

Thoughts from the Co-Chair

Is Hitchin behind the times? In Wales all residential areas now have a 20 mph speed limit. Edinburgh has had an evolving 20 mph introduction to much of the city for the past five years. First Portsmouth and then London have imposed such zones. In Hertfordshire, St Albans now has 40 streets with 20mph limits. And Hitchin?? A few streets around Bearton Road and Tilehouse Street are the only ones to have such limits.

What is the evidence that such schemes do any good? Is all this just a weird thing that parts of the UK are trying out? Studies here and elsewhere in Europe have been brought together to answer this. LUSTRE (Lower Speed Limits For Europe) brought out a [report¹](#) in May to try to find the answers.

Spain introduced a 30 km per hour (about 19 mph) urban limit in 2019 and has since reported 20% fewer urban road deaths, with fatalities reduced by 34 per cent for cyclists and 24 per cent for pedestrians. Reports from other countries give further information. Speed restrictions with physical traffic calming measures work best, but even with just signs, collisions and casualties are reduced. Some see this as just another annoyance for motorists, but the aim, as in Wales, is to improve well-being. The encouragement for people to walk and cycle makes it seem an inevitable improvement in each and every town, including Hitchin!

That's one bee out of my bonnet, but read on to learn more about our town. The history of Hitchin's sewerage has captured Bill's imagination. The cemetery in St John's Road has been the focus for a local conservation group, on which Valerie reports and Ellie provides an update on Churchgate.

Meanwhile other planning issues are looming. The junction of Verulam and Whinbush Roads will look different if flats replace Club 85. And will one of the best signs in Hitchin be changed? - 'Turn Left for Beer' at The Anchor in Walsworth may soon become 'Turn Left for Beer and Brassicas' - if Sainsburys get its way. Whether that development will have an impact on traffic and the adjoining nature reserve of Purwell Meadows will no doubt be debated over the coming months.

As a forum we invite all views on our local issues, and we have an article expressing an alternative view on the possible Luton Airport expansion with its local impact. Do read it and send comments to newsletters@hitchinform.org.uk about this and the wider national debate, which has an echo in the Prime Minister's latest suggestions, that the climate change agenda and local economic conditions need to be reset.

1. LUSTRE report on reduced speed limits:

<https://www.pacts.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Lustre-Report-2023-Funded-by-the-RST.pdf>

Mike Clarke - Co-Chair

Churchgate Update

Progress on the Churchgate Project was reported to the Hitchin Area Forum (formerly the Hitchin Committee of North Herts Council) and is minuted on the Council's website.

The current task being undertaken by the Council's appointed consultants, Lambert Smith Hampton, is called a 'Stage 1 – Baseline Review' and includes reviewing the ownership of all relevant portions of land covering

the Churchgate shopping centre and adjacent areas (some have covenants on them), an overview of all the relevant planning policy for all the areas, and an overview particularly of the Market.

The agents for the Churchgate leasehold have been Brown & Lee for many years and they will continue to attend to essential works involving Health & Safety and Compliance issues. At present, the Council is firming up final details with Brown & Lee for the improvement and remedial works planned for the shopping centre.

The Council team has also begun work on 'Stage 2 – Stakeholder Engagement' (forgive the jargon!) and expect to complete this by mid-October. The Council's current work programme with the consultants is scheduled to take until December 2023 (subject to change based on progress) and will include supporting the Council in the preparation for appointment of a development partner.

In terms of public consultation, the next meeting of the Churchgate Advisory Group (CAG) - on which Hitchin Forum has a representative - is likely to be later in the autumn, and they (CAG) hope a representative from the consultants will provide an update at the meeting. It is also hoped that the topic for discussion at the next Hitchin Area Forum will be Churchgate and of course this is open to the wider public. The Chair said he hoped that could be a special meeting before Christmas as the next scheduled meeting isn't until January 2024.

