

# HITCHIN FORUM

Caring for our Town

## NEWSLETTER

March - April 2024

No. 179

### Thoughts from the Co-Chair

Spring has sprung, there is frogspawn in my pond, and Annie Palmer writes about how to help the insects and pollinators (read her book for more gems), and why No Mow May is good. Valerie writes about why she is excited about black poplars and what has been done since Hitchin's rare example of this nationally endangered tree died after a mere 250 years.

Bill explores, again, the details of the Luton Airport expansion drama. It is a saga with potential impact on our local environment, with effects on traffic access and flight paths as well as the wider concerns about climate change. Fortunately, Herts County Council has made a strong representation to oppose the expansion, which he outlines.

Meanwhile the County Council has been speedy in progressing with the additional 'town centre' 20 mph restrictions – signs are being prepared. We are pleased about that, while still bemused as to why some roads are included whilst others are not (Walsworth and Fishponds Roads for example).

Ellie gives some more information about the Churchgate development plans. These were revealed at the last Hitchin Area Forum where Councillor Keith Hoskins provided information about the next steps in the consultation process. At the same time the District Council sent around a questionnaire about town centres in North Herts, with a very short response time. Ellie provides the response that we did manage to compose in time, with comments on the strengths, weaknesses and opportunities in this town centre.

Neil has been getting into the details of the planned housing development adjoining Lucas and Oughtonhead Lanes (the HT3 site on the Local Plan).

As currently intended, this has access implications as a road will cross the bridleway and take traffic through what is a cul de sac at the moment. Neil has been speaking at some North Herts Council Planning Committees as well as writing detailed letters of objection (involving local residents) – all praise to him for this important role.

And now that Spring has sprung the bi-annual litter pick has happened – with a report from Bill on the wonderful work done on that Sunday.

*Mike Clarke - Co-Chair*

### Appeal for help with the hospital car service

There are a number of people who need help travelling to hospital and rely on our local community transport service - North Herts Community Transport Service. They currently need some additional voluntary drivers with their own cars to support this service and are appealing to members of Hitchin Forum to help. Visit <https://www.nhcvstransport.org.uk/>, or call 01462 689402 for more details about this excellent service, whether you are interested in being a user of the service or a volunteer. The organisation and planning of rides to and from the hospital is very flexible and, as a volunteer, you can give as much time as you like to suit yourself.

## Our Town, Your Say

The author of this article, Annie Palmer, is known to many of us as an active member of the Case Against Stevenage Expansion - a protest group that was active in the 90s. Her book 'The Powers that be are PULLING THE WOOL OVER OUR EYES' brings together a number of her protest and campaigning pieces, one of which is adapted below.

### The Threat to Insects and to Ourselves - Part 1: Gardening in an Insect Friendly Way

If I were asked to be less tidy in the house, it wouldn't bother me, but asking me to do that in the garden does go slightly against the grain. It's a fairly big ask when you have, for years, been heading off to the shed for a trowel when you notice a dandelion in the lawn. However, our insects are in trouble, and they need us to be less tidy to help them survive; without them, birds, animals and people face extinction. Pollinators such as bees, moths, butterflies and hoverflies love dandelions; this early source of food is a lifesaver for them in spring. Dandelions are good for us as well, as the young leaves are edible and full of vitamins and antioxidants. Goldfinches and house sparrows are very partial to the seeds.

The uplifting charity Plantlife urges us to get involved in '[No Mow May](#)'<sup>1</sup> to boost wildflower and pollinator populations in our gardens. Come June, I am thinking of getting artistic and leaving a heart-shaped area of longer grass in the middle of my little lawn! Plantlife tells us that the highest production of flowers and nectar sugar is on lawns cut once every four weeks. It's funny how things change. In the past an untidy / unkempt lawn gave the impression of someone who didn't care. Now it's going to become a symbol of someone who does.



