

HITCHIN FORUM

Caring for our Town

NEWSLETTER

November - December 2023

No. 177

Thoughts from the Co-Chair

Christmas coming, with the usual feasting, but here is a mind feast for you. We apologise that Bill is our dominant author this time, but it's all good stuff. His tour of the town centre with a wheelchair user is a reminder of issues that we often step over, and reassuring that when raised with our elected representatives and county officers there are routes to improve the situation. Bill also provides a brief report on the very successful litter campaign and continues his sewage saga, which was also a topic within Victoria Glendinning's tale of the Seebohm family (*A Suppressed Cry*, published 1969). In commenting that the importance of lack of hygiene and proper sanitation causing disease was only just beginning to be understood (circa 1880), she quotes from a Tennyson ballad – 'An I thowt 'twur the will o' the Lord, But Miss Annie she said it wur draains'. Glendinning also comments that the Seebohm near neighbour and partner in the Hitchin bank, James Hack Tuke, suffered all his life from bilious attacks and stomach trouble, which she says can be attributed to the drains. The town does have better drains 150 years later! Things can improve.

The effects of planning decisions can be seen in the emerging development of flats at the corner of Park and Bridge Streets. Which of these two pieces of urban design do you find more pleasing and appropriate for Hitchin?

Before...



The Triangle

And after...

A wall of battleship grey symbolising Fortress Hitchin? What a pity when more careful planning is evident nearby.



The Tirangle 2023

Brent Smith writes about the 'greening up' of towns – maybe returning to the townscape seen in the above 'before' picture of the Triangle.

Planning issues preoccupy Neil who gives an account of recent applications, including the Highover proposal, which gained approval. How Cambridge Road and the Walsworth crossroads will cope with another 700 households pouring into the town centre is mind blowing. But of course, given the alarm bells about climate change we should all be biking and walking; cars will have to be banned very soon if global disaster is to be avoided.

Speaking of the climate, Bill returns to the airport plans with a response to whether they should be supported. How can any increase in flights be imagined when the latest prediction is of a 3°C rise in global temperatures? It is difficult to imagine the effects of that, but at least we are sufficiently inland that the sea should not reach us.

Valerie has unearthed another hidden treasure to explore in Ashwell, Gotha Gardens - a place to relax away from this busy town, and no, I hadn't heard of it either

There's no comment yet on the curious case of the [HCC 20 mph consultation¹](#); there's [a good letter²](#) in The Comet of 23rd Nov which highlights many of the issues.

We have added the minutes of the AGM. There was the usual business, with the same old faces on the steering group, but we do look for new faces (and minds) to join us – so let me know if you are interested. Just come to a steering group meeting and see how we operate. The AGM was followed by a fascinating account of our local and rare chalk streams. Sarah Perry from the Herts & Middlesex Trust enlightened us and talked about the work on the Purwell, which was flowing past the Walsworth Community Centre as we listened.

1. HCC Proposed 20 mph Zone - Central Hitchin:
<https://tinyurl.com/5e67cu73>
2. Letter concerning 20 mph proposal. Hitchin Forum website reproduced from the Comet:
<https://www.hitchinforum.org.uk/20mph-info/>

Mike Clarke - Co-Chair

Access Issues for Wheelchair users in Hitchin Town Centre

On a warm Good Friday this year, my wife and I accompanied a wheelchair user and her husband on their walk into Hitchin town centre, a walk they do several times each week to go shopping and enjoy a coffee. The aim was to prepare a report to Councillors about problems they experience on their journey. As some will know, I survey rights of way for Hertfordshire County Council's Rights of Way Unit, so it seemed something to which I could bring some insight. The focus for surveyors is on footpaths, bridleways, and other types of rights of way, but not generally on pavements. Surveyors are encouraged to consider the needs of different user groups. I am both a cyclist and walker but can only guess at the problems faced by horse riders, and I have to confess that I have only occasionally reported on issues for wheelchair users.

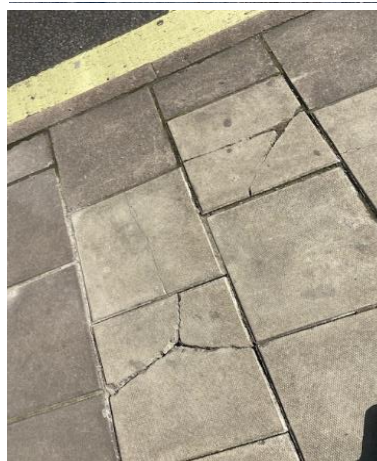
Not surprisingly, the trip was an education for me. Quite apart from the hazards encountered, I had not realised just how hard it is to control a wheelchair for the person doing the work (this is not a powered mobility scooter, and the design is basic but functional). In the jargon, this is an 'attendant propelled' wheelchair. Quite apart from the physical effort, a considerable degree of anticipation of a hazard is involved. The wheelchair isn't like a child's pushchair, which is relatively low to the ground and much lighter. The occupant in that case, even if under protest, is at least strapped in. A major problem for the attendant is that the chair and its occupant obscure the view of ground about to be covered. The attendant may have seen the hole about two or three yards ahead, but it then disappears from view until the chair has passed over it. The only safe way to deal with the problem is to advance with a considerable degree of caution, aware all the time that any of the wheels could encounter an obstacle (the position of which you have to guess) jolting the occupant forward or even out of the chair entirely.