Ellie Clarke – member of Hitchin Forum

Hitchin Forum's Autumn Clean-up

Our second litterpicking event of the year will take place on Sunday 15th October from 10.00 till 12.00. If you haven't taken part before and would like to do so, please email hflitterpick@gmail.com and I will send you further details together with the online registration form. Those who have been involved before should already have heard from me, so do get in touch if that is not the case. Let's hope for better weather than we had in March!

Bill Sellicks - Co-Chair



Wet litter pickers on Butts Close (Photo: Stuart Howarth)

Airport Update

The Examination of Luton Rising's Development Consent Order has now begun. As reported in the previous Newsletter, I am registered as an Interested Party on behalf of the Forum as a result of the Relevant Representation I made objecting to the development. Luton Rising has now responded to that – their responses can be found [here \(pages 117-148\)](#)¹.

As you will see if you have looked at the text of that initial representation on our website, it contained significant detail, and can stand alone. It gives me rights to make further representations to the Examination as long as these do not simply make points already made (a rule that does not seem to apply to the applicant, since many of their rebuttals are taken from documents already submitted). The right to make further representations includes providing responses to Luton Rising's response, which I am about to submit at the time of writing. Deadlines are tight for all of this, and are set out in the Examination Timetable, in [Annex A of the 'Rule 6 letter'](#)².

I would encourage concerned members to keep an eye on the [Planning Inspectorate website for the Examination](#)³. This features transcripts and video recordings of preliminary hearings on Thursday 10th and Friday 11th August. The transcripts are worth dipping into, even if just to sample the effectiveness of the AI package used to convert the verbal utterances into text, which can at times be amusing. They may be easier to use than trying to use the video recordings. These often require an attempt to separate out relevant contributions from the inevitable, but rather lengthy procedural necessities, not to mention interjections from the Chair to ensure that microphones are switched on or off!

We are very fortunate in having local dedicated groups such as the Luton and District Association for the Control of Aircraft Noise (LADACAN) to keep up the pressure. And, given their experience and expertise, they will probably do it far more effectively than I can manage.



Small jet taking off from Luton airport. (Photo Bill Sellicks)

Those who are not members of LADACAN can keep up to date with proceedings by accessing the [LADACAN website](#)⁴.

1. Luton Rising responses to Hitchin Forum comments:
[https://infrastructure.planninginspectorate.gov.uk/wp-content/ipc/uploads/projects/TR020001/TR020001-001527-London%20Luton%20Airport%20Limited%20-%20Comments%20on%20Relevant%20Representations%20\(RR\)%202.pdf](https://infrastructure.planninginspectorate.gov.uk/wp-content/ipc/uploads/projects/TR020001/TR020001-001527-London%20Luton%20Airport%20Limited%20-%20Comments%20on%20Relevant%20Representations%20(RR)%202.pdf)
2. Examination timetable:
<https://infrastructure.planninginspectorate.gov.uk/wp-content/ipc/uploads/projects/TR020001/TR020001-001276-LUTN-Rule-8-and-hearings-notification-letter.pdf>
3. Planning Inspectorate website:
<https://infrastructure.planninginspectorate.gov.uk/projects/eastern/london-luton-airport-expansion/>
4. LADACAN website:
<https://ladacan.org/>

Bill Sellicks - Co-Chair

Hitchin's Water Supply and Sewage Disposal before 1873

Part 1 – The National Context

Recent national publicity about sewage being allowed to flow into our waterways and onto our beaches reminded me of a project that I started in 2020, the fruits of which never saw the light of day at the time. I found it a fascinating story with elements that still resonate today. However, I am not a historian. What follows should therefore be regarded as much an opinion piece as anything else.

This is a story which illustrates the slow progress which mid-19th century society made in addressing pressing issues. People suffered, especially the poor. Nationally, an apparently well-meaning, but egotistical public

figure, blinded by what he saw as a commitment to the problems of the poor above all else, used his political skills to justify ignoring the advice of those who knew better. At the same time a pioneer made a breakthrough in what is now the science of epidemiology, which included one of the first demonstrations of the use of statistics in analysing data. Instead of being lauded for his efforts, he too was vilified by the adherents of a 'theory' which owed more to magic than science.