Picture credit - Peter Farmer



Picture credit - Peter Farmer

Another way to help insects is to grow plants that flower earlier in the year, such as the pretty pink or white Erica carnea. This is a lime tolerant heather that flowers from December to April. In summer, plants that particularly attract pollinators include lavender, foxgloves, buddleias, cotoneaster, hardy geraniums and herbs. Bedding plants, especially those with showy double flowers, produce little or no pollen and nectar, so should be avoided. Wildflowers such as clover, comfrey, selfheal, dead nettle, field scabious and daisies are hugely beneficial to insects. At the end of summer, instead of tidying the garden, leave everything as it is until spring. This means that there are hollow stems and seed heads for insects to hide away in when the days get shorter. When it comes to saving our insects, every little bit helps.

In Autumn 2022, I took inspiration from a WI leaflet about encouraging bees to our gardens and plant containers and produced one of my own: Take Action for Pollinators, the text of which is reproduced below. It has tips on attracting essential pollinators to gardens and includes a pollinator-friendly planting guide.

1. Plantlife's No Mow May initiative:  
<https://www.plantlife.org.uk/campaigns/nomowmay/>

## Take Action for Pollinators.

### Top Tips:

**Stop using Chemicals** - they may get rid of the insects you don't want but they also kill or seriously harm the ones that you need. We cannot survive without insects so to use insecticides (pesticides) is ill-advised to say the least. Try companion planting instead. This is the growing of different plants close together to deter insects such as aphids and whitefly and to attract their predators. A good example of a companion plant is the marigold (great with tomatoes but not with beans - try potatoes with them).

**Plant flowers for every season** - this maintains a steady source of food for pollinators. Do a bit of research, bearing in mind your own garden's conditions, and find a list of plants and the time of year at which they flower.

**Go wild** - try sowing wildflower seeds (scabious, poppies, daisies, vetch etc). They attract pollinators such as hoverflies, the larvae of which prey on aphids.

**Be less tidy** - some insects live in holes in the ground, long grass etc. By leaving a wild patch in your garden, you can encourage bumblebees and other pollinators to make their home there. You might find hedgehogs, frogs and toads - who all love slugs - moving in as well. Leave dandelions, buttercups, clovers and daisies to grow in your wild patch (and elsewhere!) - these plants are so beneficial to pollinators.

**Keep a source of water on site** - a birdbath or other water feature will help pollinators. Make sure it's accessible by having some small pebbles in it.

**Plant flowers in large patches or 'drifts'** - this will provide a good forage area especially for bees. Avoid bedding plants such as petunias and begonias. As beautiful as they are, they have little or no nectar or pollen for pollinators. Most double flowers are useless to them as well. Go purple and blue! Bees see these colours more clearly than any other colour.

**Plant herbs** - good for cooking and really great for pollinators. Try marjoram, thyme, sage, rosemary, chives, mint and borage. Plant in a container if you're limited for space.

**Fruit and veg are brilliant** - pollinators love beans, courgettes, tomatoes, strawberries, raspberries, blackberries and fruit trees. They are great to grow for insects and very good for us as well.

*Annie Palmer – local resident and campaigner*

## Luton Airport Update

*This article is a shortened version of one which appears [on the Forum's website](#)<sup>1</sup>. That article is fully referenced. Unless otherwise stated, this article refers to Document 8.15 Statement of Common Ground between London Luton Airport Limited and Hertfordshire County Council ([Tracked Change Version](#)<sup>2</sup>) available on the National Infrastructure Planning website.*

The Public Examination of the application submitted by Luton Airport's owners, Luton Rising (LR), for a Development Consent Order (DCO) to provide the facilities to increase its annual passenger numbers from the current 18 million up to 32 million, whilst continuing to use only one runway, closed on 10th February.

The final round of submissions to the Examination was published on 9<sup>th</sup> February. These included statements of common ground between LR and various stakeholders such as National Highways, local councils and Thames Water. The documents list issues which have arisen during the Examination, stating the applicant's (i.e. LR's) and the stakeholders' positions, and whether or not there is agreement between them. Those areas where there is disagreement are likely to be those on which the Inspectors will focus in order to make their recommendation. In the local context, it seems sensible to concentrate on just those that appear in the document which itemise the areas of common ground between Hertfordshire County Council (HCC) and LR. North Hertfordshire Council submitted a similar document, which is a subset of that from Hertfordshire County Council. Both Councils oppose the development.

