HITCHIN FORUM
Caring for our Town

NEWSLETTER

July - August 2024 No. 181

Thoughts from the Co-Chair

Just a few things to get you thinking – but you may need to take it in small doses – so much here! We start with some of our core business – planning issues. Neil works hard to follow (or pursue) the ins and outs of our council's response to plans, which is not always satisfying. The accounts of HT3 land by Oughtonhead Lane for starters… Ellie updates on Churchgate matters and then we have the work in progress on Bearton Road to encourage compliance with 20 mph.

Andrew writes about the Willow Lane/Park Way junction – a scene of many accidents and near misses. Why doesn't Willow Lane have a 30 mph limit, and speaking as someone who occasionally walks along the lane, why is the vegetation not cut back? The prospect of having an impact with a speeding truck's wing mirror as I skirt the green stuff always scares me.

In a calmer part of town Brent outlines the ongoing saga of a riverside walk – is there light at the end of the tunnel, or rather between Bridge Street, pictured below in earlier times, and the market?

Ellie encourages us to attend meetings of the Hitchin Community Forum to hear more about the various and wonderful community groups in the town, to which I would add the work of Hitchin Creative who now organise the amazing Hitchin Festival.

Meanwhile there was an election, remember that? – it seems so long ago… David Howlett gives a fascinating account of the history of our constituency. The only disappointment in that is that we were never a 'rotten borough' – would be fun to have had that dark shadow in our history. I was recently in Yarmouth on the Isle of Wight. With a population of 600 they had 2 MPs, while Birmingham with 150,000 residents had none. The 1832 Reform Act, which David highlights, sorted that.

Valerie has been off wandering again and highlights the wonders of Wicken Fen. For anyone looking for more local walks we include notice of the Herts Health Walk Scheme. For myself I have just returned from a guided tour of Heartwood – the superb 850-acre forest developed by the Woodland Trust between St Albans and Harpenden. In the past 16 years it has been transformed from low yielding farmland to a splendid site, but sadly not within walking distance of our town. Read on and let us know your thoughts.

Mike Clarke - Co-Chair

Planning

In the previous newsletter, I gave a rundown of key current planning applications which we had been or were scrutinising. Picking up where I left off:

HT3 Land south of Oughtonhead Lane

Following the abrupt deferral on 21st March, we were invited to the Planning Committee meeting on 13th June, where this matter was decided. Beforehand, we were shared legal opinions by two KCs. The first of these was commissioned by the applicant, Cala Homes, and was sent to each of the councillors on the Committee on 21st March. It concluded that if the application were to be refused on the grounds of access issues, the applicant would be very likely to win an appeal for substantial damages. The second legal opinion was commissioned by the Council. Its advice was that the applicant should never have sent the first opinion to the councillors on the Committee, but agreed that large damages would be likely.

Hitchin Forum, local residents and local councillors spoke against the access arrangements for HT3, which involve all traffic going through the quiet current cul-de-sac of Lower Innings, and thence over a concrete crossing of Oughtonhead Lane. There is no other vehicular access available, either for construction traffic or for future residents' cars. We also pointed out the unsuitable access for pedestrians (a councillor raised the issue of disabled access, which is to be addressed).

Given the legal and cost implications, it was hardly surprising that, despite our concerns, the Committee granted the application. This was the third development application where I have witnessed the Planning Committee being threatened with large costs on appeal, and it makes me wonder what is the point of speaking against proposals, when the developers can appeal in this way. With all these developments, access is a significant problem, both for existing residents and for traffic congestion, but never seems to be fully addressed.

Looking ahead!

The new government has plans for more housing. After the current round of approvals for previously Green Belt land crammed in around Hitchin, it is difficult to see where a significant number of new homes could go. However, the so-called 'safeguarded' sites, south of St Ippolyts and west of the A1(M), are earmarked as suitable for 3300 dwellings. These would then link up with the West of Stevenage development to make a total of 4110 dwellings west of the A1(M).

The government also has plans for more solar farms, and we have already had applications for 90 hectares to the east of Great Wymondley and west of the A1(M), and 36 hectares south of St Ippolyts, both feeding into the Little Wymondley electricity sub-station. These schemes were approved by the council but were called in by the previous government for scrutiny at a higher level. We are waiting to see what effect the new government will have on these deliberations.

Altogether, it looks like the building will never stop, and Hitchin and its villages will become very much overdeveloped with frequently congested roads. But despite all this, will local people be able to afford the new houses and flats?