The national picture was reflected at a local level here in Hitchin. At the start of the 19th century, residents might have got their water from standpipes in the streets or from wells, either on their own property or, for the less well-off, serving a number of properties. Such supplies would doubtless have been supplemented by rainwater collected in water butts. During the first half of the century, the town's population more than doubled as the poor from outlying villages lost their rights as tenant farmers and migrated into the town to find work (although many continued to work as agricultural labourers). Many of these new arrivals would have settled in the Dead Street area (now Queen's Street) in poor quality houses in which families were forced to live in single rooms, and which were served by a single privy for several households. Conditions were documented by William Ranger in a report written in 1849, parts of which are reprinted in a [Hitchin Journal article by Simon Walker¹](#). The waste from the privies was transferred to cesspits, which were poorly constructed, prone to leakage and irregularly emptied. These properties were served by a single well, often shared between a number of properties, and the well was often not far from a cesspit. The sewage was thus able to leak into the water supply. In Hewitt's Yard, where three privies served the 129 occupants of 26 houses, the privies were built over the river and the waste from them drained directly into it. Some people took their water directly from the river. It was no surprise that the area was prone to outbreaks of water-borne disease, especially cholera. There were serious outbreaks of cholera in Hitchin in both 1833 and 1848.



One of the yards in Dead Street (later Queen Street) which were demolished.

This was, of course, before the development of the germ theory as a result of the work of Pasteur and Lister among others in the 1850s and 60s. Until then, people believed (with some logic in view of the likely stench that would accompany the prevailing insanitary arrangements) that diseases such as cholera were to do with bad air or 'miasmas'. There was clearly an understanding that the cleanliness of drinking water was important to public health. However, it was not until 1854 that Dr John Snow established the connection between the source of drinking water and cases of cholera during an [outbreak in London²](#). Snow mapped incidents of the disease and concluded that they were associated with water from a pump in Broad Street, Soho, in what is widely considered to be the first ever epidemiological investigation. He persuaded local officials to remove

the pump handle, which brought the outbreak to an end. Even so, there was considerable opposition to Snow's ideas, and powerful vested interests often obstructed progress in improvement of clean water or in sewerage infrastructure for some years afterwards. It took London's 'great stink' of 1858 to drive the political initiative that resulted in Joseph Bazalgette's construction of London's sewers, which was completed in 1865.

In Part 2, I will discuss what happened in Hitchin between 1848 and 1873, which reflected changes made in London and elsewhere. There are parallels with the current problems of the water industry, and lessons that should have been learnt in the 19th century which need to be applied today.

1. William Ranger's Report. Simon Walker. The Hitchin Journal, Vol. 30, No. 2. Hitchin Historical Society:
<https://www.hitchinhistoricals.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Journal-Sep-2020.pdf>
2. 1854 Broad Street cholera outbreak:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1854_Broad_Street_cholera_outbreak

Bill Sellicks - Co-Chair

Our town, your say

As a forum we welcome debate and are interested in the views of all our members. This article puts a case for expansion of Luton Airport, a view opposed to the newsletter's long-running set of articles on the subject.

Expansion of our Local Airport- Is it all so dreadful?

Over the years, our Hitchin Forum newsletters have regularly offered us a rather sceptical view of Luton Airport's plans to further develop the airport and increase the annual number of passenger movements. This article offers my personal thoughts to help us consider what often is presented as a controversial subject. I do not have any conflict of interest when writing this article.

The most recent proposals from Luton Rising, the name of Luton Council's social enterprise business, is to increase the current 18 million passengers per annum to 32 million by the year 2041.

I start from the adage that, 'nothing in this life is perfect.' The proposals throw up many questions and fears for local people which might include aircraft noise, increased road congestion in the area, pollution caused by aircraft and vehicle emissions, or climate change issues caused by the burning of fossil fuels.

However, as they say, 'every cloud has a silver lining.' Increased passengers will also bring additional employment for many local people, additional revenues for Luton Council, a convenient international airport near to home with additional destinations and improved transport links.