A key plank of LR's case for expansion is, of course, that it is supported by government policy. HCC points out that whilst national policy is supportive of airports beyond Heathrow making best use of their existing runways, such support is subject to a number of caveats including the satisfactory mitigation of the negative impact of a range of environmental factors which, HCC argues, will not be satisfactorily addressed should consent be given to the development. Although it does not explicitly say so, it is clear that HCC does not accept that the over-optimistic reliance on untried technology (which the government's Jet Zero strategy espouses) will deliver the necessary emissions reductions needed to decarbonise the aviation industry. The Council also argues that developments at both Heathrow and Gatwick bring into question LR's assumptions on future demand.

There are serious disagreements on surface access, including safety concerns over M1 Junction 10. HCC questions the adequacy of the modelling used for LR's Traffic and Transport Assessment - specifically it has concerns about the way it deals with the anomalous traffic count data for the COVID-affected year 2020-21 and the implications for junctions in Hitchin which LR proposes. HCC believes these are likely to increase vehicle speeds and traffic density with little thought for vulnerable road users or, indeed, public transport. HCC expresses concern over the potential to increase traffic through Hitchin's Air Quality Management Areas, both of which are on the A602/A505 corridor. Since it contends that modelling is inadequate, HCC wants to see a commitment to funding mitigation measures to address unforeseen traffic impacts.

Aircraft noise is, unsurprisingly, another area of disagreement. LR wants to use both a higher starting passenger number of 19 million passengers per year (mppa) and to be allowed to grow at what it calls its 'faster growth scenario', which means that there are more generous noise thresholds and limits before any action to curtail growth is implemented within its so-called 'green controlled growth' (GCG) strategy. The proposed procedure by which noise is to be monitored is based on the area enclosed within a specific noise contour (see annotated map showing noise contours in the following section.) This reflects the number of dwellings and people exposed to noise above a certain limit and requires noise measurements to be fed into an algorithm to calculate the location and area of the contours, which is opaque to all but a few. In contrast to this approach, HCC want to see noise controlled by a quota count, which would restrict the number of flights of each type of aircraft depending on how noisy the aircraft actually is – a system which is relatively easy to verify and understand. It would also like to see fines imposed for noise violations rather than LR's proposed scheme which would merely 'pause' the growth while an action plan is formulated.

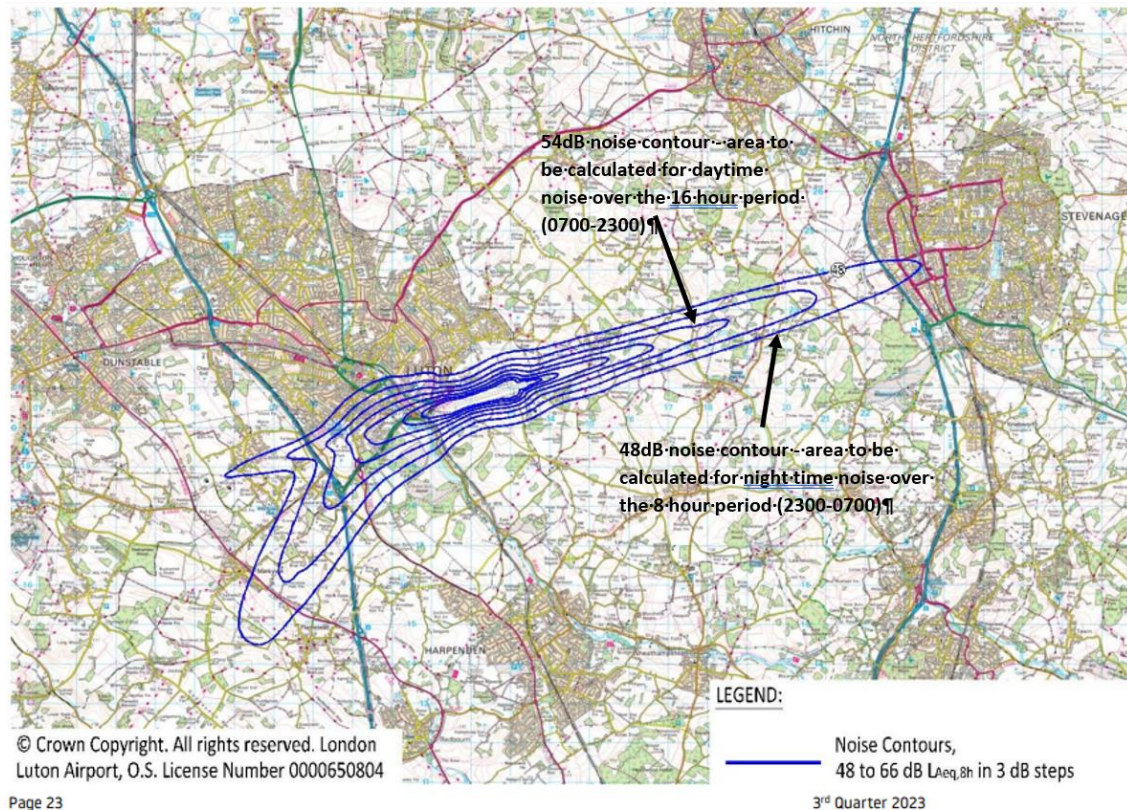
Carbon emissions are predicted to rise by approximately 5.4 million tonnes CO<sub>2</sub> equivalent if consent is given to the development. HCC believes the project is inconsistent with the guidance of the Institute of Environmental Management with regard to the achievement of net zero. As with noise, HCC would like to see a system of fines if the airport does not meet its carbon emissions targets, and contends that the 'faster growth scenario' will again maximise the emissions impact of the development.