Other applications

The revised scheme for flats between Garrison Court, Woodcote House and Baliol Chambers was rejected by the Planning Committee.

A revised scheme for the Exchange (the former Telephone Exchange building at the bottom of Hollow Lane) omitting the previously proposed cramped basement flats was approved.

Neil Dodds – member of Hitchin Forum Steering Group

Churchgate

We reported in our March/April newsletter (NL180) that although progress seemed to be slow, there would be a public consultation in June to find out what residents would like to see happen with Churchgate. Here we are in July, and at the last meeting of the Hitchin Community Forum in June, we were told there definitely would be a public consultation in September. It is currently planned to begin on 2nd September. This will be followed by a special Hitchin Community Forum meeting on Tuesday 17th September for councillors to discuss it with the community.

Image from NHC website

Representatives from North Herts Council's planning consultants Lambert Smith Hampton (LSH) were there. An investment prospectus 'Churchgate Centre - Time to Invest in Hitchin' prepared for the UKReiif (UK Real Estate, Investment & Infrastructure Forum) was made available in the meeting. UKReiif is an international planning jamboree held in May each year for developers, planners, investors and others with about 16,000 attendees. The intention was to 'showcase the opportunities' for Churchgate. Glossy, with colourful pictures, it lists the areas for regeneration, making it sound like one big redevelopment bonanza. No mention of possible staged enhancement.

Each time we have had discussions with LSH, we have stressed that this should not be seen as one big development opportunity (remember the Simons debacle?), but rather that Churchgate and its surroundings with four car parks, Hitchin Market and riverside area lends itself to staged regeneration. This could take place over a number of years, reducing the overall impact on the Churchgate traders, market traders, car parking and access, as well as the wider town centre. It is important that an overall vision for what should happen is agreed between the Council and residents. That vision could even be adapted over time to meet changing needs.

Meanwhile, we don't know what kind of 'interest' was expressed at the UKReiif convention, if any. However, it is worrying that the current Local Plan (supposed to cover the period up to 2031) has a policy (HT11) on Churchgate which requires '*Redevelopment to provide 4,000 gross sqm of additional shop, café, restaurant, pub, drinking establishment or takeaway town centre uses at ground floor level, subject to an up-to-date assessment of retail capacity and supply*'. This is clearly out of date and inappropriate: life has moved on. Successful town centres are adapting by creating flexible meeting/auditorium spaces, providing facilities for children, young people, health/wellbeing, spaces for galleries and cinemas etc. Churchgate - whether regeneration or redevelopment - provides Hitchin with that kind of opportunity, to create different sorts of spaces, including leisure, community and residential.

Recent discussions with planning policy officers indicate they accept this policy is out of date and the Council is doing an early review of parts of the current Local Plan, including town centre and retail policies. Consultation on this will also take place in September, so no confusion there then.

Ellie Clarke –member of Hitchin Forum

Bearton Road and Periwinkle Lane Traffic Calming Measures – Some wins and lost opportunities.

On 1st July, work started to install traffic calming measures on Bearton Road and the part of Periwinkle Lane to the west of the roundabout junction with Strathmore Avenue / Water Lane. See this Herts County Council website[1] for details. The works are scheduled to last until early September – road closures are inevitable – and start in the west (Bedford Road end) working eastwards. At the time of writing, the section between Bedford Road and Old Hale Way has been completed. We hope the measures will result in a safer environment, encourage observation of the speed limit in those surrounding roads where the speed limit is 20 mph, and will promote the take-up of both cycling and walking.

The situation before the roadworks

We have often seen examples of vehicles which appeared to be travelling at well over 30 mph, which was the speed limit prior to 2017. Bearton Road / Periwinkle Lane (we will refer to both as 'the Road' since, from a driver's point of view, they appear as a single road) is a rat run for drivers trying to avoid Fishponds Road and the 20 mph unenforced limit is rarely observed, except by a few - mainly local residents.

The Road changes character depending on the nature of the housing. Overall, a majority of houses are terraced or small semi-detached and have small front gardens. Some of these front gardens have hard standing for parking, but there is considerable on-road parking on both sides of the road. The western end of Bearton Road and the north side of Periwinkle Lane in the east have houses with front drives. The relatively low level of on-road parking at the western end (a much wider stretch of road) encourages motorists to accelerate on leaving Bedford Road. The houses on the north side of Periwinkle Lane are further set back from the road by a grassy area. This seems to encourage pavement parking on the north side of the road in particular.