Being an island nation, it is arguable that we are more dependent on air transport than other European countries. Road and rail connections to the mainland continent are limited to the southeast and other ferries are costly and take many hours to make the crossings. If people are to travel easily, this is the main reason why there is pressure everywhere to expand travel capacity by air.

Consider our nearby airports:

- For many years, Heathrow has had plans for a third runway to facilitate an additional 260,000 flights annually.
- Gatwick also has plans to increase passenger numbers to 75 million a year.

- Stansted intends to submit plans to increase capacity from the current 26 million passengers to 43 million per annum.
- Southend airport also has plans to expand its small capacity by four times.

So, our local airport is no exception. It appears there is a pressure cooker effect in the southeast and if the expansion doesn't happen in one place, it inevitably will take place elsewhere. I was pleased to be able to attend one of Luton Rising's recent presentations to the public, which took place in Hitchin Town Hall, and talk with the consultants, technicians and different professionals who have been tasked with consulting the public concerning the proposals. I came away excited by the plans and with the knowledge that there are organisations eager and ready to invest in our local transport facilities and economy for our benefit.

Potential Negatives

If the plans were to get the green light, consider some of the perceived negatives. Those living or working under the flight path between Stevenage and Luton would probably bear the brunt of additional noise for eastbound take offs (which correspond to only 30% of flights), but homes such as these are eligible for sound insulation grants. In addition, aircraft engines have become dramatically quieter over the years and set to become quieter still. Other towns and villages in our locality should not be unduly affected by the noise of additional flights.

People are rightly concerned by the fuel burn of aircraft engines, but these have become considerably more efficient in recent decades, and all businesses, including the airport and airlines, are legally obligated to become net zero of producing greenhouse gases by the year 2050.

Additional passengers will mean more people travelling to and from the airport by various means. However, private and public service vehicles will inevitably become cleaner and greener as the years go by. Regarding congestion, we are already benefitting from the improvements to the M1 Junction 10 and the A505 access to the terminal. The new railway station at Luton Parkway serving the airport and the Luton Dart rapid transit transfer from Parkway direct to the terminal also encourages use of public transport to London and other locations.

Potential Positives

Let's now consider some of the positives. Additional passengers using the airport will bring a substantial number of jobs at all levels. If not for us, these are jobs for our family members and our children who will welcome them. This can only enhance the local economy and improve opportunities for local businesses to service the airport. Our own town, Hitchin, will also benefit from this additional influx of spending power, helping it to maintain its vibrant economy and facilities.

Additional passengers also means additional revenues for the council. How can this not be welcomed? The airport operator understands it needs to maintain good relations with the local community and it has a good track record in making generous financial grants to local groups. With more passengers using the airport, one would hope it would expand these positive interactions.

Luton has the unwelcome reputation of hosting one of the worst airports in the UK! This is probably due to the constant developments which have been ongoing for decades. If the plans to expand are completed, let's hope Luton's reputation will improve and we locals will be the eventual beneficiaries of a leading efficient welcoming local airport.

If Luton had first class facilities and offered a direct route to a desired destination, who would choose to travel to one of the other airports further away for their flight? While an expanded airport might attract more people travelling from afar, it will also be quicker and more convenient for local people to use.

Conclusions

This article may not have been a rigorous examination of complex issues, but hopefully it suggests that there are solutions to much of the negativity thrown at the plans which are intended to make things better for us.

On the positive side, there is much to commend the plans and they do not deserve simply to be dismissed out of hand.

Being considered to be part of our national infrastructure, it is probably only right that an application such as this is taken out of the hands of local people as it seems to cause such division. We should make our views known to whoever will listen but then sit back and accept the outcomes, otherwise life probably isn't worth living!

For more information about the proposals, visit: <https://lutonrising.org.uk>

Jeremy Burrowes – member of Hitchin Forum

History and Nature together on our doorstep - Hitchin Cemetery

The idea for this article germinated in summer when Hitchin Festival was in full swing with its amazingly wide variety of events. One of the events advertised was a tour of Hitchin Cemetery and its wildlife. I was keen to join this tour and was disappointed to find that it was fully subscribed on both of the occasions it was offered. Nevertheless, as the event was free, I thought it possible that perhaps someone who had booked would not turn up and I could be squeezed in, which luckily turned out to be the case.

