

HITCHIN FORUM

Caring for our Town

NEWSLETTER

July - August 2023

No. 175

Thoughts from the Co-Chair

Hitchin Festival has passed by, an amazing array of events, unfortunately though my first bout of COVID meant I missed some booked events. But I did manage the History Day event in Church House. That was a good day for us, with an opportunity to share some of our concerns about the town with the visitors. Sadly, EcoDay was postponed because of the weather, ironically! It has now been rearranged for Saturday 5th August at 10 am. A lot of rain here (will that fill the aquifers??) and awful fires elsewhere. Maybe that will convince doubters that climate change is here and happening, no ifs or buts.



Our highly approachable co-chairs Mike and Bill at the History Day stand

Meanwhile, how do we view our local scene? Neil gives a clear view on two local housing plans – Highover and West of Lucas Lane. Housing is needed, but in the right places, and of the right sort. Transport links from the west of the town into the centre became the crucial issue at the District's planning committee, leading to a deferment of the decision about Highover.

The environmental impact of any expansion at Luton Airport is again the focus of Bill's article and the Forum's 'Summary of Case' to oppose the expansion, citing both the negative impact on Hitchin and the unsustainability of the plans.

At the centre of town is Churchgate, once again the focus for the Council. Ellie reports back on the first meeting of a new Advisory Group which North Herts Council has set up. Its long term future, as well as the market and the surrounding area will be up for more discussions and consultations, and we look forward to progress and change after 20 years of frustration.

Another source of frustration is the demise of the Charnwood Community Management Association. Charnwood House was originally gifted to the town by the Moss family. CCMA was formed when it was vacated by Hitchin Museum as it moved to the new (and splendid) North Herts Museum. CCMA hoped to manage the building for community use but felt frustrated by the Council and has now withdrawn – its 'statement of closure' is included. We can but hope that our councillors will ensure that its original purpose is fulfilled.

And with the usual need to relax and explore, Valerie describes some of the history of Chicksands Priory – and no, I also hadn't heard of it. So much to explore!

Mike Clarke - Co-Chair

Planning – a Tale of two Meetings

Two planning meetings were attended in recent weeks, both of which were intended to approve housing developments in the town.

Planning Meeting on 15 June 2023 addressing Local Plan Site HT5: Land to the West of Lucas Lane and East of Headlands.

Somehow, we managed to overlook this application when it was submitted for planning approval in February 2022. However, 158 members of the public objected in writing, and Keep Hitchin's Green Belt submitted a petition. This meeting was to vote on the earlier proposals, the land having been removed from the Green Belt in November 2022, thus losing the protection this gave against development.



Local Plan Site HT5, proposed scheme at the junction of Grays Lane and Lucas Lane

Copyright: Hill Residential Ltd

The scheme was originally envisaged for up to 16 dwellings, but the submitted arrangement was for 9 large houses with garages. Nine is the largest number that can be built without requiring contributions to affordable housing. What is more, Hertfordshire County Council apparently mis-applied their criteria for requiring contributions to infrastructure, so the developer, Hill, did not need to pay out at all.

The scheme was opposed at the meeting in a passionate five-minute presentation by Phil Davis of Keep Hitchin's Green Belt; and by Councillors Hoskins and Lucas who crammed a lot into their allocated five minutes between them. However, the scheme was approved, the vote being 5 For, 0 Against and 6 Abstaining.

As an observer at the meeting, I could not understand how a scheme for 9 large and expensive houses, with no contributions for affordable housing and infrastructure, was passed. This was surely not what the land was taken out of the Green Belt for.

Planning Meeting held on 6 July 2023 addressing Local Plan Site HT1: Land to the North of Highover Farm and West of Stotfold Road.