The Environmental Scrutiny Group (ESG) is the body LR proposes to set up to oversee the GCG strategy. If the development is consented, the Chair of the ESG will be appointed by LR and will decide who can attend meetings, thus HCC fears that LR will have control over the composition of the Group.

What happens next? The Inspectors are in the process of compiling their report and recommendation to the Secretary of State for Transport, which must be submitted before three months after the end of the Inquiry. The Secretary of State will then have three months to publish the decision.

## Noise Contour Mapping – how it is used to monitor and, if necessary, halt growth

For illustrative purposes only, the map below shows the noise contours at 3dB intervals calculated from real noise monitoring data for all flights during the night-time period 2300-0700 for the 3rd quarter of 2023. The shapes of the daytime contours will be similar. As part of its 'Green Controlled Growth' strategy, LR plans to calculate the areas within the 54dB contour for daytime flights, and that within the 48dB contour for night-time flights, over the 92-day summer period of each year. If the areas are found to breach a limit defined in advance, growth is supposed to be paused until an action plan to address the problem has been formulated.



*As measured LAeq,8h contours: for the night-time period 2300-0700 for the 3rd quarter 2023.*

*Source; London Luton Airport; Quarterly Monitoring Report QUARTER 3 2023*

1. Full version of this article:  
<https://www.hitchinforum.org.uk/luton-airport-update-march-2024/>
2. Document 8.15 Statement of Common Ground between London Luton Airport Limited and Hertfordshire County Council:  
[https://infrastructure.planninginspectorate.gov.uk/wp-content/ipc/uploads/projects/TR020001/TR020001-003269-8.15%20Statement%20of%20Common%20Ground%20between%20London%20Luton%20Airport%20Limited%20and%20Hertfordshire%20County%20Council%20\(Tracked%20Change%20Version\)%20\(1\).pdf](https://infrastructure.planninginspectorate.gov.uk/wp-content/ipc/uploads/projects/TR020001/TR020001-003269-8.15%20Statement%20of%20Common%20Ground%20between%20London%20Luton%20Airport%20Limited%20and%20Hertfordshire%20County%20Council%20(Tracked%20Change%20Version)%20(1).pdf)

**Bill Sellicks – Co-chair**

## Churchgate Update

There is progress on Churchgate even though it may not be immediately obvious. The regeneration project has progressed through **Phase 1** - a review of the ownership of the shopping centre as well as the wider area, including the car parks. This was carried out by the Council's consultants, Lambert Smith Hampton, who have also done an overview of relevant planning policy and a market overview in relation to residential, leisure, investment and retail.