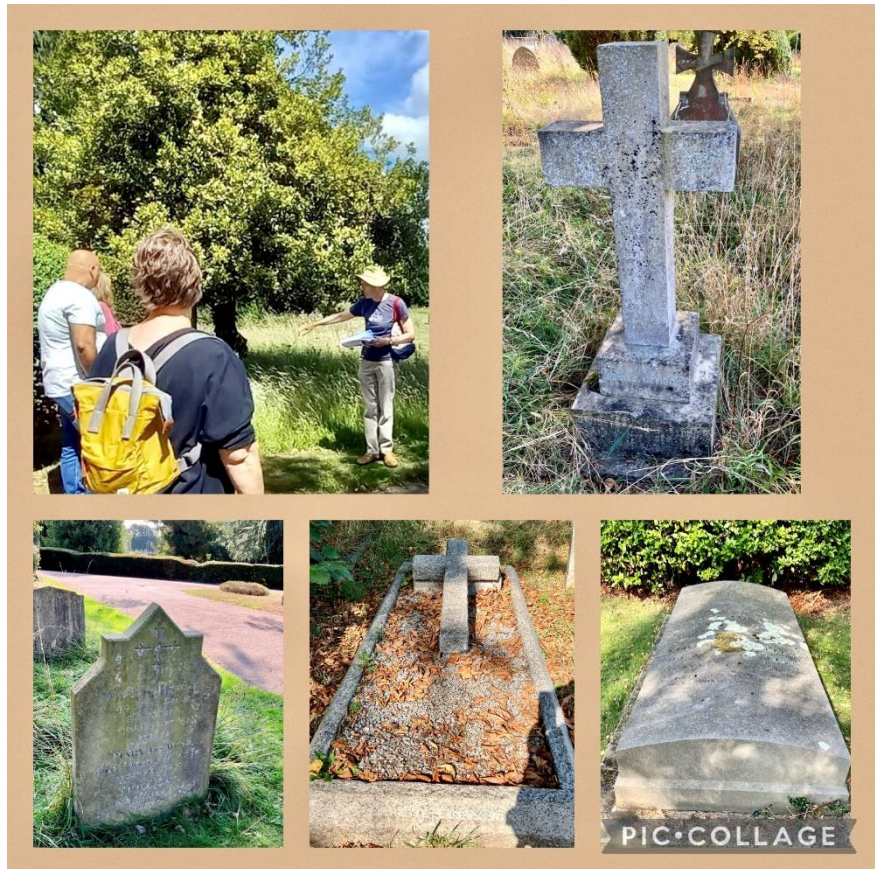
These tours are organised by the Friends of Hitchin Cemetery group led by Veronica Gardner. They usually occur four times a year, two of them taking place as part of the Hitchin Festival. If you were unfortunate enough to miss out on a tour this year you can keep up to speed by visiting the cemetery's [‘wildlife haven’ blog¹](#) produced by Phil Barron, an update of which is due to be published shortly.



North Herts Council sign with map and brief description of Hitchin Cemetery

Below is a collage showing Phil Barron of the Friends (top left) taking a group round the cemetery to see some of the graves that are of historical interest. Among those presented are:

- Top right, the tombstone of [William John Fitch²](#), headmaster of The British Schools.
- Bottom left, the tombstone of a sexton named William Morgan, dated May 22, 1857, the earliest grave to be dug in the cemetery.
- Bottom middle and right are graves that have a connection to Charles Dickens. The middle grave is that of his granddaughter, [Mary Angela Dickens³](#), while the grave shown at bottom right belongs to his publisher, Edward Chapman of Chapman and Hall, who added to Dickens' success by publishing his work in the form of a serial novel, an example of which is *The Pickwick Papers*.



