

HITCHIN FORUM

Caring for our Town

NEWSLETTER

January - February 2024

No. 178

Thoughts from the Co-Chair

A new year and things are happening, and some of them are good. The County Council has moved on in the consultation process to produce more definite plans for a 'Central Hitchin' 20 mph zone, including streets from Brand Street to Nightingale Road with proposals for speed humps in Verulam Road. The details can be found on the [HCC website¹](#). Consultation for those changes goes on until 15th February. Also on that site are details of improvements for Bearton Road, where the 20 mph limit tends to get ignored. Such changes are happening in many towns and cities with the aim of improving safety for all who travel our streets – walkers and cyclists included. For those who may complain at the very slight lengthening of journey times I can only say that life changes, at least there is no longer a sheep market in Bancroft!



Read on and learn more about the Luton Airport developments. Bill continues to delve into the twists and turns of that saga, diligently following the science and the politics – how to square the long term reality of climate change and environmental effects with the short term love of making a financial profit.

Brian wonders at how the grey blob of Austin House became a reality. The examination of planning applications is something that we have always focused on, but perhaps missed how badly this could turn out. But that raises the question of how such important developments are scrutinised by the District's Planning Committee. Something to ask our councillors about!

Maybe as a sign of the County Council running short of cash is the news of an intention to sell off Lower Green Farm – a local community asset. Frances Barry informs us of this and the petition that has been started. Many other assets have been sold off around the country, part of a toxic wave of austerity sadly leaving many communities poorer.

Valerie has been on her travels and reports on the Welney Wetland Centre and the value of such a resource.

Closer to home I have recently read a brilliant small book by Annie Palmer. You may have seen her name on various letters to The Comet, highlighting issues of encroachment on our green spaces. She was involved in the 1990's Campaign Against Stevenage Expansion (CASE), which this Forum was also involved in. She writes from the rural powerhouse of Shillington with a series of observations about developers and the impact on nature – 'Pulling the Wool Over Our Eyes'. The book is now on sale in Hitchin Information office.

Herts County Council 20 mph consultation:

<http://tinyurl.com/traffic-orders>

Mike Clarke - Co-Chair

Kind Offer of a beautiful watercolour painting from Hitchin Forum member Brian Kelly

Brian writes as follows...

I recently had a bit of clear out and found behind my wardrobe a watercolour I did some 20 odd years ago of a tree that stood in Priory Fields. I painted it because I was interested in how it was hanging on despite the huge amount of ivy growing on it. It was cut down a few years after I completed the painting.

It hung on the wall in the University I worked at for some years, but I eventually took it with me when I retired, and it has been hidden away ever since.

I wonder if there might be a Hitchin Forum member who might like to have it.

It is quite large, about 1 m x 0.7 m.

Please contact chairman@hitchinforum.org.uk if you are interested.



Luton Airport Update

The Examination in Public of Luton Rising's application for consent to increase passenger numbers to 32 million a year (32 mppa) is scheduled to be completed on 10th February. The most recent round of questions, issued by the Inspectors on 15th December 2023, together with some from other parties, received a response from the applicant (and others in some cases) on 9th January, expanding the already extensive Examination Library on the Planning Inspectorate's website by a further [117 documents¹](#). Meanwhile, modifications to the application have been made. From the time of writing until the end of the examination process, there will be a further round of questions and comments, ultimately leading to the submission of the 'final' version of the Development Consent Order application on 30th January. After that, by 5th February Luton Rising may have to provide further information to the Inspectors and there is a final chance for further comments. After the end of formal proceedings, the Inspectors have three months to compile their report and present their recommendation to the relevant ministers for a decision. The decision must be made three months after submission of the report.

