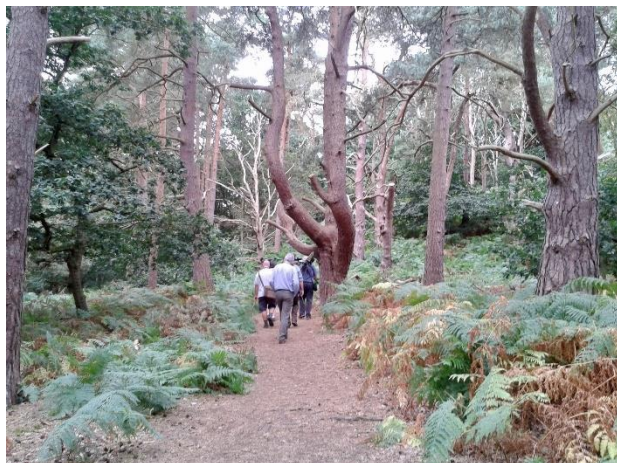
Heavily involved in the production of the series, along with the World Wide Fund for nature ([WWF²](#)) and the [Open University³](#), has been the RSPB with its community of over a million members of which I am but one. This got me to thinking about how fortunate we are to have the headquarters of one of the world's largest wildlife conservation organisations within the SG postcode region, less than a 30-minute drive away. If you wanted to visit the main headquarters of the WWF, for example, you would have to travel to Switzerland! Though, having said that, they do have a [base in Woking⁴](#).

The Lodge [Nature Reserve and Gardens](#)⁵ was acquired by the RSPB in 1961, after Princess Margaret was advised not to buy it due to a public bridleway running through the grounds. If you have never visited The Lodge I can highly recommend it especially since there is now a brand new café to enhance visitor experience in addition to the 'Swiss Cottage', which dates back to circa 1851 and serves as the reserve's visitor centre and shop.



However, I have heard people say that there weren't many birds about when they visited, though I would certainly not let this put you off as the site offers an extraordinarily rich combination of wildlife and heritage experiences, there being plenty of interest to see both in the gardens and along the various [walking trails](#)⁶, having a total length of five miles, examples of which can be seen in the photos below.

Covering 440 acres, the reserve itself sits on the Greensand Ridge, overlooking the River Ivel (another chalk stream) valley and includes areas of both broadleaved and coniferous woodland, acid grassland and heathland, which now forms the largest stretch of heathland in Bedfordshire. This is attractive to the nightjar, raven, common lizard and natterjack toad, along with some of The Lodge's iconic species such as the nuthatch, hobby, spotted flycatcher, green and greater spotted woodpeckers. Towards the end of April this year six Dartmoor ponies were released on the heathland to graze over the summer and you can [watch their release here](#)⁷.



The site also boasts an impressive iron age fort built circa 700 BC. This is found on Galley Hill, and has obvious banks and ditches. You can reach it by taking the blue 'Buzzard' trail, which at 1.5 miles takes around one hour to complete.

The gardens alone are worth a trip out there and are at their most colourful from May onwards with the flowering of the rhododendrons and azaleas, followed by the roses. My last visit was in early April, though the photos above were taken on an August visit. However, on my April visit the daffodils were very much in evidence as were the spring blossoms as illustrated in the following pictures.



Having good facilities, including those for the disabled, The Lodge Nature Reserve and Gardens is an excellent place for families to visit and includes a wild play area, as well as having some pushchair- and wheelchair-friendly paths. Binoculars can also be hired on site. Entrance is free but non-RSPB members presently pay £6 per car for parking, though it's free for blue badge holders. There are many other events held there throughout the year, which can all be [booked here](#)⁸. Coming up fairly soon (June 20th) there is a guided nature walk for women only, and it is on this note I will leave you, except to remind you that it is World Environment Day on June 5th, which will focus on solutions to plastic pollution.

1. BBC Series, Wild Isles:
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p0f0t5dp>
2. WWF:
<https://www.wwf.org.uk/>
3. Open University:
<https://connect.open.ac.uk/wildisles>
4. WWF base in Woking:
<https://www.wwf.org.uk/get-involved/living-planet-centre>
5. The Lodge nature reserve and gardens:
<https://www.rspb.org.uk/reserves-and-events/reserves-a-z/the-lodge/>
6. The Lodge walking trails:
<https://www.rspb.org.uk/globalassets/downloads/the-lodge-trail-map.pdf>

7. Release of Dartmoor ponies:
<https://www.biggleswadedetoday.co.uk/news/people/watch-as-6-dartmoor-ponies-are-released-on-the-heathland-at-rspb-the-lodge-in-sandy-4116330>
8. RSPB bookings:
<https://events.rspb.org.uk/thelodge>

All photographs were taken by the author.