The application for this large development of 700 dwellings was made in January 2022, after public consultations stretching back to 2017. We wrote with our objections in February 2022. These objections included that the land was (then) in the Green Belt, that the development would reduce the important separation between Hitchin and Letchworth Garden City, would generate a large amount of vehicle traffic and would be without safe and easy cycle and pedestrian routes into the town centre. We also queried the assumptions and accuracy of the traffic forecasting, which gave anomalous results, including reduced rather than increased traffic flows following the development.



Highover Farm Development Illustrative Master Plan

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Before the meeting we liaised with local objectors Justin Richards and Richard Wilcox, and were granted a precious five minutes each to address the meeting. Richard had previously put together a YouTube video about the scheme, organised a petition and issued a press release to the Comet. Our address included the objections made in February 2022, and pointed out the pinch points for pedestrians, cyclists and traffic caused by the three railway bridges which separate the development from all the facilities in Hitchin. The meeting

was also addressed by Councillor Elizabeth Dennis, speaking on behalf of existing residents. The developer's representative pointed out that they had done everything asked of them, during a long submissions process.

The councillors on the committee were clearly impressed by what had been said, and even considered a straight refusal. On consideration they voted for deferral, subject to an updated traffic report.

Lessons learned

We should continue commenting on applications of any size, including looking into every angle, such as traffic congestion and pollution, pedestrian and cycle access, buses, education.

It is well worth working with other groups, individuals and Councillors.

Speaking at planning committee meetings is very worthwhile. Note this has to be applied for and granted before the meeting – and then probably shared with other speakers. You cannot just turn up and speak – or you will be asked to leave!

Neil Dodds - member of Steering Group

'Green Controlled Growth' – how Luton Rising plumbs new depths in cynical greenwashing.

At the time of writing, we are still awaiting the outcome of the inquiry into Luton Rising's (LR's) attempt to relax agreed noise controls and increase its passenger cap. The cap was 18 million passengers per year (18mppa) which the airport previously predicted would not be achieved until 2028. The noise controls were breached because it increased flights too rapidly in 2017, 2018 and 2019. The separate Development Consent Order (DCO), which it is currently seeking, to allow it to increase passenger numbers from 18 mppa to 32 mppa by 2038, would see flight numbers substantially increased. Since the proposals constitute a Nationally Significant Infrastructure Project (NSIP) it must be determined at ministerial level following a public examination. Along with many other local groups, not to mention councils, Hitchin Forum has registered with the Planning Inspectorate to have its say on these proposals by outlining its objections. The Examination will be conducted under the Infrastructure Planning (Examination Procedure) Rules, and will start with a preliminary meeting on August 10th, which is to enable views to be put to the Examining Authority about how the application should be examined. The Examination will take 6 months, after which a recommendation will be made to the Minister of Transport who will make a final decision about whether the development will be allowed.

Is this sustainable?

In the National Planning Policy Framework, sustainable development is defined as 'Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'. The proposal is based not on present need, but on the assumption of a continued ever-increasing demand for cheap international flight which is mainly for leisure purposes (the 2018 Civil Aviation Authority survey found only 11% of passengers at Luton were flying for business purposes). This results in the off-shoring of tourist revenue that might otherwise accrue to the UK economy and perpetuates the disproportionate reliance of the local economy on aviation. It facilitates the continued increase in 'Scope 3' in-flight CO₂ emissions. These are emissions over which LR claims to have no control, and which are of ever-increasing concern given the recent announcement that we are likely to see a 1.5°C rise in average global temperatures reached in the next 5 years.

What will be the impact on Hitchin and its surroundings?

If granted, the order would inevitably increase aircraft noise over Hitchin in a way that is unquantifiable at present - for example, due to unknown future airspace changes over the course of the proposal - but which will reflect the increased noise impact in the immediate vicinity of the airport. Traffic through Hitchin, which

is already congested, will increase on the A602/A505 corridor in particular, including through Hitchin's two active Air Quality Management Areas. The amenity value of the countryside to the south-west of the town will suffer, both as a result of noise due to overflights, and additional traffic on roads, particularly in the Lilley Bottom area, which are unsuitable for significant traffic.