I wonder how the decision will play out in terms of the possible election, likely to be a couple of months after the decision. As a local issue, it may not gain traction nationally, but there have been a couple of interesting developments recently which suggest that the environment, and by implication the drive for airport

expansion, may take on additional significance as the election approaches. The more headline-grabbing event is the resignation of the former Energy Minister, Chris Skidmore, over his opposition to the government's decision to offer more licences for offshore oil exploration. In the context of airport expansion, the cross party (9 Conservative, 4 Labour, 1 Green, 1 independent, 1 SNP) Environmental Audit Committee compiled a report entitled [Net zero and the UK aviation sector](#)² dated December 2023, which received relatively little media attention. The report criticised the relaxed timetable for review of the government's Jet Zero strategy and recommended bringing forward the initial review of the strategy to no later than the end of 2025 "with a view to determining whether the strategy remains on track to meet the interim emissions reductions projected for 2030 and 2040 as well as the overall reductions projected for 2050". It went on to say:

The review should be undertaken with the active engagement of the UK aviation sector, which is principally responsible for delivering the reductions in emissions it has claimed are possible: any shortfalls in delivery ought to be reviewed and urgently remedied.

The Report's final recommendation was that there should be reconsideration of the role of demand management measures in aviation emissions policy – something the Climate Change Committee has consistently advocated for a number of years, most recently in June last year³. It remains to be seen whether politicians not involved with the Environmental Audit Committee are listening and are brave enough to support its recommendations as the election approaches.

1. Planning Inspectorate, London Luton Airport Expansion Documents:
<https://national-infrastructure-consenting.planninginspectorate.gov.uk/projects/TR020001/documents?stage-4=Deadline+7&date-from-day=&date-from-month=&date-from-year=&date-to-day=&date-to-month=&date-to-year=&searchTerm=&itemsPerPage=25>
2. Environmental Audit Committee: Net zero and the UK aviation sector:
<https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/42703/documents/212154/default/>
3. Climate Change Committee: Progress in reducing emissions 2023 Report to Parliament Box 10.1, Page 276:
<https://www.theccc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Progress-in-reducing-UK-emissions-2023-Report-to-Parliament.pdf>

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 the view of one of our members concerning the recently-completed Austin House.

Austin House

Perhaps there were others in the town who also watched over the last couple of years the terribly slow progress of the redevelopment of the former Carpetright showroom and gymnasium at the bottom of Hitchin Hill. I wondered at one point if it would ever be finished. Maybe, I thought, the developer had gone bust. However, in fits and starts, progress continued and it became obvious it was being converted into flats. Like in many commercial to residential conversions these days I noted an extra floor was being added on top. Late last year, after a couple of weeks away, I walked down the hill into the town. Halfway down I stopped, aghast. There at the bottom of the hill was a grey featureless block. The building had been cloaked in dark, smooth, flat panels. I wondered rather hopefully whether this was an intermediate stage awaiting final details. But I was wrong. For, several days later, it was clear that there would be nothing more added to the façade. How depressingly blank and dreary it looked. I heard subsequently it being referred to as The Blockhouse, Fortress Hitchin and the Lock-Up. All disparaging names indicating a high level of disapproval amongst some Hitchin

residents. Letters were written to the Comet complaining about the poor quality of this redevelopment named, I read, as Austin House. No doubt a reference to the building's former life as a British Leyland car showroom and repair shop.

I determined immediately to write to the Planning Department at North Herts Council to ask how a building so lacking in design quality in a prime position at the southern entry to the town could be given approval. How, indeed, was it given permission when it stands within the bounds of the Town Centre Conservation Area? Instead of contributing to the townscape of the area, this building is a minus, offering nothing. No visual interest, no imaginative detail, nothing to arrest the eye. A blank visual blot on our historic townscape.



Austin House

I had read just before I wrote my complaint to the Planning Department an article in the Guardian by Thomas Heatherwick, a well-known architectural designer. In it he complained about the poor quality of many new town and city centre buildings, lamenting the lack of imagination and quality of design. He called it the 'blandification of Britain'. Austin House is, I think, an example of what he is referring to. A bland, dull building without any redeeming visual qualities.

Brian Kelly – member of Hitchin Forum

Churchgate Update

It may seem that little has happened regarding the future of Churchgate and surroundings since the online public consultation held December 2022 to February 2023. One of the primary findings from that consultation was that respondents wanted to make the town centre livelier and more attractive for local people. This has been picked up by the Council's consultants who have indicated ways of making town centres beautiful. They point out this is not just to do with aesthetics or creating beautiful places and spaces, although this is important. They also highlight factors such as air purity, noise reduction, water management, privacy, wildlife and light pollution. This is refreshing to say the least, given that a mere decade ago improving town centres seemed to depend mainly on more shops.