That has provided the basis for the Council to begin **Phase 2** - the 'Masterplan & Investment Framework'. The North Herts Project Team, along with their planning consultants and their master planning company will prepare an **Investment Prospectus** that will act as a brochure to showcase the Churchgate opportunity at the UK Real Estate Investment and Infrastructure Forum (UKREiIF), a three-day national event attended by the public sector, investors, funders, developers, house builders and Government departments. This event will give the Council a good indication of the appetite for investing in the future Churchgate. Bear in mind the Investment Prospectus is merely a marketing document for the shopping centre, town and wider area, putting forward only the vision, ideas and some tested options for the potential redevelopment of the Churchgate Centre. It doesn't include concrete proposals or detailed designs.

The Council has stressed that consultation is key in preparation of the **Masterplan & Investment Framework**. They are planning a series of workshops and meetings - starting in June - to understand the public's priorities and thoughts about the project in order to develop a **joint vision**. The Council see this as a 'live' theme, evolving as they gain more intelligence and engagement from the wider community. This will help to define a '**top-level plan**' which will set out ideas for the kind of spaces and places that could be created, and design options that can eventually be developed to guide new regeneration and investment. This plan can be adapted as the project progresses and is intended to show potential developers / joint partners what could be possible in the wider Churchgate area. As this framework is about investment as well as planning, different development options that emerge from this process for Churchgate and surrounding areas will have to be tested for their financial and planning viability. No pressure then...

Lichfields have been appointed by NHC as planning consultants to prepare a Town Centres and Retail Study for the District, with action plans for each of the four town centres covering the next 10-20 years. Lichfields recently consulted Hitchin Forum to get views on what we see as Hitchin's strengths and weaknesses, and what improvements we think are needed. We were given a very short response time (12 days!) but the Steering Group was able to prepare a response, reproduced below. We hope that future consultations will have longer response periods allowing us time to hold discussions with our members and the town at large on these issues, which are so important for Hitchin.

The Council will be updating its digital Churchgate Hub where the latest news should be published. To follow progress, search for Churchgate on the NHC website.

*Ellie Clarke - member of Hitchin Forum*

### Hitchin Forum Steering Group Response to the Consultation on Hitchin Town Centre

In terms of the town's **strengths**:

- i) The town's performance in turbulent times has been steady. This is in considerable measure down to the many varied and innovative efforts of the Town Centre Manager via the Business Improvement District, demonstrating what can be done with taxes raised locally and spent locally.
- ii) Hitchin town centre is blessed with an interesting, sometimes quirky and always attractive built environment. Numerous small units encourage independent, bijou businesses. Hitchin Market has enormous potential, mostly yet untapped.
- iii) Size: most residential areas are within walking distance of the town centre and have easy access to attractive countryside with fairly well-maintained footpaths.

- iv) Easy access to green spaces: Oughtonhead nature reserve, Purwell Meadows, Walsworth Common and Butts Close are inviting green spaces. In the town centre we have the Churchyard, Bancroft Rec and Windmill Hill. Sports are well catered for.
- v) An engaged population: Local residents are supportive of town centre businesses and pressure groups have managed to see off inappropriate developments whilst supporting appropriate ones. There is a strong “can do” ethic. Hitchin Market Place provides a focus for socialising and children's activities.
- vi) Cultural interests: The British Schools Museum is an internationally important educational museum with a Galleried Classroom, the only Monitorial Classroom still in existence and an additional focus on Victorian life with the restored Head Master's House. The site also offers an indoor/outdoor play cafe. The recently revamped North Herts Museum provides a district-wide focus. St Mary's Church is a strong tourist attraction as well as a focus for worship. The Queen Mother Theatre (with film studio) and Market Theatre provide a range of theatrical performances.

We included the following **weaknesses**:

- i) Hitchin Market: is outdated, tatty and looks neglected. It needs massive investment (a total rethink actually) as part of any redevelopment around Churchgate.
- ii) Lack of investment in the public realm: everywhere looks tired (apart from the new paving in Hermitage Road!) – tarmac infill in block pavements, uneven pavements, gully grilles falling apart, rusting signposts and Moss's Corner is uninviting. The river in the centre is a concrete gully apart from the fountain.
- iii) Insufficient enforcement regarding trailing cables along shop fronts which detract from the appearance of the Conservation Area.
- iv) Lack of integrated and efficient public transport from the villages into Hitchin.
- v) It is a disaster that only 4p in the pound of business rates remains local; this barely covers the Council's costs in administering this tax. The Council must lobby the next government to take action on this. Again, BID shows what can be done with local rates spent locally.