What is Luton Airport's 'Green Controlled Growth'?

To make the proposals more palatable to their many detractors (LR claims it has 'listened' to feedback from several rounds of public consultation), LR proposes to 'control' the airport's environmental impacts by what it calls its 'Green Controlled Growth' (GCG) strategy. Incidentally, it doesn't like the word 'impacts', preferring to describe the damage it inflicts on the environment and local residents as 'effects' – presumably LR believes that there are those who thrive on deafening noise, traffic congestion and poor air quality.

What follows is an attempt to illustrate why the GCG strategy will do little or nothing to safeguard quality of life for ourselves and our neighbours living closer to the airport. It is not exhaustive, but you can see our initial submission on the Forum's website by following [this link](#)¹ for more detail.

LR trumpets GCG as an innovative strategy (meaning that no other airport has tried it). It wants us to believe that passenger numbers will be allowed to grow as long as it does not breach limits in four areas – noise, air quality, greenhouse gas emissions and surface access. All of these are subject to caveats which work in the airport's favour in allowing more rapid growth. For instance, as a baseline, LR wants to use the 19mppa passenger cap figure which is still subject to a decision from last year's Planning Inquiry. Its interim passenger number targets are always as high as possible (based on the 19mppa baseline). Almost shamelessly, LR describes these targets as 'worst case scenario', effectively conceding the point that they will have harmful impacts. In terms of greenhouse gas emissions, it ignores the most significant so-called Scope 3 in-flight emissions. According to Luton Borough Council's own [Climate Action Support Plan](#)² of 2017, these amount to 51% of emissions associated with the airport.

The GCG mechanism appears to suggest that if limits are breached, further expansion will be halted. The reality is that the limits are set generously. If breached the damage will already have been done. The way it would work with noise, as set out below, illustrates what could happen.

Illustration – how GCG will apply to aircraft noise nuisance

The noise impact is assessed by a single metric: the area within which residents are subjected to noise that could be damaging to health. As well as agreed 'limit' areas, GCG identifies smaller 'threshold' areas which, if exceeded, should result in action being taken to ensure that the affected area does not increase further. If a 'threshold' area is exceeded, action is meant to be taken to prevent the area exposed to noise increasing even further and causing a breach of the 'limit' area. This logic means that if the threshold is set too close to the limit, exceeding the threshold may come too late to prevent a breach of the limit.

The logic of this approach seems reasonable until the timescale is considered. The area exposed to noise is calculated by taking noise monitoring data from flights over a specified period of time – the busiest three months over the summer – running them through an algorithm and following an agreed process to determine any mitigation actions. This all takes time. Paragraph 1.4.13 of LR's [Green Controlled Growth Framework](#)³ actually admits the problem:

'Based on the availability of monitoring results, it is evident that performance against the Limits in one calendar year cannot inform the capacity declaration (that is, the number of slots allocated for flights) for the following year; rather the minimum lag is two summer seasons.'

In other words, those experiencing health-damaging noise levels will already have suffered for two years before any action is taken (if it is). Even then there is no certainty that action will be taken as there is potential for further delay in that the airport can appeal the process and contend that the breach is due to circumstances beyond its control.

LR chose to ignore representations from local groups, including Hitchin Forum, to include other metrics such as the total number of flights.

Who decides whether breaches have occurred and what action should be taken?

Much depends on the effectiveness of the apparently independent Environmental Scrutiny Group (the ESG). LR claims that this is not ‘..marking its own homework’, but it (LR) specifies the composition of the group (no elected representatives from local councils) and reserves to itself the right to make representations to the group. The ESG’s remit is also tightly controlled. In the words of Para A3.2.2 of the GCG FRAMEWORK APPENDIX A: DRAFT ESG – TERMS OF REFERENCE

The ESG must accept the principle of the growth consented at the airport under the DCO and their functions shall be limited to considering how such growth aligns with the [Limits](#)⁴.