We hope that a report will be made to the Hitchin Area Forum (the renamed Hitchin Committee of North Herts Council) so that the public can consider and discuss findings thus far and feed back more ideas at the earliest stages in this process. "Stakeholder and community engagement" is highlighted by the consultants, but we are left wondering at that distinction: surely members of the community are the stakeholders?!

And picking up on another priority expressed in the public consultation, the December newsletter of Hitchin BID (Business Improvement District) reports they are progressing...

"an ambitious and transformative Hitchin Market improvement scheme that will breathe new life into the heart of our community. Our market has a special place in the hearts of our local residents and visitors from further afield. This regeneration scheme is not just

about bricks and mortar; it's improving the space, increasing traders and generating footfall. This was made possible by the support and funding of Visit Hitchin, Hitchin Markets Ltd, North Herts Council, Future Prosperity Fund, Platinum Press and Aitch Creative."

Well done Hitchin BID!

Ellie Clarke - member of Hitchin Forum

Not quite on our doorstep - WWT Welney

Following the series of winter storms experienced in the UK towards the end of 2023, which caused widespread flooding - along with the ensuing misery - my thoughts turned to the WWT (Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust) [AGM](#)¹. I had recently attended this meeting in which we were informed that wetlands are the super-powered ecosystems that can save species, combat climate change and safeguard communities from flooding.

According to WWT, wetlands not only improve our water quality by filtering out pollutants from agriculture and industry, but importantly they protect us from flooding by acting as a sponge, storing rainwater and buffering us from the sea. In addition, they can assist in slowing down climate change by absorbing and storing vast amounts of carbon. Furthermore, they are one of the most diverse habitats on earth, providing homes for birds, insects and mammals, [many of which are endangered](#)². Yet WWT says we are losing wetlands at a staggering rate, in fact 75% over the last 300 years in the UK alone, faster even than forests. Therefore the charity, in its own words, is on a mission not only to restore and create bigger and better wetlands but to inspire more people to value, act for and benefit from them. Hence their new slogan "For Wetlands. For Life."

To date there are [10 wetland sites](#)³ across the UK. The first of these was founded by [Sir Peter Scott](#)⁴ in [Slimbridge](#)⁵ in 1946. Sir Peter also helped establish the World Wide Fund for Nature, the logo of which he designed, as well as that for WWT. The two nearest WWT sites to Hitchin are [The London Wetland Centre](#)⁶ - perfect for a February half-term visit with children - and [Welney](#)⁷ depicted in the photo collage below, acting as a flood defence.



Perhaps Welney is of the greater interest as it is the most important and largest site, taking in 1,000 acres of the northernmost part of the Ouse Washes - Britain's greatest area of seasonally-flooded land. Hitchin is one of the urban areas within the Upper and Bedford Ouse managed catchment that, together with ten other catchments, form the [Anglian River Basin](#)⁸.



Additionally, all the birds seen at Welney are wild as it does not hold any captive species – unlike other wetland centres. In fact, until the 11th March, you can see the feeding of Welney’s wild swans every day at 3.30 pm accompanied by a [live commentary](#)⁹ giving information about the birds and how the area is protecting the fenlands from flooding. This is usually a spectacular sight not to be missed. Unfortunately, we were told on my visit on the 11th January this year that the water, as you will see from the adjacent photo, was too deep for them to come in to roost on. Therefore, there was a poor showing of swans on this feeding occasion although some Pochards presented themselves and a lone Scaup. You can view a better

showing of the “Swan Spectacular” on [this video](#)¹⁰.

Apart from the mass winter gatherings of many thousands of wild ducks, geese and swans, Welney is home to the brown hare and Chinese water deer, which can be viewed on free organised walks. My partner and I took part in one such “wellies essential” Hare Walk, see photo right, and we were not disappointed as we saw a Chinese water deer as well as hares. However, although I have previously witnessed hares boxing at Welney, there was no boxing on display, probably because this is more likely to occur in spring. Nevertheless, in [this video](#)¹¹ documenting life on the Ouse Washes in the month of February, boxing hares are apparent and even more so in the video in the next paragraph.