Loose or broken paving stones or iron gully covers (sometimes caused by pavement parking) are obvious hazards, along with gaps between pavers where wheels might fit into the gap and get stuck. Elements of the designed environment can be just as difficult to negotiate. Vehicle entrances with steep cross-slopes and poorly maintained pavers, or the decorative paving in Hitchin's Market Place present particular difficulties. Steep slopes, both up and down, are things to avoid, but often the alternatives are even less palatable, especially when extra road crossing is involved. At one point on our journey, customers enjoying a coffee at one of Hitchin's many eateries had encroached so far onto the pavement that the wheelchair had to be steered through a narrow chicane between their chairs and the kerb only just wide enough for it to get through. There are [National Guidelines](#)¹ which apply to all of these features, but it is a long time since they were applied in Hitchin (or, I suspect, anywhere else).

After the walk, I prepared a report which I sent to Hitchin Committee members. I was able to make some pretty obvious recommendations; more frequent surveying, better maintenance and more stringent enforcement to ensure pavements were not obstructed by venue overspill or damaged by pavement parking.



Uneven kerb



Broken paving stones



Loose or missing pavers

I was unable to follow up the report until the Councillors' Surgery in July, when I spoke to Keith Hoskins. Keith quickly invited Jeff Clayton - HCC's Strategy and Programme Manager for Highways Implementation, Growth and Environment - to repeat the walk. Jeff and a colleague spent three hours in August retracing the walk to see the problems for themselves. Jeff pushed the wheelchair around Bucklersbury, Tilehouse Street, Sun Street, Market Place and Churchgate, and was clearly concerned at the problems he encountered.

Jeff is Hertfordshire County Council's sponsor for the Hitchin and Royston High Streets Recovery budget. He is optimistic that improvements can be made as part of an overall package of measures to encourage High Street recovery in Hitchin, which could start as early as next year. Let's hope that happens, and that it can herald an era when greater care is taken to maintain our public realm for everyone's sake.



Steel / iron gully covers in poor repair



Cross-slope on vehicle access

A more comprehensive report on the survey of hazards in the town centre can be found on the Hitchin Forum [website](#)².



The wheelchair's small front wheels can easily get stuck in gaps between paving slabs.



Damaged Concrete – frost damage or mechanical overload

1. A Guide to Best Practice on Access to Pedestrian and Transport Infrastructure:
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1044542/inclusive-mobility-a-guide-to-best-practice-on-access-to-pedestrian-and-transport-infrastructure.pdf
2. A bumpy ride – a summary of hazards encountered by wheelchair users during a journey to Hitchin town centre:
<https://www.hitchinform.org.uk/a-bumpy-ride/>

Bill Sellicks - Co-Chair

Hitchin Forum's Autumn Clean-up

The bright sunshine made for a very pleasant day for over 120 volunteers who took part in Hitchin Forum's Autumn Clean-up on Sunday October 15th.

Once again, all our individuals and family groups of volunteers cleared a total of 15 areas in the town with the help of Holy Saviour Guides, Bubbleworks Community's running group and Hitchin Tennis Club. The overall downward trend in the amount of litter was again often commented upon by participants. In part this is due to the work of North Hertfordshire's contractors, but the small and growing army of unsung local heroes who quietly work on their own areas every week is having an effect too.



Although we believe there is less litter overall, in recent years there have been worrying changes in the most common items to be discarded. Unsurprisingly, in 2020 and 2021, disposable COVID masks were everywhere. After that it was the large blue catering packs of nitrous oxide, used as a 'legal high'. Incidentally, we hope the recently introduced [law making possession of nitrous oxide illegal¹](#) will reduce the problem in future.

Quite apart from the appalling waste represented by the thoughtless disposal of over 100 aluminium drink cans found by the Guides in the Dell (which can easily be recycled using the bins that are now plentiful), this time we saw an increase in the number of disposable vapes left lying around. Hitchin is not alone. According to Material Focus, which aims to encourage the recycling of electrical products, 1.3 million single use vapes are thrown away every week. Each single use vape contains on average 0.15 g of lithium, which equates to 10 tonnes of lithium being discarded every year (equivalent to the lithium contained in batteries inside 1,200 electric vehicles). When crushed, or if they get wet, the batteries in vapes can cause fires and explosions. Hopefully those who use them will start to get into the habit of returning them to the shops from which they were bought.

If you would like to take part in the Forum's spring event on Sunday 24th March 2024, please email hflitterpick@gmail.com.

1. Government announcement on new law to make N₂O illegal:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/nitrous-oxide-to-be-illegal-from-november>

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 presents a proposal to improve our environment by increasing the number of trees and other plant life in the town centre.

Greening Up Hitchin – a Proposal

The thinktank, Create Streets, has prepared an excellent report to promote the greening of urban areas. The team researching it has taken evidence from across the world and its findings show the importance of greenery to us humans. They show clear links to increased happiness, improved health (particularly mental health) and prosperity.