To extend the educational metaphor, LR and the airport operator intend to choose the examiners, write the mark scheme and determine the pass/fail borderline. LR will be able to contest, and ignore, any recommended corrective actions which get in the way of growth.

What do others say?

As I write this article, there are frequent new developments. A total of 13 documents have been added to the library on the Planning Inspectorate website under the heading ‘[Principal Areas of Disagreement Summary Statements](#)⁵. One, from National Highways, identifies serious safety concerns regarding M1 junctions 10 and 11 which have not been addressed. Most significantly, another from the Director for Sustainable Development for Luton Borough Council demonstrates that LR even faces opposition from within the Council that owns the airport. I am pleased to see that it highlights issues such as: whether the 2019 baseline (19mppa) is appropriate given that the airport operation that year was not compliant with the planning conditions (therefore giving elevated noise levels); the validity of the model used to predict traffic flows; and whether the development complies with current and emerging Government policy in terms of limiting and where possible reducing the number of people significantly affected by aircraft noise. It questions whether there is an appropriate balance between growth and noise reduction, and expresses concerns about Scope 3 emissions and the operation of the ESG. Documents have been submitted by local councils detailing other major concerns.

In summary

The proposals will have a negative impact on Hitchin, its residents and neighbours. They are unsustainable according to the commonly accepted definition of the term. GCG will not prevent environmental damage because it is predicated on a plan to achieve maximum passenger and flight numbers as rapidly as possible. To this end its procedures will ensure that any remedial measures (such as reduction in flights) will lag behind the damage to the environment that they are apparently designed to prevent. Its oversight body, the ESG, whilst ostensibly independent, will allow little direct representation from those most directly affected by increased flights. LR will have power of veto over the ESG’s membership. Its powers are tightly delineated.

Let us hope that the Inspectors see through the greenwashing and advise the Minister that the proposals should be rejected.

1. Hitchin Forum submission addressing the GHG strategy:
<https://www.hitchinforum.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Hitchin-Forum-Summary-of-case.pdf>
2. Luton Borough Council Climate Action Support Plan (2017):
<https://democracy.luton.gov.uk/cm5public/Document.ashx?czJKcaeAi5tUFL1DTL2UE4zNRBcoShgo=Ze%2BGHIRaDIkoTmzZ8K9cXPsdzYstgmDudTOdRI0o%2F3yFIGJZKP%2FsTA%3D%3D&rUzwRPf%2BZ3zd4E7lkn8Lyw%3D%3D=pwRE6AGJFLDNIh225F5QMaQWctPHwdhUfCZ%2FLUQzgA2uL5jNRG4jdQ%3D%3D&mCTIbCubSFFxsDGW9IXnl%3D%3D=hFflUdN3100%3D&kCx1AnS9%2FpWZQ40DXFvdEw%3D%3D=hFflUdN3100%3D&uJovDxwdjMPoYv%2BAJvYtyA%3D%3D=ctNJff55vVA%3D&FgPIIEJYlotS%2BYGoBi5oIA%3D%3D=NHdURQburHA%3D&d9Qjj0ag1Pd993jsyOJqFvmyB7X0CSQK=ctNJff55vVA%3D&WGewmoAfeNR9xqBux0r1Q8Za60lavYmz=ctNJff55vVA%3D&WGewmoAfeNQ16B2MHuCPMRKZMwaG1PaO=ctNJff55vVA%3D>

3. Green Controlled Growth Framework:
<https://infrastructure.planninginspectorate.gov.uk/wp-content/ipc/uploads/projects/TR020001/TR020001-000840-7.08%20Green%20Controlled%20Growth%20Framework.pdf>
4. ESG limits:
<https://infrastructure.planninginspectorate.gov.uk/wp-content/ipc/uploads/projects/TR020001/TR020001-000835-7.08%20Green%20Controlled%20Growth%20Framework%20Appendix%20B%20-%20ESG%20Technical%20Panels%20Draft%20Terms%20of%20Reference.pdf>
5. Principal areas of disagreement - documents on Planning Inspectorate website:
<https://national-infrastructure-consenting.planninginspectorate.gov.uk/projects/TR020001/documents?date-from-day=10&date-from-month=07&date-from-year=2023&date-to-day=12&date-to-month=07&date-to-year=2023&searchTerm=&itemsPerPage=25>