We suggested the following **improvements**:

- i) Greater investment in the public realm – it should not be down to BID to replace tarmac infill with the appropriate paviers or to organise volunteers to paint street furniture. There needs to be a long term maintenance & enhancement programme, an annual budget for public realm maintenance / improvements with clear costings, oversight by a town centre Councillor and results reported to Hitchin Councillors. This is particularly important for the elderly, people with disability and young parents with buggies – an increasing proportion of our citizens.
- ii) Investment in the Market and wider Churchgate area, including the river environs and improvements to car parks, particularly with tree planting here. We are pleased that it is beginning to look like the Council is focusing on a comprehensive long term plan specifically for this area. What happens here is key for the rest of the town centre, and indeed, the entire town and its prosperity. The Churchgate Resurgence concept published in recent years points to a positive way forward. [See <https://www.newchurchgate.org/>]
- iii) Pay on exit car parking is desperately needed. This would be a subtle encouragement for visitors to remain longer, increasing dwell/spend time in the town. EV charging stations should be installed. In development terms, car parking should not be lost in any redevelopment.

## Planning – Housing Development Area HT3

The Local Plan for 2011 to 2031 took a line of sites on the west side of Lucas Lane out of the Green Belt, ready for housing development. The northmost site, called HT3 in the plan, lies behind the static caravan site at the top of Victoria Road and is bounded on its south side by the Bowlers End development of large homes, and on its north side by Oughtonhead Lane, which is a 'restricted-by-way' - that is a traffic-free footpath and bridleway for pedestrians, cyclists and horse riders - leading to open countryside and the Oughtonhead nature reserve. Please see accompanying plan, below.



*Development HT3 - Copyright of Architectus Limited*

The building application for this site by Cala Homes involves 43 dwellings with an astonishing 137 car parking spaces! The traffic generated is predicted in the Transport Assessment which accompanies the submission to involve 233 car journeys per day and peak flows of 27 vehicles per hour in the morning, and 30 per hour in the evening. These movements will not go down Victoria Road or nearby Lavender Way, but will instead go across rural traffic-free Oughtonhead Lane and down the currently dead-end residential streets of Lower Innings and Westbury Close to Redhill Road, past the busy Redhill Road shops (at which there are often many parked and manoeuvring cars) and onto Bedford Road at the very busy Angel's roundabout.

The new proposed crossing of Oughtonhead Lane will urbanise this green traffic-free route, which leads out of town. When I last visited the site and walked along Oughtonhead Lane near the proposed crossing, I had to step aside to allow a girl on her horse to pass me by.

The proposed development's main road, and the line of houses facing it, run along the ridge which falls to the west. These will thus be visible from the countryside below. Note that, based on the many such planning applications in Hitchin, it seems likely that residents will convert their roofs, involving windows which can be seen from a distance away, including from the Chilterns Area of Natural Beauty (AONB).



There is no pedestrian or cycle access proposed from the south-east, linking up with the Bowlers End development, which we suggested would be beneficial for residents. For cyclists, cycle paths are needed to avoid having to share the main Lower Innings crossing with vehicles, as implied at present.

All these points and more were made by local residents and councillors, and by Hitchin Forum, both in writing and before the Planning Committee. The councillors at the Committee Meeting at first sought to reject the proposals, but having admitted their fear of possible legal action by the developers, pulled back and sought a deferral instead. This deferral is on the very minor matter of the above-mentioned footpath link to Bowlers End, and was to be resolved at a further Committee meeting on 21st March. However, the item was removed from this meeting at the very last minute, following receipt of a letter from the management company (i.e. residents) of Bowlers End, declining to allow the residents of the new site pedestrian access to and from its south east corner. The Council advised as follows: "This is to let you know, agenda item 6, 22/00563/FP, is going to be deferred to a future meeting of the Committee to allow the Council to consider late information submitted to members of the Committee by the applicant, and the Planning Authority is considering its own independent legal advice."

We will just have to watch this space!