Valerie Schicker - member of Steering Group

Luton Airport Update

At the time of writing I have not heard the outcome of last autumn's Public Inquiry into the attempt by Luton Airport to increase its passenger cap from 18 million passengers per year (mppa) to 19 million and to relax the noise constraints to which it agreed in 2013. The 2013 permission was for 18mppa to be achieved by 2028, but that was reached in 2019. The boost in passenger numbers, incentivised by Luton Borough Council, was achieved at the expense of breaching the noise constraints agreed when permission was granted. The Inspectors have completed their report, and it has been passed to the two relevant government departments – the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) and the Department for Transport. The parties – in this case the airport, Luton and District Association for Control of Aircraft Noise (LADACAN) and The Countryside Charity (CPRE) – have not been allowed to see it at this stage. One can imagine that a certain amount of negotiation between the departments will need to take place before an agreed stance is taken, so that may account for the delay. It is, however, entirely possible that we may hear the decision before this newsletter is published.

That is not the only thing that is of concern to those of us who oppose the expansion of Luton airport. The airport (now re-branded as 'Luton Rising') has launched its next attempt at expansion – it has submitted an application to be granted a Development Consent Order (DCO) to increase its passenger numbers to 32mppa by 2038. The proposals have already gone through a long gestation period with three previous public consultations (you may remember the last one – the exhibition which took place in the Town Hall in March last year was part of that).

The process of achieving a DCO is long and complicated. For an objector, even if not planning to speak at one of the hearings, it involves completing a registration process outlining the main grounds for objection. The registration form must be submitted by midnight on **Friday 23rd June**. The objection must address the issues raised in the current iteration of the proposals, so re-submitting previous arguments is probably not acceptable, even if these have not been properly addressed in the submission. There is much that is ruled out as grounds for objection.

The main stumbling block for objectors is that the present government – together with those which preceded it, irrespective of political party – is keen on the economic benefits of airport expansion to the exclusion of all else. This is reflected in current policies. These ignore the weight of scientific evidence which lies behind the call from the Climate Change Committee in its [6th Carbon Budget¹](#) for no net expansion of airport capacity if the UK is to achieve its net zero ambition. The government's 'Jet Zero' strategy pins its hopes on hydrogen or electric powered flight in the long term, whilst increasing the use of 'sustainable aviation fuels' alongside carbon off-setting in the shorter term. Hydrogen powered and electric flight are technologies which are in their infancy and may never be commercially viable. It has been made clear that contesting those policies and strategies is not considered a valid objection against a DCO. Nor, I suspect, is highlighting the airport's track record on breaches of noise controls, its use of inflated job projections to support its business case, or its minimisation of the impact of increased car traffic on local towns such as Hitchin. The objector, on receiving permission to submit their case, is faced with no fewer than 490 documents on the [National Infrastructure Planning website²](#), some running to hundreds of pages, which form the proposal submitted by Luton Rising.

When it finally comes to the hearings, the battle is asymmetric. As noted by the CPRE's Chris Berry during his excellent talk at our recent members' meeting, the airport is able to deploy numerous experts in support of its case, to say nothing of a legal team, including King's Counsels. National policy and massive financial resources tip the balance in favour of the DCO being granted.

Assuming I haven't put you off, any member who wishes to submit an objection would be well advised to look at the information provided by [LADACAN](https://ladacan.org)³, which gives suitable links to documents and videos.

1. The Sixth Carbon Budget: Aviation:
<https://www.theccc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Sector-summary-Aviation.pdf>
2. National Infrastructure Planning website: London Luton Airport Expansion:
<https://infrastructure.planninginspectorate.gov.uk/projects/eastern/london-luton-airport-expansion/?ipcsection=docs>
3. LADACAN website: Understanding the Development Consent Order process:
<https://ladacan.org/how-to-oppose-the-future-luton-plan/>

Bill Sellicks – Co-Chair

Hitchin's Colourful Addition to the Landscape

You may have noticed (how could you miss it!?) the rainbow Pride bench celebrating humanity's amazing diversity. Its creation was a project initiated by the North Herts Pride, who approached local councillor Judi Billing about three years ago. Sadly Judi didn't live to see the installation of the bench, but it now sits proudly at the top of Windmill Hill and can be seen clearly from Hermitage Road, Queen Street and Hollow Lane.



Photograph taken by Mike Devenish, member of North Herts Pride.

Dates for your Diary

Hitchin Councillor Surgeries. Hitchin Market Place.	10.30 am to 12.00 noon	First Saturday of every month
Hitchin Festival, History Day, Town Centre	All day	July 15th

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/>