Bill Sellicks – Co-Chair

Churchgate Update



Churchgate

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And here we are again... Hitchin Forum has been nudging/encouraging/campaigning on this since its inception – that’s over 25 years. In fact, built in 1971 as a “space age development to keep up with Luton and Stevenage”, it was recognised already in 1986 that Churchgate needed refurbishment, so what is different now?

Firstly, North Herts Council now owns the leasehold as well as the freehold, which means we are no longer dependent on an outside developer to come up with ideas for its future. Secondly, public ownership means the public (that’s us!) can have much more say on the principles of any redevelopment or refurbishment rather than just being consulted on the details of any proposals. And thirdly, with the entire area including the Market and adjacent car parks also in public ownership, there can be a more comprehensive perspective on the community benefit to be had for this area.

The Council is taking an entirely different approach from what has happened historically. An advisory group of Hitchin representatives, with local professionals in design, architecture, town planning and landscape architecture has been established for preliminary local input. Hitchin Forum sits on this group as a community representative and membership of the group may change as expert input is needed. The Council is also taking external advice from consultants to establish parameters and possible scenarios.

Issues to be considered: what are the main drivers – a financial return or community benefit (and are these mutually exclusive?) What is the area under consideration – just Churchgate or should the Market, the riverside area and Biggin Lane car park be included? Will it be redevelopment, refurbishment or a combination

of these? How does all of this relate to the Council's overarching planning framework, the Local Plan (its town centre proposals are already out of date), as well as the lack of an up-to-date Hitchin Town Centre Strategy?

The preliminary public consultation in late 2022 showed strong public support for the Market, which is encouraging and perhaps a pointer for early progress. It could be argued that the Market should be a first consideration for modernisation and revamp, taking account of its importance both commercially and socially to the town.

One thing is certain - the town centre needs to continue to adapt to continue flourishing, and the entire Churchgate and Market area will be key drivers in this process.

Ellie Clarke - member of Hitchin Forum

Charnwood Community Management Association to close

For your information, as members of CCMA, we are sorry to say we have received the following statement on Charnwood House from their Chair, Bernard Eddleston.



Charnwood House

Reproduced from CCMA's Facebook page.

It is with regret that Charnwood Community Management Association (CCMA) will close.

Charnwood House was donated to the people of Hitchin by a local family for community use and became Hitchin Museum until it closed about 10 years ago.

CCMA as a charity was set up in 2015 to seek to protect the original Hitchin Museum (Charnwood) and work with NHC for Charnwood to be a community asset. CCMA was refused access to the building until 2019/20. CCMA then undertook a survey of the building and drew up a business plan and detailed costing for the repairs and for the community to raise further monies for modifications to the building.

Following NHC consultation meetings in spring 2022 and potential interest groups in August 2022, CCMA prepared a Letter of Intent and a Business Plan including costings

which were submitted to NHC late 2022. It was made clear to NHC that the only way the refurbishments could be completed in a cost effective and sensible manner was for CCMA to negotiate and manage an integrated contract covering all the work.

Having been provided with this information, NHC put some monies in the budget for 2023/4. However, it was estimated that CCMA would have to raise significant further monies to complete the refurbishment. CCMA continued to press both Local Councillors and Officers for responses on their submission and after 5 months had no response. Finally, comments were received in April 2023, it was clear that it is was the intent of the Officers to contract the work themselves but with no business plan in place for the effective use and running of Charnwood as a community asset. The Local Councillors were asked whether they endorsed this decision, but CCMA received no reply. The Trustees of CCMA were concerned that what was evolving was akin to similar projects with the Community, such as Hitchin Town Hall and they were not prepared to continue in this way.