Against all the above objections, the development includes 40% 'affordable' homes, air source heat pumps and solar panels, all of which are to be welcomed if the scheme goes ahead.

*Neil Dodds – member of Hitchin Forum Steering Group*

## **Hitchin Forum's Big Spring Clean**

About 130 of Hitchin's volunteer litter pickers took part in our Big Spring Clean on Sunday 24<sup>th</sup> March. This comprised two Guide groups, Bubbleworks Community runners and Hitchin Tennis Club as well as family groups and individuals. Chris Hall, a former Hitchin resident who first helped a year ago, recently moved to Wisbech but nevertheless travelled down to help, and must surely set the record for the furthest distance travelled to take part in our event.

My preliminary estimate of the number of bags collected is over 70, but at the time of writing, I have yet to hear from all participants. The usual difficulties with providing a figure have been compounded this year by a desire on the part of volunteers to clear areas that we may not have cleared in the past – the total number of areas is about 20. That too is an estimate as some branched out from their allotted area to clear nearby footpaths and alleyways. The push to work in new areas is partly fuelled by those who normally work in places with which they are familiar making an assessment that the amount of litter there had diminished. They then decided that they could have greater impact elsewhere. Windmill Hill and Pinehill Field attracted fewer volunteers in particular this time, and I do think that North Hertfordshire's contractors have helped towards making our green spaces cleaner.

Pleasingly, the number of catering cylinders of nitrous oxide was down, but there may still have been over 10 (these have now been banned) and surprisingly few disposably vapes were found. There were no particularly bizarre finds this time, but there seems to be a trend to separate shopping trolleys into two halves! I wonder if the owner of a ticket to watch Peterborough United v Stevenage on 13<sup>th</sup> March was disgruntled at its loss on the way to the match, or might be embarrassed to find they had dropped it on their return. Several frustrated pickers told me of the number of dog poo bags they found. We all agreed that we found this behaviour incomprehensible. Why bother to bag-up your dog's offerings if you are then going to leave the bag lying around? I understand that some dog walkers do this and then collect the bags on their return journey. I'm afraid litter begets litter – even left for a short time, the bags remain a signal to others that it's OK to leave other things lying around, even if they are ultimately removed.

If you would like to take part in the Forum's autumn event on Sunday 25<sup>th</sup> October, please email [hflitterpick@gmail.com](mailto:hflitterpick@gmail.com).



## **Bonus Litter Pick!**

On Sunday 5<sup>th</sup> May from 8.30 am, while the road is closed for the 10k race, Keith Hoskins is organising a litter pick along Charlton Lane and Willow Lane. He will be able to supply a number of litter pickers and bags, but if you have your own, please bring them. The road will reopen at 11.00 so the litter pick will finish before that.

Please contact Keith on [Keith.Hoskins@north-herts.gov.uk](mailto:Keith.Hoskins@north-herts.gov.uk) if you'd like to get involved.

***Bill Sellicks – Co-chair***

## A rarity on our doorstep - Hitchin's Black Poplar

Nearly a year has passed now since Hitchin lost its veteran hybrid black poplar tree (pictured below). Listed in the Woodland Trust's Veteran [Tree Inventory](#)<sup>1</sup>, it was reported in the comments by Phil Barron of Hitchin Nature Network as having a girth of 6.5m at 1.5m from the ground:



*Hitchin's Black Poplar - Photo: Nic Wilson*

Situated by the Ash Brook, it had survived much during its allegedly 250 years of being. However, the storms of last spring proved too much for it and sadly, now lying prostrate, it no longer dominates the skyline in this part of Hitchin, leaving the birds, and the many other creatures that depended on it and its catkins as a food source, bereft.

In some ways this loss is a tragedy as the black poplar is described by the Woodland Trust as [‘the most endangered native timber tree in Britain’](#)<sup>2</sup>. It seems that they are unable to pollinate each other as there are so few left in the wild: about 7,000 and of these, only 600 trees are female.

However, Nic Wilson of Hitchin Nature Network, writing her [Country Diary in The Guardian](#)<sup>3</sup> on 3<sup>rd</sup> April 2023, tells us that the story isn't over yet, as black poplars have a survival mechanism whereby they take root and regenerate from fallen branches. Thus, it is not surprising that a large branch, shed by the tree across the brook many years ago, is now exhibiting fresh growth.