Create Streets is chaired by Nicholas Boys Smith, who also heads the Office for Place in Michael Gove's Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC), so it will hopefully get government support. The [Executive Summary](#)¹ of the report is available online, as is the [full report](#)². Both are well worth reading, although the full report does run to 192 pages.

It highlights the maze of specific permissions required to plant street trees, which is difficult to navigate, and that the liability it imposes on the planter is off putting. The process is long, the sign-offs are unpredictable and significant money is needed up-front just to gain permission. Local councils, insurance companies and particularly highways authorities, have many opportunities to block planting and few incentives to permit it, allowing narrow, short-term concerns to trump the wider benefits of greening up. It argues that instead of having to fight to plant in our streets, there should be a more permissive regulatory regime which gives the right to plant.

There is an 'unconscious bias' against greenery and plants in local planning, despite the benefits to areas and people. The report says the government should encourage local authorities to adopt a 'grow don't mow' policy to create biodiverse verges instead of clearcut lawns – the central reservation of the road into Luton has been brilliant with its uncut grass and an abundance of wildflowers.

One approach praised by Create Streets is called 'the 3-30-300 rule': that everyone should have sight of three trees, every neighbourhood should have 30% canopy cover, and everyone should live within 300 metres of a park or green space.

It shows that urban greenery has the capacity to boost our natural ecosystem and has the power to enrich our social ecosystems. As with our individual wellbeing, research is demonstrating how green spaces and urban trees can improve our collective health, providing the physical setting for healthier communities with stronger social bonds. Trees and neighbourhood greenery have been shown normally to improve interpersonal relations and support more tightknit communities, whilst being associated with slower cars, less crime and higher local business revenues.

If local authorities are not going to plant and maintain urban planting, I do think that local groups should be allowed to do so. There needs to be control and commitment to future upkeep. The Urban Vigilantes sound a great idea, rather like having contemporary Robin Hoods, but I don't think that they work. I followed the story of the phantom gardeners of Northwich who planted a row of trees, but the council then put a notice up for their removal. They were duly removed but, with the support of councillors responding to the public wish to keep them, were replanted elsewhere in the town.

Trees obviously do present some problems – leaf fall, droppings from birds attracted to them and, in urban locations, they require periodic maintenance. But these downsides are massively countered by the benefits that they bring. The Create Streets report quantifies these benefits.

However, the good intentions of the report, and indeed any government support that it receives, will come to nothing unless local authorities play their part. They must change from seeing their role as tightly controlling whatever initiatives the community has and being blockers to obvious improvements. They need to take the

lead and not just sit back thinking that everything is just too difficult. In the past we have been poorly served by NHC and HCC – just look at the state of Hitchin’s public realm - but I understand that the current councillors are excited by proposals to add greenery to the town and will do their best to support proposals. They will doubtless be met by the old chestnut that underground services will represent too great a problem to doing anything. The GreenBlue planting systems that we are suggesting have been designed and developed to answer this very problem.

Local authorities look just at the cost of trees, hence the vandalising of Sheffield, but ignore their overall cost benefit so clearly set out in this report. Introducing a change in the way that local government is funded so that they receive payment for these cost and health benefits could potentially yield massive results - rather like the way that farmers are paid for ecological and environmental improvements. (Note: this is my idea and not a recommendation contained in the report.) I have been in Japan during blossom time and have witnessed the joy that it brings and the way in which it invigorates the people.



Visual of proposals by Mark Wearne

In Hitchin we can make a modest but significant start by implementing the ‘Trees in Hermitage Road’ initiative (my article on this was published in the Forum’s [September 2022 Newsletter](#)³). There is an example of what we are proposing on Page 102 of the [report](#)² showing a scheme carried out at Goldsmith Street in Norwich. We hear that Hermitage Road is programmed for resurfacing next year; then would be the time to put in the trees.

The report suggests that we should all join the mission to improve our environment and that we should start by shouting about the benefits of urban greening and encourage a media and educational culture change campaign to celebrate the benefits of urban greenery. Let’s start with Hitchin Forum shouting!

1. Executive summary of the Create Streets ‘Greening Up report:
https://www.createstreets.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Greening_Up_Executive_Summary.pdf
2. Full report of the Create Streets ‘Greening Up report:
<https://www.createstreets.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Greening-Up-290923.pdf>
3. Hitchin Forum Newsletter 170:
[Hitchin-Forum-NL170-Sept-Oct-2022.pdf](https://www.hitchinform.org.uk/Hitchin-Forum-NL170-Sept-Oct-2022.pdf) ([hitchinform.org.uk](https://www.hitchinform.org.uk))

Brent Smith – member of Hitchin Forum

Planning

We attended the Council's Planning Committee meeting on 12th October 2023, and spoke against both the Highover Farm development of 700 dwellings and the West of Crow Furlong development of 47 dwellings. We combined forces with other objectors and together made some very valid points in our allocated five-minute slots, including searching criticisms of the traffic studies used to justify both these schemes. In the case of Highover Farm, our objections were overshadowed when the applicant's representative raised the intention of taking legal action against the Council if the scheme was not approved. Ultimately, in both cases we were unsuccessful, and the majority of councillors present voted for these schemes. Interestingly, Richard Wilcox, with whom we objected to the Highover Farm scheme, produced some entertaining and persuasive videos on YouTube which can be found [here¹](#) and [here²](#).