As a result, the Trustees of CCMA unanimously agreed to resign at the AGM on 5th July 2023 and as no members were willing to come forward to replace them the charity was wound up.

It is a sad reflection on NHC that over 10 years after a decision to vacate Charnwood, it still remains empty and in a significant state of disrepair. Despite CCMA's best efforts and the expenditure of significant money and time on surveys, building plans, cost estimates and business plans this has been for nought and the Officers' attitude in dealing with the Community has not changed.

Bernard Eddleston, chair of CCMA

History on our doorstep – Chicksands, a Priory with a difference!

We are all probably familiar with the dissolved 14th Century Hitchin Carmelite Priory, parts of which are incorporated into the Hitchin [Priory Hotel](#)¹ that now resides on its site. And also, The Biggin on Biggin Lane next to the market that used to be a [Gilbertine Priory](#)², founded by Sir Edward de Kendale, Lord of Hitchin Manor, in 1361. However, perhaps some of us, myself included, were not aware of the 12th Century Gilbertine Priory that is situated on the base of the Joint Forces Command at Chicksands, and is within the SG postcode area. A Grade 1 listed building and Scheduled Ancient Monument, it now serves as an officers' mess.

Should you wish to visit the Priory it is easily accessible as it is only 25 minutes away from Hitchin by car and 50 minutes by bicycle. In spite of it being in the middle of a high security military base it is still possible for the general public to enter either as individuals, families or groups of up to 40, although photographic identification and other details are needed to do so. The tours, arranged by The Friends of Chicksands Priory, are by appointment on the first and third Sunday afternoons of each month, from April to October. To book you are requested to email tours@chicksandspriory.co.uk. You will find further information on their [website](#)³.

There is no charge for taking part in a tour although a small donation of £5 per person is recommended. Refreshments are provided at the end and there may be a chance to see the walled garden. On the occasion of my visit this year on Sunday, June 4th, we were blessed with glorious weather, and we were able to take our tea, coffee and biscuits on the terrace with a magnificent view of the parkland. By prior arrangement, it may also be possible to visit [All Saints Church](#)⁴ in the nearby village of Campton. Here, in the north chapel, are monuments and the remains of the Osborne family who occupied the Priory, after its dissolution, from 1576 to 1936 when it was sold to the Commissioners for Crown Lands.

Although elements of the original building remain, it has been altered over the years. In particular, during the time of General Sir George Osborne the 4th Baronet, many alterations were made to the north, south and east wings. In addition, an entrance porch, cantilevered staircase and the gothic style arches of the south cloister were added, and this is how you will find the Priory when visiting today.

Without going too deeply into its history, which might otherwise detract from a visit there, a few notable facts about Chicksands Priory are as follows:

- It was one of the Gilbertine Priors that housed both nuns and canons.
- Archbishop Thomas Becket is said to have spent a short time there on his way out of England when fleeing King Henry II with whom he was in dispute.
- It was once the residence of the famous letter-writer Dorothy Osborne. A book about her story is available in the Priory shop.
- As a communications and intercept facility in 1941 it was home to some 'Y' Service personnel and can claim to have contributed to the sinking of the battleship Bismarck.
- In 2001 the Priory received a visit from Channel 4's Time Team, a fascinating description of which can be found [here](#)⁵. It contains a [video](#)⁶ that is definitely a 'must watch'.