Also, if you were to read a more recent edition of Nic's [Country Diary in The Guardian](#)<sup>4</sup>, you would learn that a very important male black poplar cutting, from the royal estate at Sandringham, was kindly donated to the people of Hitchin to replace their own much-lamented tree.

Luckily, I managed to spot the post on [Hitchin Nature Network's Facebook Page](#)<sup>5</sup> indicating that the black poplar cutting, mentioned in the paragraph above, would be planted on 19<sup>th</sup> February at 2pm at [Maydencroft Manor](#)<sup>6</sup>, and afterwards there would be a Hitchin winter tree walk. Being me, I immediately signed up my partner and myself to take part, numbers being limited to 15.

It turned out that there was much more to the occasion, as the plan was for everyone to gather in the car park of Maydencroft Manor and then Tom Williams, the Managing Director, would lead us through the farm, and talk about [the business](#)<sup>7</sup> and their strong interest in the environment. This proved to be very interesting as, apart from learning about the business, we heard how English longhorn cattle are reared for conservation grazing. We were even able to get up close and personal to the cattle as they were penned in at that particular time due to the fields being water-logged, but not so for the rare breeds sheep. Fascinatingly, Maydencroft Manor is also the location of [Bunyan's Barn](#)<sup>8</sup> as depicted in the photo collage below left.



After the talk the group walked to the black poplar planting site near Brick Kiln Lane, where Tom and his associate planted the cutting (see photo below) while the rest of us looked on expectantly hoping to be involved in the mulching.



Following on from the planting, after Nic had said a few words about the cutting, we proceeded to take part in the winter tree walk, taking time to stop and inspect buds, galls, bark and early spring flowers, not to mention the owl pellets, which can easily be mistaken for something a dog has deposited! (See adjacent photo collage).

After such an interesting afternoon it was a bit of a downer to return to the Maydencroft car park to discover that we had a completely flat tyre due, we were later to discover, to a faulty valve. However, all is well that ends well, as fortunately the farm has its own source of air, and we were quickly able to resume our short journey home.

All photographs were taken by the author except the one credited to Nic Wilson.



**Valerie Schicker - member of Hitchin Forum Steering Group**

1. Tree inventory entry for the black poplar:  
<https://ati.woodlandtrust.org.uk/tree-search/tree/?treeld=186660#/>

2. Most endangered tree:  
<https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/trees-woods-and-wildlife/british-trees/a-z-of-british-trees/black-poplar/>
3. Guardian Country Diary, 3<sup>rd</sup> April 2023:  
<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/apr/03/country-diary-a-family-friend-queen-of-the-skyline-has-toppled>
4. Guardian Country diary, 11<sup>th</sup> March 2024:  
<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2024/mar/11/country-diary-back-by-poplar-demand-this-simple-stick-carries-our-high-hopes>
5. Hitchin Nature Network Facebook page:  
<https://www.facebook.com/HitchinNatureNetwork>
6. Maydencroft Manor:  
<http://www.maydencroftmanor.co.uk/>
7. Maydencroft:  
<http://www.maydencroft.co.uk>
8. Bunyan's Barn:  
[https://historicengland.org.uk/research/results/reports/7942/ManorFarmBarn/Bunyan'sBarn/MaydencroftStlppolytsHertfordshire\\_Tree-ringAnalysisofElmandOakTimbers](https://historicengland.org.uk/research/results/reports/7942/ManorFarmBarn/Bunyan'sBarn/MaydencroftStlppolytsHertfordshire_Tree-ringAnalysisofElmandOakTimbers)

## 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](http://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 Councillor Surgeries. Hitchin Market Place.	10.30 am to 12.00 noon	First Saturday of every month
Hitchin Forum, all members meeting with a talk by Elizabeth Hamilton of CPRE entitled 'A Recent History of Hertfordshire – and how CPRE continues to campaign to protect the countryside'. Walsworth Community Centre.	7.30 pm for a 7.45 pm start	Date to be decided
Autumn litter pick	10.00 am to 12 noon	Sunday 25 <sup>th</sup> October