We applied to speak to back-up our written objections against the development of 52 dwellings at Waterdell Lane, St Ippollitts, but the Council's permitted five-minute slot was already taken by two local speakers. The development there was approved, though we understand that the Section 106 money will quite properly go to the local infant and junior school and not elsewhere as originally proposed.

We have also written objecting to aspects of the redevelopment of Club 85 and to a Sainsbury's convenience store in the grounds of The Anchor public house. Our comments on these and other schemes have benefitted from the specialist knowledge of some of our members, to whom we are greatly indebted. Other smaller applications on which we have commented include Westbourne Care Home and Payne's Park House.



Artist's Impression of the Club 85 development

1. Video - Everything you need to know about the Highover development:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JwvtW0lOulo>
2. Video - Week long traffic survey near Highover:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K6o8NJfHrXU>

Neil Dodds - member of Hitchin Forum Steering Group



Masterplan of Highover Development -Copyright Plane I.E. Ltd for Bellcross Homes

Hitchin's water supply and sewage disposal before 1873. Lessons for the future?

Part 2 – National legislation brings 'improvements' to Hitchin

Under the provisions of the Public Health Act 1848, Hitchin's Board of Health was set up that year. The Act, largely the brainchild of Sir Edwin Chadwick, recommended improved drainage and provision of sewers, the

removal of all refuse from houses, streets and roads, the provision of clean drinking water, and the appointment of a medical officer for each town.

As Secretary of the Poor Law Commission, Chadwick was an effective, even visionary, social reformer, but sometimes he had definite ideas well-beyond his sphere of competence. He viewed engineers (at least those who disagreed with him – a majority) as part of the problem which saw sanitary reform stalled by powerful vested interests. He persisted in his view that sewers should be small 6-inch diameter pipes rather than being brick-built and larger, claiming that the brick-built sewers advocated by most engineers were both expensive and [possibly dangerous](#)¹. Engineers wanted to install manhole covers to allow for inspection to deal with damage and blockages, which they saw as inevitable. Chadwick saw the need to clean sewers by hand as inhumane, unhealthy and unduly expensive. Given the practice of using children to clean chimneys, he certainly had a point, but he was unable to say how to deal with blockages – he thought that if people used sewers properly, there would be no problem.

Chadwick had little time for evidence that did not agree with his view and commissioned a series of experiments aimed at proving his ideas. The results of the experiments were mysteriously never published, but his influence was such that many sewers were constructed using pipes which were insufficiently strong. Unsurprisingly they collapsed. Leaks occurred because it was hard to join the pipes together. These types of sewer were impossible to inspect or clean. One of the engineers who opposed Chadwick was Joseph Bazalgette, mentioned in Part 1. His London sewers were large, brick-built and could be inspected and repaired. They were able to cope relatively well with demands placed on them into the 20th century.

One of the first acts of Hitchin's Board of Health was to initiate the building of a sewer under the Hiz at Bridge Street. As mentioned in Part 1, the report on the town by The General Board of Health's Inspector, William Ranger, in 1849 makes grim reading – see [Simon Walker's article](#)² in the Hitchin Journal of September 2020. Ranger recommends that 'it will not be necessary to use tubular sewers greater than 12 inches in diameter, whilst in many parts 8 inches will suffice'. He goes on to say that drainage from small houses - in other words, houses for poor people - will only need pipes of 4 inches in diameter. The sewerage arrangements did not work well and the work was considerably over-budget. One wonders if that sewer suffered from Chadwick's arrogant and misguided approach. The Board of Health's poor management, mounting debts and the threat of legal action for fouling the river resulted in the collapse of the Board in 1858. The work of the Board reverted to the 'Vestry' – an association of ratepayers. It was not until the Board was reformed in 1873 that Hitchin was provided with safe drinking water and a working sewerage system.

In recent years it has become obvious that the water treatment industry has a problem with storm water in particular. In 2022, at West Hythe on the Kent coast, a sewer storm overflow spilled 77 times for a total of [over 500 hours](#)³, discharging sewage into the English Channel. Nearby St Mary's Bay, an area whose economy is heavily reliant on its tourist business, has been subject to a ['Do not swim' warning for 2023](#)⁴. By comparison, Hitchin would appear to have been fortunate. Last year, a sewer storm overflow on Bancroft recreation ground discharged sewage into the river Hiz for about an hour. In 2022, the sewer storm overflow at the Ash Brook Waste Water Recycling Centre spilled sewage into the Ash Brook for a total of just over 19 hours. In the past, on the outskirts of Hitchin during heavy rain, storm water covers on the footpath at the back of houses on Oakfield Avenue alongside the Ippollitts Brook have frequently been reported as failing, with the contamination of the footpath surface and the brook. We should remember, of course, that the volume of water in the Ash Brook and the Hiz is relatively small. By contrast, discharges into sea water are diluted with much larger quantities of water which is more mobile due to tides and currents. The damage caused by these events closer to home is more localised and not strictly comparable with the West Hythe incidents. Incidents have not just been concerned with sewage pollution, and it is not just the water companies that have been found responsible – an [oil spill into the river Hiz](#)⁵ from the former Bowman's mill site caused significant problems for wildlife in September this year.