Welney is not only an attractive winter destination but there is also plenty to do and see all year round as it supports breeding populations of Black-tailed Godwit, Redshank, Snipe, Little Ringed Plover, Marsh Harrier, Gadwall, Garganey, Teal, Skylark, Yellow Wagtail and Reed Bunting, as well as providing a home for many other wetland creatures and plants that are a joy to behold, such as the water vole. [This video](#)¹² provides information on some of the favourite species to found at Welney.

Given the above it’s not surprising that in 2022 Welney was recognised as one of the world’s [best wetland visitor centres](#)¹³, making it a ‘must’ to visit if you have not already done so. Its eco-friendly building provides excellent facilities such as a good value café, shop and education and exhibition space. Also, a good reason to visit soon is that [World Wetlands Day](#)¹⁴ falls on 2nd February; its theme this year is Wetlands and human

wellbeing. To help more people experience the stress-busting power of wetlands, the WWT are offering visitors [free entry for a friend¹⁵](#) at their Wetland Centres from 2nd to 4th February.

All photographs were taken by the author.

Valerie Schicker - member of Hitchin Forum Steering Group



A pair of captive Cranes at the Slimbridge Wetland Centre - a somewhat greater distance though for Hitchin people to travel. Photo taken by Bill Sellicks.

1. WWT Annual General Meeting 2023:
<https://www.wwt.org.uk/about-us/annual-general-meeting>
2. WWT “Why Wetlands?”:
<https://www.wwt.org.uk/our-work/why-wetlands>
3. Introduction to the 10 WWT wetland sites across the UK:
<https://www.wwt.org.uk/our-work/wetland-sites>
4. Ten fascinating facts about WWT founder Sir Peter Scott:
<https://www.wwt.org.uk/news-and-stories/blog/ten-fascinating-facts-about-sir-peter-scott>
5. Slimbridge – a history:
<https://www.wwt.org.uk/about-us/our-history>
6. London Wetland Centre:
<https://www.wwt.org.uk/wetland-centres/london>
7. Welney Wetland Centre:
<https://www.wwt.org.uk/wetland-centres/welney>
8. The Anglian river basin:
<https://ubocp.org.uk/catchments>
9. Live commentary of feeding the swans at Welney:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v32WMbiwudo>
10. “Swan Spectacular” at Welney:
<https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=mm8Navo--hw&pp=ygUKV1dUJFdlbG5leQ%3D%3D>

11. WWT Welney - Winter on the Great Ouse Wetlands:
https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=hCh_V_2JvvE&pp=ygUKV1dUIFdlbG5leQ%3D%3D
12. WWT Welney - A Closer Look At Our Favourite Species:
https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=o_y12Ek6Kr8&pp=ygUKV1dUIFdlbG5leQ%3D%3D
13. International recognition for WWT Welney Wetland Centre:
<https://www.fenlandcitizen.co.uk/news/international-recognition-for-wwt-welney-wetland-centre-9284000>
14. World wetlands day:
<https://www.wwt.org.uk/discover-wetlands/world-wetlands-day>
15. WWT free entry for a friend:
<https://www.wwt.org.uk/discover-wetlands/world-wetlands-day/duck-the-stress>

Our Town, Your Say

This article is an appeal from the Ickleford Equestrian Centre for support in its campaign to ensure positive development of the site.

The Past, Present and Future of Lower Green Farm aka Ickleford Equestrian Centre

Lower Green Farm is 120 acres of unimproved grazing pasture and arable land in and around Ickleford, and at its heart is the 17th Century Grade II listed farmhouse and barn, surrounded by a cluster of stables, farmyard and paddock at Lower Green, Ickleford - a stone's throw from Hitchin Lavender. Previously part of the Hitchin Priory Estate, the land and property of Lower Green Farm have been owned and managed by Hertfordshire County Council (HCC) since 1919. This farm and land, as well as many other smallholdings in the area, were bought with public money, as part of a post WWI effort to provide homes, jobs and food for farming families and agricultural communities.