The Road is a busy crossing point for children and parents travelling to and from local schools and a nursery. With reduced traffic speeds, the road may become safer for cyclists and pedestrians, hopefully reducing the parental anxiety that results in many using their cars to deliver children to school.

History

Following sustained pressure exerted by the late Councillor Judi Billing, the unenforced north Hitchin 20 mph 'zone' was established in March 2017. Without traffic calming structures, and the willingness of the police to prosecute those speeding, 20 mph limits result in a marginal reduction of average speed at best, but it was at least a start. In November 2022, Hertfordshire County Council consulted on changes to calm traffic on the Road. As local residents, we contributed detailed responses to those proposals, some of which were incorporated in the final plans for the work. 75% of local residents who responded were supportive of the scheme.

The Changes

Overall, double yellow lines are to be provided at all road junctions to prevent inconsiderate parking and ensure adequate sight lines. Tactile paving is to be provided at both sides of all junctions where not already present. The main calming measure will be the use of road humps or flat-topped speed tables, but there will be some build-outs which will act to constrict the width of the road. Areas where parking is to be permitted will be marked by white dashed lines parallel to the kerb on the road surface, but not where road humps and tables are located or opposite driveways.

Bearton Road - Bedford Road to Old Hale Way

At the time of writing, the main modifications have been completed on this section. Three flat-topped speed tables have been constructed (rather than road humps because it is a bus route). The original plans only allowed for two, which we believe would have been inadequate because their proposed positions would have allowed for excessive acceleration of eastbound traffic leaving Bedford Road, or of westbound traffic leaving Old Hale Way. Several local residents have commented that the speed tables are not high enough to deter speeding – we will see. There have been improvements to the informal pedestrian crossing (with refuge) of

Bearton Road at the Bedford Road junction, although not the zebra crossing which we would have preferred to see. Whilst it is pleasing that double yellow lines have been used to reduce the hazard caused by cars parking too near to the junction of Bearton Road with Bearton Green, to be really effective in preventing irresponsible parking, the lines should have extended further into the entrance of Bearton Green rather than what we estimate to be about 8 metres. We have asked for this to be reconsidered.

Bearton Road - Old Hale Way to the Ickleford Road junction

The kerb build-out on the south side of the road, just to the east of the Old Hale Way junction, is to be removed. The build-out's removal should improve road drainage. Immediately east of the current build-out, there is to be a short flat-topped speed table with a kerb build-out at its north end. This will form a non-designated pedestrian crossing – a proper crossing would be preferable. Proceeding east, at about 70-metre intervals, there will be three round top humps. Near to the junction with Brampton Park Road, opposite Up-town Pizza and Kebab, there is to be a zebra crossing with kerbs built out on both north and south sides of Bearton Road to form a narrowing of the carriageway. A crossing warden is stationed here at the beginning and end of the school day at present, so, assuming the provision of only one zebra crossing is due to funding constraints, it probably makes sense that the crossing is placed here. A loading bay will be provided outside Premier Stores, and bollards will be installed behind the built-out kerbs on the north side of the crossing to deter pavement parking. About 75 metres to the east of the zebra crossing there will be a round top speed hump. The central bollards at the Ickleford Road / Whitehurst Avenue junction are to be removed. The present sweeping curve of the Ickleford Road/ Bearton Road junction is to be built out to improve sightlines for motorists and pedestrians.

We believe that differences between the widths of the carriageways encourage parking on the pavement on the north side of the road in particular. New white lines should encourage drivers to keep to the road. However, we hope to see the central white line relocated to midway between the kerbs to further encourage this – it is not clear whether that will be done. The present 7.5 tonne weight limit would also need better signage than at present, as HGVs often find their way here.

Periwinkle Lane from Ickleford Road junction to Water Lane / Strathmore Avenue roundabout

A round top hump will be provided just east of the Ickleford Road junction, followed by two further round-top humps at 50-metre intervals, the last of which is just before the Strathmore Avenue / Water Lane roundabout. The latter will perform a gateway function to the calmed area from the east.

Conclusion

It was pleasing to see that some of the concerns we had about the scheme as originally proposed in 2022 have been listened to. The scheme is unlikely to be perfect. It is a pity that other issues will not be addressed at the same time - although drainage will be improved, the pavement outside the launderette just to the east of the build-out (which is to be removed as noted above) is invariably flooded after rain. However, not only do we wish the scheme success, we hope that eventually all areas of Hitchin will benefit from lower speeds. It would also be good if the already acute and growing problem of lorry traffic in other areas of the town could be addressed.