Whilst nothing like as extreme, the current situation reflects what was happening in Hitchin in the mid-19th century. There are still health implications for us all, not to mention wider environmental damage. Some groups are more vulnerable to damaging problems of ill health. Recently Dame Katherine Grainger, Chair of UK Sport, and others, have drawn attention to the hazardous conditions athletes face when training for and

competing in a variety of [water sports events](#)⁶. The House of Commons Environmental [Audit Committee](#)⁷ found that 14% of rivers and lakes in England are considered safe to swim in. Some countries do much better - in Austria, the [equivalent figure is 98%](#)⁶. It has been suggested that a lack of investment in infrastructure, coupled with increased dividends to water company shareholders and bonuses for industry managers, have contributed to the current crisis. New housing developments, some in unsuitable locations, make extra demands on infrastructure. Ofwat appears to be insufficiently robust in its dealings with the privatised water companies, so it is about time the industry was subjected to tighter regulation. The Government published its Storm [Overflows Discharge Reduction Plan](#)⁸ in August 2022; perhaps it is too early to expect to see any improvements as a result, but indications so far this year have not been encouraging.

1. Edwin Chadwick and the Engineers, 1842-1854: Systems and Antisystems in the Pipe-and-Brick Sewers War. Christopher Hamlin:
<http://www.homepages.ucl.ac.uk/~ucessjb/Hamlin%201992.pdf>
2. William Ranger's Report. Simon Walker. The Hitchin Journal Vol 30 No. 2:
<https://www.hitchinhistoricals.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Journal-Sep-2020.pdf>
3. All information on incidents in this article is taken from the Rivers Trust Sewage Map, where you can find out more details of your favourite holiday resort:
<https://experience.arcgis.com/experience/e834e261b53740eba2fe6736e37bbc7b/page/Map/>
4. 'Do not swim' warning at St Mary's Bay beach on Romney Marsh in place for whole year:
<https://www.kentonline.co.uk/romney-marsh/news/do-not-swim-warning-at-kent-beach-for-whole-year-282543/>
5. Ickleford: Suspected oil spill pollutes chalk stream river:
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-beds-bucks-herts-66723945>
6. Sustainability in sport: 'Water companies need to be held accountable':
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/66886505>
7. 'Chemical cocktail' of sewage, slurry and plastic polluting English rivers puts public health and nature at risk:
<https://committees.parliament.uk/committee/62/environmental-audit-committee/news/160246/chemical-cocktail-of-sewage-slurry-and-plastic-polluting-english-rivers-puts-public-health-and-nature-at-risk/#:~:text=Only%2014%25%20of%20English%20rivers,of%20health%20for%20chemical%20contamination.>
8. Storm Overflows Discharge Reduction Plan. DEFRA: 26 August 2022:
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1101686/Storm_Overflows_Discharge_Reduction_Plan.pdf

Bill Sellicks - Co-Chair

Our Town, Your Say – Follow-up

A response to the article in Newsletter 176 that was in support of Luton Airport's expansion plans.

Jeremy Burrowes (NL176: Our Town, Your Say) believes that Luton Rising's (LR's) plans are vital for the prosperity of Luton and its environs including Hitchin. His article was intended as a counterbalance to the sceptical line that I have taken in articles about airport expansion.

There are numerous aspects of his article that could be challenged. I will focus on climate change, but with a brief mention of LR's Green Controlled Growth strategy with respect to noise. Like Jeremy, I do not claim that this article is rigorous, but I do believe that it is important to demonstrate where the evidence on which it is based comes from. This article is therefore a summary of a fully referenced longer version which appears on the [Forum's website](#)¹.

Scepticism is a good thing. It underpins the system of scrutiny by peer review by which ideas gain acceptance in the scientific community. In spite of some problems, peer review is probably the best basis the layperson has to be confident in scientific findings. I trust the outcomes of peer-reviewed science more than I trust what I am told by representatives of wealthy industries seeking my acquiescence in their attempts to make even more money, or the politicians, targeted by those organisations' lobbyists, who are focused on short term electoral advantage.

The Royal Society tells us that aviation, both domestic and international, contributed 8% of the UK's carbon emissions in 2019. Decarbonisation is difficult. My view is that the government should follow the repeated advice of the Climate Change Committee (CCC) and impose a moratorium on airport expansion. That recommendation is based on the findings of peer-reviewed science.

Excess deaths due to extreme heat, melting of ice sheets, and displacement of communities in low lying areas are now accepted real consequences of man-made climate change caused by carbon dioxide emissions. By contrast, Jeremy's article seeks to suggest that carbon emissions are just one of a number of 'perceived negatives' associated with airport expansion. That claim is misleading. Scientists' models fit the constantly growing body of data from recent years more closely than ever before. The frequency of extreme weather events, together with the melting of glaciers and ice sheets leading to a rise in sea levels are predicted by those models. The predictions are now accepted by the vast majority of scientists.