For the last 60 years the farm was let to the Nicholls family, tenant farmers who in the last 30 years developed it to become Ickleford Equestrian Centre, which included livery, DIY stabling, a riding school, a Pony Club Centre, and a centre for the Riding for the Disabled Association (RDA). It was managed as an inclusive equestrian centre, with strong community values and accessibility, and with an outreach ethos that provided therapeutic benefits for vulnerable groups. It was a thriving rural business or as we say now a social enterprise.

Lower Green Farm is sited alongside a network of bridleways and footpaths, including the historic Hicca Way and Icknield Way. It is bordered by the River Hiz - a rare chalk stream - and Ickleford Common. It is part of a wildlife corridor that attracts walkers, cyclists and locals to come and enjoy the green spaces of a village alongside the quintessential village backdrop of horses grazing. The environmental benefits the land and grazing provide are of enormous value, with trees, hedgerows and pasture providing native habitats, and helping to meet our national bio-diversity and other environmental goals.

Sadly, the listed heritage farmhouse building was not well maintained by the landlords (HCC), and it was considered for many years to be a financial liability to repair and maintain. Following the sudden death of the tenant in 2021 the tenancy expired and the widow was asked to vacate the farmhouse. This home was also her business and her livelihood, and the only viable option was to relocate everything. The whole farm had to close, impacting a whole equestrian community, customers, volunteers and horses, as well as Ickleford village and its residents.

The community group 'Save Lower Green Farm' sprang up when local residents became aware that this important community asset was now at risk, its future being uncertain. A community group meeting followed, which led to a meeting with the landlords, Hertfordshire County Council Rural Estates, who confirmed that the farm is to be divided in to four parts, three parts of which are to be re-let with smallholdings and the fourth part (the farmhouse, barn, stables and 10-acre pasture) is earmarked to be sold to the highest bidder, via a commercial estate agent. This decision will be considered at the Resources and Performance Cabinet Panel on 8th February by 11 County Councillors from across Hertfordshire.

This situation was alarming to the community group, who felt the value of Lower Green Farm and Ickleford Equestrian Centre as a community asset was being overlooked. So, they started a petition outlining three viable options that would be preferred by the community, with the hope that their point of view will be heard, understood and considered, so that the best outcome for Lower Green Farm can be achieved, thereby making it a beneficial rural asset to the community once again, and upholding the legacy of the previous tenants.

[This petition¹](#) is now up and running. It details the options and gives an overview of the situation. Please note that it can only be



signed by people who live or work in Hertfordshire, aged 11 years or over. Also note that to sign, you will need to give your name and address, and create a password, a bureaucratic hurdle we hope you won't mind jumping!

Anyone who signs it will have played a positive part in protecting and saving Lower Green Farm and Ickleford Equestrian Centre for future generations to come. We thank you for your support.

If you would like to join our mailing list for updates as the future unfolds, please email:

savelowergreenfarm@hotmail.com

1. HCC petition to Save Lower Green Farm and Ickleford Equestrian Centre:
<https://democracy.hertfordshire.gov.uk/mgEPetitionDisplay.aspx?ID=1176&RPID=29829283&HPID=29829283>

***Frances Barry - coordinator of 'Save Lower Green Farm' community group
and resident of Lower Green, Ickleford***

Have Your Say on North Herts Council (NHC) Matters

If you wish to make your feelings known on any of the NHC-related matters discussed in this newsletter – or, of course, anything else that NHC covers, you are encouraged to visit the 'Have Your Say' page at www.north-herts.gov.uk/haveyoursay. Via this page you can get involved in current consultations and also join the citizens panel. Connections to social media can be made by clicking on the icons at the bottom of the page.

Dates for your Diary

Hitchin Forum's Big Spring Clean. Please email hflitterpick@gmail.com for full details and registration.	10.00 am to 12.00 noon	Sunday 24 th March
Hitchin Councillor Surgeries. Hitchin Market Place.	10.30 am to 12.00 noon	First Saturday of every month

Hitchin Forum's Big Spring Clean

This will take place on Sunday March 24th between 10.00 and 12.00. Please email hflitterpick@gmail.com for full details and registration.