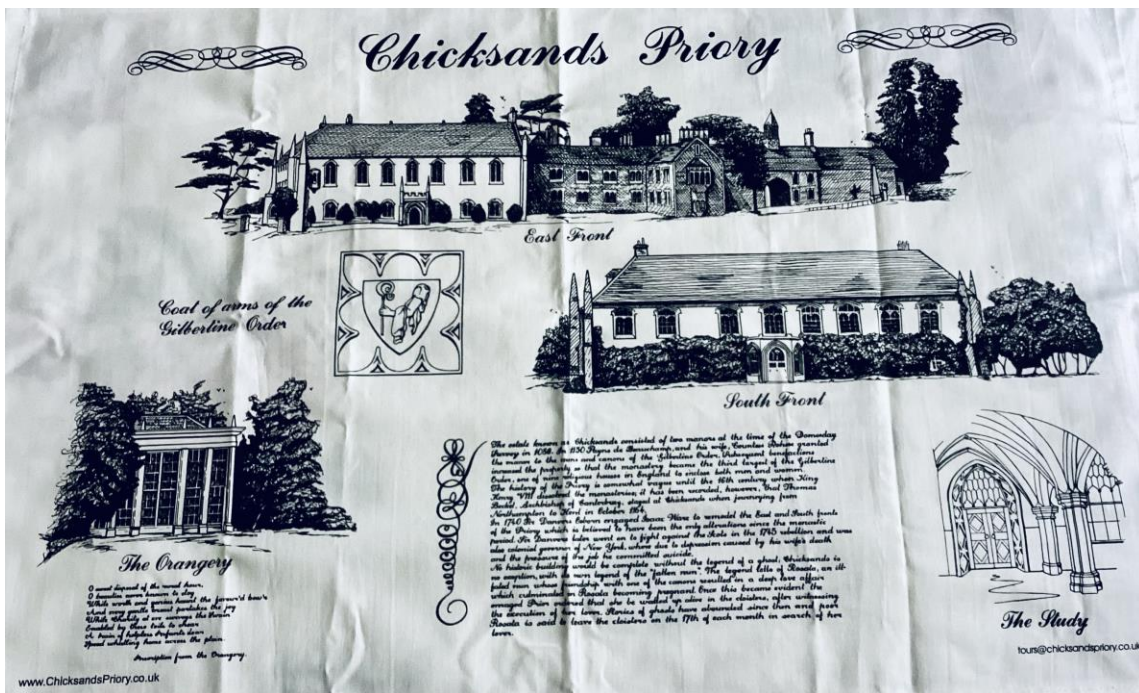


Photo reproduced by the author from a tea towel (non-copyright) purchased at the gift shop, as photography on the base was not allowed.

Notwithstanding this is a relatively short article, it will hopefully have been sufficient to leave you wanting to know more and increased your desire to visit the Priory. Interestingly, amongst the other guests at the time of my visit were former personnel and family members of former personnel who had lived on the base and who were able to enlighten us about how it was during their time there. It seemed their visit was one of nostalgia.

It is worth noting too that the base is also home to the [Military Intelligence Museum](#)⁷ that can be visited, by appointment only, between 10am and 4pm, Tuesday to Friday. For members of Letchworth Arts and Leisure Group there is a trip on Friday 17th November, travel by car, to the Intelligence Museum for a guided tour. Contact Sally Cannon: trips@lalq.org.uk.

By way of acknowledgment, in writing this piece I have relied on the excellent guiding information imparted by Julie and Diane, volunteers with the Friends of Chicksands Priory, and the informative leaflet that I picked up free of charge in their shop.

1. Hitchin Priory blue plaque: <https://www.hitchinhistoricals.org.uk/history-of-hitchin/blue-plaques-and-other-commemorative-wall-plaques/10-the-priory/>

2. Gilbertine Priory, Hitchin:
<http://aroundhitchin.net/?p=393>
3. Chicksands Priory:
<http://www.ChicksandsPriory.co.uk>
4. All Saints Church, Campton:
<https://bedfordshireparishchurches.co.uk/wp/campton/>
5. Time Team visit:
<https://www.chicksandspriory.co.uk/time-team-visit>
6. Time Team video:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=doOiaYCPVhw&t=78s>
7. Military Intelligence Museum:
<https://www.militaryintelligencemuseum.org>

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
Hitchin Area Forum (formerly known as Town Talk and Hitchin Committee) – venue: virtual. Check NHC site.	7.30 pm	5 th Sept 2023