I am not reassured that the UK's legal obligation to achieve net zero carbon emissions by 2050 will guarantee that we do so. Last year, the High Court found that the Government had not met its obligations under the Climate Change Act to produce detailed climate policies that show how net zero would be achieved. Government policy favours airport expansion, and its Jet Zero Strategy is based on the short-term use of 'sustainable aviation fuels' (SAF) to buy time before electric and hydrogen powered flight will decarbonise the industry. The strategy has been severely criticised for its over-reliance on technologies which are still in their infancy. Earlier this year, the Royal Society analysed the resource implications of the strategy and demonstrated that we have insufficient farmland or renewable energy generating capacity for it to succeed.

Luton Rising's Green Controlled Growth (GCG) strategy sounds reassuringly attractive, but we must view it with scrutiny and scepticism. An example of why we should be careful concerns the noise limits predicted in the surrounding villages and how they are tracked and enforced. In a document accompanying the Development Consent application there is an inconspicuous statement in which LR admits that once a noise limit has been breached, residents exposed to this harmful noise will suffer for a full two years before any relief comes. Even then, GCG permits the airport to argue that the breach is beyond its control, which would allow the growth and harmful noise to continue. That doesn't seem much of a safeguard for this one example of the effects of expansion and suggests that GCG's other 'controls' should be regarded with similar scepticism.

We ignore the findings of peer-reviewed science and the advice of the Climate Change Committee at the world's peril. I would be surprised if the expansion is not permitted, but for the sake of future generations, I hope that I am wrong.

1. Response to NL176 article:

<https://www.hitchinforum.org.uk/campaigns/>

Bill Sellicks - Co-Chair

Airport Update

On Friday 13th October the decision following the call-in and Public Inquiry into Luton Rising's (LR's) bid to increase its passenger cap to 19 million passengers per annum (mppa), and relax previously agreed noise limits, was finally released. The decision is to endorse Luton Borough Council's decision to grant permission. This allows various on- and off-site building works to be made to facilitate the increase. It was clear that a significant factor contributing to the decision was the perceived socio-economic benefits. It is not without caveats, however. Perhaps the most significant is to do with noise. The commercial passenger throughput at

London Luton Airport must not exceed 18 million passengers in a twelve-month period until a strategy detailing how noise will be managed has been submitted to, and approved in writing by, the Local Planning Authority. The full decision letter can be found on the [LADACAN website](#)¹.

Meanwhile, the examination of LR's Development Consent Order to increase passenger numbers to 32 mppa continues. The inspectors have now published the examining authority's [written questions and requests for further information](#)².

This is an interesting document because it suggests those areas of LR's case which the Inspectors feel are weak and need further clarity. Numerous other questions were raised about noise, surface access and, of course, Green Controlled Growth. Answers to these questions were required by 1st November, which is known as 'Deadline 4' in Examination speak, and the full set of responses can be found [here](#)³.

I find the questions around the Greenhouse Gas Action Plan (GHGAP) particularly interesting because they identify exactly the same weaknesses that I have previously pointed out in Noise Action Plans relating to the use of vague language leading to ineffectual 'plans' with no measurable outcomes. I will provide just two examples:

Example 1

The Inspectors say the GHGAP:

'... uses phrases such as 'encourage', 'may include', 'seek to implement'

What they really want to find out is how these proposals would be measured and enforced, and how much weight should be given to the likelihood of their delivery.

LR's response is lengthy and hides behind the hopeful provisions of the government's Jet Zero Strategy:

'In the case of emissions from aviation these are controlled by government policy. ...The Applicant will however play a part in facilitating government policy through the provision of sustainable aviation fuels and through operating policy that will incentivise more efficient aircraft.'

This sort of vague response gives me no confidence that any weight at all should be given to the effectiveness of LR's proposals.

Example 2

The question raised was:

'Table 3 of the GHG Action Plan states that completing an annual aircraft emissions inventory is a mitigation measure. Is it correct that this is described as a mitigation measure?'

Nobody could fault the logic of LR's response:

'While completing an annual emissions inventory will not in itself reduce GHG emissions it is an activity that will enable and incentivise emissions reduction. Without measuring the impact of GHG emissions from aircraft it is not possible to robustly understand the effectiveness of reduction measures that are being implemented.'

The straight answer should, of course, be 'no' but it is interesting because LR clearly wants to avoid admitting a lack of effective mitigating measures.

If you are brave enough to follow the link to the Deadline 4 responses, you will see that there are 220 separate documents. My advice is to use the search facility to find those which you consider to be most important.

1. Public enquiry decision letter:

https://ladacan.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/combined-DL-IR-R-to-C_Luton-Airport.pdf

2. Examining authority's written questions and requests for further information:
<https://infrastructure.planninginspectorate.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/projects/TR020001/TR020001-001991-LUTN-ExQ1-FINAL.pdf>
3. Deadline 4 submission - Response to ExQ1 BCG.1.2:
<https://national-infrastructure-consenting.planninginspectorate.gov.uk/projects/TR020001/documents?stage=4&date-from-day=&date-from-month=&date-from-year=&date-to-day=&date-to-month=&date-to-year=&searchTerm=&itemsPerPage=25&page=2>

Bill Sellicks - Co-Chair

A Gem on our Doorstep - Gotha Gardens, Pembroke Farm, Ashwell

Many of you will think of the village of Ashwell in terms of its [springs](#)¹ (a biological Site of Special Scientific Interest), that provides a habitat for cold water invertebrates and is particularly important for rare flatworms; or its historic church, [St. Mary the Virgin](#)², with its medieval graffiti; or even its iconic Grade 2 listed Tudor timber-framed [museum](#)³: (see photo opposite, taken from a jute bag sold in support of the museum).