Details of the Bearton Road scheme:
https://www.hertfordshire.gov.uk/services/highways-roads-and-pavements/roadworks-and-road-closures/road-closures/bearton-road-20-mph-traffic-calming-scheme.aspx

Bill Sellicks and Neil Dodds – members of Hitchin Forum Steering Group

Pictures of many of the features covered in this article are presented overleaf.

		
Pavement parking on the north side of Periwinkle Lane	Bearton Road between Old Hale Way and Ickleford Road. On road parking on both sides with much use of pavements.	Parking near the junction of Bearton Green and Bearton Road
		
Junction of Bearton Road and Ickleford Road	First flat top hump on entering Bearton Road from Bedford Road	Soon-to-be-removed buildout at Bearton Road's junction with Old Hale Way
		
The often ignored vehicle weight limit sign at the Bearton road / Old Hale Way junction	Site of new zebra crossing and several other safety features outside Uptown Pizza and Kebab	Tactile paving for pedestrian crossing at the Bearton Road / Bedford Road junction

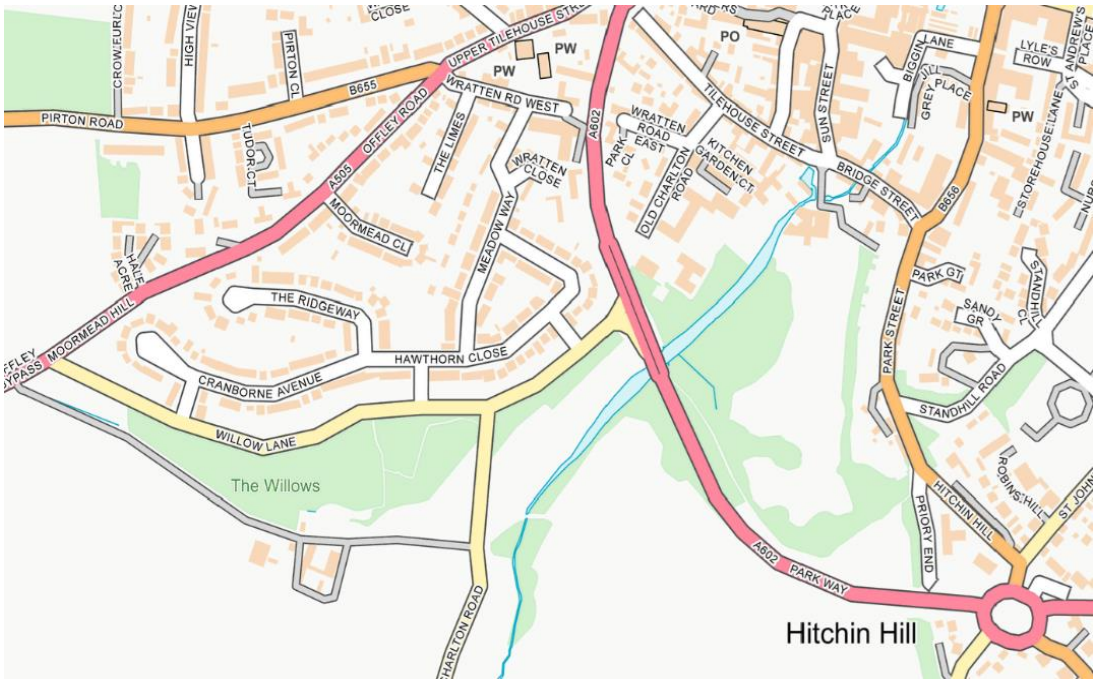
The Willow Lane / A602 road junction: A few personal thoughts

The dangerous situation of the access on to the A602 (known as Parkway / Tilehouse Street Relief Road / Priory Bypass) from Willow Lane is understandably causing concern, especially in view of the number of serious accidents and mortalities which have occurred there. Traffic from Luton comes along Willow Lane to avoid the library roundabout, and queues to turn right on to the busy main road.

Various suggestions have been made to improve safety, but it is understood the County Council Highway Authority's reaction is that "there haven't statistically been a sufficient number of accidents to warrant alterations being financed".

A number of options come to mind, but three in particular appear to stand out. The first would be to reduce the speed limit on the A602 from 50mph to 40mph, but this may have a limited effect. Second, the possibility that Willow Lane should become the main route from Stevenage Road to Luton Road, with the road to the library roundabout being a turning off is appealing, but the necessary improvements to Willow Lane would be expensive. The third alternative however does seem to have possibilities.