Other graves you may encounter on the tour are those of:

- Peter Wolff (top right in the collage below). It seems Peter's mother arranged for him to come to England, possibly on the Kindertransport, before she died in Poland's Lodz concentration camp. [His story⁴](#) can be read in the Comet archives.
- Miriam Florence Simms, aged 23, the only person to be killed by enemy action in Hitchin.

At this point it is probably worth mentioning that Hitchin Cemetery is also a site for Commonwealth War Graves where [61 casualties from the First and Second World Wars⁵](#) are identified. These graves are scattered around the cemetery, 31 of them being from WWI and 30 from WWII. In addition, there is a line of a further 12 war graves, which includes those of two German airmen, the details of which can be found as Items #62 and #63 on the [WW2Talk website⁶](#).

And, whilst on the subject of death and destruction, in the top left of the collage below a deadly nightshade (*Atropa belladonna*) plant is to be found lurking amongst the foliage in this secluded spot in the cemetery. It appears it was the pharmacy of William Ransom, a local botanist and pharmacist, that brought this somewhat [rare indigenous plant⁷](#) to Hitchin.

Importantly, the cemetery provides a haven for wildlife, and improvements in the habitat carried out by the Friends benefit its bumblebees and 17 species of ladybird, as well as butterflies such as the peacock. This in turn helps birds, such as the green woodpecker, by increasing their food supply. Amongst the mammals that frequent the cemetery are bats and the humble hedgehog. I have been told the Hedgehog Hospital releases its restored-to-health patients in the cemetery. Wildflowers such as primrose and wild carrot can be found there too.

Bottom left in the collage is a picture showing the bat boxes that have been installed on the outside of the chapel to provide a roost for pipistrelle bats.

Bottom right is a photo of a beetle bank that was constructed on my recent Friday morning visit to take some photographs and glean more information from the Friends and, in particular Phil Barron, who kindly provided me with their leaflet from which the map on the next page is taken.

Similar to many older cemeteries and graveyards, Hitchin cemetery has an ancient yew tree, whose site is marked on the map below. It appears that [the yew tree](#)⁸ has been linked with death and the journey of the soul from this life to the next for thousands of years. Indeed, from an [article in Great British Life](#)⁹ from 22nd October

2016 we learn that one of the features of Hitchin Cemetery is its collection of topiary and, though moulded into various shapes over the years, it lacked a common theme. Thus, a plan was devised to develop curved, natural shapes in the topiary that would reflect the curves in the grass. As remodelling the topiary could take several years, the Friends of Hitchin Cemetery group was formed to take on this challenge. In addition, they took on the task of improving the appearance of the cemetery by clearing unwanted vegetation and brambles, and creating a habitat friendly to wildlife.

The Friends of Hitchin Cemetery group welcomes new members; they generally work on Friday mornings from 10 am until 12 noon, with a coffee break. If you would like to get involved either turn up on a Friday morning or contact the Countryside Management Service on their [Facebook](#)¹⁰ page. Alternatively, contact the Chair of the Friends, Mrs. Veronica Gardner, who can be contacted via vgardner211219@gmail.com or 07896272585.

Should you wish to tour Hitchin Cemetery independently, North Herts Council (NHC) information boards with a map of the older areas, as depicted in the photograph at the beginning of this article, are on display throughout the cemetery, and there is adequate seating for quiet relaxation and contemplation. Separately, the Friends have produced their own leaflet, which contains the map shown below and provides information on where things most worth seeing are sited.



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: Check NHC site.	7.30 pm	Tuesday 30 th January 2024

Hitchin Forum Annual General Meeting

Hitchin Forum's Annual General Meeting will take place on Tuesday November 7th at 7.30pm. The venue will be Walsworth Community Centre in Woolgrove Road. The postcode is SG4 0AU. There is no parking on site, but it should be possible to find parking over the road or elsewhere not far away. As many will be aware, we normally invite a speaker to make a presentation after the formal business is over. At this stage, we have not finalised who that will be.

This year, we have taken the decision to send out all papers electronically to all who have agreed to receive newsletters by email only. If you normally receive a hard copy of the newsletter, you will receive hard copy of the AGM papers as usual.