However, Tripadvisor lists [Gotha Gardens](#)⁴ as Ashwell's top attraction. Reported as 'A peaceful, lovely garden - not highly manicured, but charming and interesting with many beautiful plants and quiet spaces to enjoy' it has an overall 4.5 star rating out of 5 from 28 reviews. The photo below depicts one such quiet space.



Although you won't be able to visit at present as it is only open in 2024 from March to October on Friday, Saturday, Sunday and Monday, 11am-5pm, it is well worth noting for a visit come Spring. For an entrance fee of only £5 per person, bought on arrival or beforehand online, you can stay till closing time, or you could get one free entry with one full-paying adult, with a Gardeners' World Magazine 2-for-1 entry card. All monies from the garden are used wholly to maintain and encourage the habitat for the precious flora and fauna that abound there.

Should you desire refreshments whilst visiting, you will not go wanting, as you can enjoy breakfast, lunch and/or afternoon tea in the Gotha Garden Café where 20 different types of tea are available, delicious homemade cakes, hearty soups and freshly made sandwiches, the fond memory of which is causing me to salivate as I write.

Though not especially mine, if shopping is your thing, located within the gardens is the Artisanal Botanical Candler and Natural Perfumery as well as a gift shop. Their online store '[Luxury Closet](#)'⁵ sells a variety of products and gifts all year round that can be collected or delivered locally - a possible source of presents for Christmas.

There is even a holiday cottage, The Domek, situated within the courtyard of the gardens, that is [bookable on Airbnb⁶](#): all year round - useful to know, perhaps, if you have family visiting over the festive season.

Apart from Tripadvisor, Gotha Gardens at Pembroke Farm is also listed on websites such as [Great British Gardens⁷](#), further endorsing the reputation of Gotha as a place to visit.

On its [own website⁸](#) Gotha Gardens is described as: 'a country house garden with a wildlife walk and formal surprises. The garden was started in 1990. It was created from an arable field and is mostly based on chalk. It was originally conceived as a woodland walk, stocked with anything which might attract wildlife and pollinators, then later some more formal areas were introduced. These include a topiary garden, rose gardens (encompassing over 150 rose specimens), a woodland garden and tea lawn with cottage garden beds in the style of Gertrude Jekyll.'

The occasion of my visit, which took place as part of a guided group tour, was on a beautiful summer's day in June this year and, by way of the following collages and/or this [YouTube video⁹](#), which was made shortly before my visit, I invite you - on this, a dreary day in November - to join me on a virtual walk through the gardens - the spirit of which is Arts and Crafts.



All photographs were taken by the author.

1. Ashwell springs:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ashwell_Springs

2. Ashwell Church of St Mary the Virgin:
<https://www.atlasobscura.com/places/church-of-st-mary-the-virgin>
3. Ashwell Museum:
<https://www.ashwellmuseum.org.uk/category/about/about-museum>
4. Gotha Gardens:
https://www.tripadvisor.co.uk/Attractions-g1010305-Activities-Ashwell_Hertfordshire_England.html
5. Luxury Closet:
<https://gothagardens.square.site/luxury-closet>
6. The Domek, holiday cottage:
<https://www.airbnb.co.uk/rooms/20401819>
7. Gotha Gardens on Great British Gardens site:
<https://www.greatbritishgardens.co.uk/hertfordshire/item/pembroke-farm-garden.html>
8. Gotha Gardens website:
<https://gothagardens.square.site/gardens>
9. A walk through Gotha Gardens:
<https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=xIK2LPUvgFc>

Valerie Schicker - member of Hitchin Forum 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: Check NHC site.	7.30 pm	Tuesday 30 th January 2024

Hitchin Forum Annual General Meeting

Hitchin Forum's Annual General Meeting was held on Tuesday November 7th at 7.30pm at the Walsworth Community Centre in Woolgrove Road. The minutes of the meeting are reproduced below.



MINUTES OF ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING, 7th NOVEMBER 2023

AT WALSWORTH COMMUNITY CENTRE

Present: There were 22 attendees, and 9 apologies for absence had been received.

1. Reports and Discussion.

The Co-Chairman, Bill Sellicks (BS), welcomed those attending, remarking that it was the second face-to-face meeting held by Hitchin Forum this year, and expressing hope that there would be more next year. Given the passage of time, no vote was taken on the accuracy of the Minutes of the previous AGM on 9 November 2022. The following are comments arising from the written reports sent to members with the agenda:

a) There were no queries or comments regarding the co-Chairs' report.

b) Membership. Ken Chapman (KC) reported that membership remained stable at 111. 7 members had been cancelled for non-payment of subscriptions, and 2 had resigned, but this was countered by there being 10 new members.

c) Finance. KC produced a financial report, which stated that there was £2,063.16 in the bank, a similar amount to the previous year. The question was asked why we held such a sum, the response being that 1) during the pandemic we had not paid out for meeting venues, and 2) it was sensible to hold reserves so that we could support appropriate causes, an example being the £250 we donated to help LADACAN against Luton Airport expansion. KC proposed acceptance of the accounts, seconded by Jennifer Piggott, and the meeting agreed.

KC stated that accountant Christine Skeen had audited the financial statement, and it was agreed that she be asked to audit the accounts for the coming year, proposed by KC, seconded by AW.

d) Newsletter. Stuart Howarth (SH) reported that the newsletter had been produced every 2 months as planned. The majority of members received it by email, but there was a print run of 50, 20 being delivered and the remainder being supplied to Hitchin Initiative, Hitchin Historical Society etc. There was a query regarding the cost, but it was agreed the content was "really good", and a vote of thanks given to those involved.

e) Website and social media. Mike Clarke (MC) and Valerie Schicker (VS) had nothing further to add to their written reports.

f) Planning. Neil Dodds (ND) reported that there had been some success in moderating some development proposals. He gave the Crow Furlong development as an example, where minor alterations had been made to satisfy some of our concerns. He remarked that he had attended some Council planning meetings, but was extremely concerned at the time limits placed on speakers. This is 5 minutes and if 2 wish to speak, then they have half that each! As far as the Highover development was concerned, objections on traffic grounds had resulted in the application being delayed pending further traffic reports, but the Council had eventually given

in to the developers and permission was granted. The serious concerns include the likely increase in traffic from 700 houses all probably driving down Stotfold Road to Cambridge Road, the restrictive nature of the three bridges under the railway, and their substandard and dangerous footpaths.

Neil was thanked for his perseverance.

g) Campaigns. BS reported that the government had disappointedly approved the proposed increase in passenger numbers at Luton Airport from the current 18mppa to 19mppa, subject to conditions.

MC stated that Brent Smith was campaigning for 2 issues: the riverside walk behind Jill Grey Place, and for tree planting to enhance the street scene of Hermitage Road. MC stated that the issues had support from Cllrs Ian Albert and Keith Hoskins.

Regarding the creation of 20mph zones in the town, concern was expressed at the effectiveness of the Council's current consultation process, involving residents of affected streets. It was commented from the floor that the proposed limit would be too restrictive in certain locations such as Bedford Road, although it was appropriate in more narrow and congested areas. It was suggested that a piecemeal approach would be impossible to regulate if drivers were passing into and out of 20mph streets and that a specified area should be considered, focussing on the town centre. Concern was expressed that the Police did not enforce the limits enough, probably because their resources are limited and other more serious crimes take precedence. There was a suggestion that police would not be needed if cameras were deployed.

It was agreed that Steering Group (SG) should consider Hitchin Forum's approach to this matter.

2. Election of Officers.

BS stated that all members of SG were prepared to serve again, BS and MC sharing co-chairmanship.

SG would comprise (in alphabetical order)

Ken Chapman, Mike Clarke, Neil Dodds, Stuart Howarth, Valerie Schicker, Bill Sellicks, Andrew Wearmouth.

There were no further volunteers at the meeting.

3. Any Other Business.

a) Danny Pearson (DP) and Aimee Flack, Community Officers at North Herts Council, confirmed that Churchgate would be the main topic at the Council's next Hitchin Area Forum (previously Hitchin Committee).

b) VS expressed concern at the apparent inactivity regarding Charnwood, suggesting that the house was continuing to deteriorate. DP confirmed that consultation was ongoing, and that the sum of £400,000 was allocated for repairs. He stated that the asbestos problem had proved more serious than previously believed, and hoped that Charnwood would also feature on the next Hitchin Area Forum.

c) A member asked what might be being done regarding recruiting younger people, as the membership present tended to be of an older age group. BS confirmed that efforts were made at the town History Day and also at the litter picking days, where large numbers of volunteers were present. VS also confirmed that Hitchin Forum's Facebook page had over 1000 followers, the problem being converting these numbers into active membership.

There was then a short break for refreshments, before a talk by Sarah Perry, Rivers Officer at The Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust (HMWT). Her talk was a little rushed owing to a delay in setting up the equipment, but she was an excellent speaker, her talk being packed with interesting information. HMWT is one of 47 such organisations, with some 23,000 members, and amongst other issues, takes interest in the area's chalk

streams, a rare ecological resource worldwide. In Herts and Middlesex there are 22 or 23 such streams, providing habitat for a wide range of species of flora and fauna, but the condition of those rivers in this part of the country gives rise to concern compared with those in Dorset and Hampshire. Only 16% of Hertfordshire is original habitat, and only 1% of this is wetland, a situation that HMWT is trying to reverse, especially given that wetlands act as a better carbon sink than woodlands.

Sarah suggested that we look at the HMWT website hertswildlifetrust.org.uk/stateofnature

She then moved on to the action being taken to restore the chalk streams, using the Purwell and Hiz as examples. Water extraction from the aquifers and rivers is causing problems in that the springs feeding them are moving further down the valleys, and pollution is also an issue. A number of interested parties (including Anglian Water, Affinity Water, Worldwide Fund for Nature etc) are working together, seeking solutions to the problems. There are plans to increase the wetlands area at Purwell Meadows, and to reshape the Purwell at Walsworth Common to help control the flow. In addition, the water companies have plans to restore rivers taking effect from 2025.

The meeting thanked Sarah for her presentation.

The meeting finished at 9.15pm.