In Letchworth, the road from Willian on to Letchworth Gate is left turn only, there being a barrier along the Gate preventing right turns. Traffic has to go to the 'Longabout' with the filling station, and then back along the Gate to access the A1(M). The installation of such a barrier along the centre of the Priory Bypass in Hitchin, forcing traffic to go to the library roundabout to turn back along the A602, would greatly improve safety, and the increase in congestion at the library roundabout would be a small price to pay for this safety.



Map showing the junction of Parkway and Willow Lane. Note that the map already shows (incorrectly) the barrier without a break. Map source: Ordnance Survey Open Data. Contains public sector information licensed under the Open Government Licence v3.0

Andrew Wearmouth – member of Hitchin Forum Steering Group

Our Town, Your Say

The author of this article is a retired building surveyor who has lived in Hitchin since 1965. He is one of the founder members of Hitchin Festival and the Hitchin Town Centre Initiative, and has been active in the building preservation movement both locally and nationally.

Riverside Walk Update

Since the 1930s it has been the policy of North Hertfordshire Council (NHC) and their predecessors North Herts District Council (NHDC) and Hitchin Urban District Council (HUDC) that there be a Riverside Walk on the banks of the River Hiz through Hitchin.

General view of the walkway already built along the river frontage of Jill Grey Place (completed about 25 years ago and not yet used!)

I have been promoting its completion from Bridge Street to Biggin Lane and was delighted when the construction of part of it was made a condition of the development of the Water Board site, which became Jill Grey Place. Unfortunately, it transpired that NHDC had not taken the transfer of it in around 2000 when the development was completed. The residents of Jill Grey Place blocked it with a fence panel from the section constructed as part of the Crown House redevelopment due to not wanting to be responsible for its maintenance. No action was taken to open it. Condition 5 from Planning Permission reference 93/0980/1 dated 10th April 1997 states…

> **5.** **Before the development hereby permitted is commenced full details of the 1.2m high east iron railings alongside the riverside walkway and to the rear of the Biggin Almshouses as well as the demountable cast iron bollards providing maintenance access to the riverside walkway and embankment shall be submitted to and approved in writing by the Local Planning Authority.**
>
> **Reason:** **To ensure that the development is compatible with the Conservation Area and the setting of the Grade II* Listed Building.**

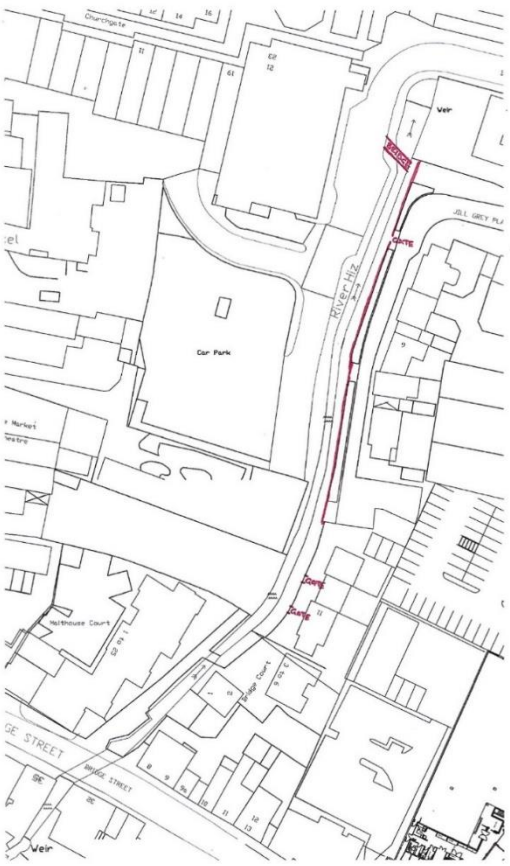
In 2013 I discovered that the residents of Jill Grey Place had no objection to it being part of the walk but they, quite reasonably, wanted it to be adopted by NHDC. I was chairman of Hitchin Initiative at the time and took up the fight to get it open. With the help of local architects and consulting engineers working pro bono, a scheme was prepared and agreed with the residents of Jill Grey Place. It involved adding gates and railings so that the path would not be used for people to walk up Jill Grey Place to Queen Street and for there to be a bridge across to the existing footpath at the rear of Churchgate rather than continuing across the river frontage of The Biggin.

In that year I had two meetings with the then Chief Executive of NHDC and obtained his support for the completion of the walkway. The planning department were also happy with the proposed design of the footbridge (similar to the one at the other end of the path). Details were agreed in principle with the various agencies.

The work was costed and Hitchin Initiative set aside sufficient funds to pay for it (but would have also looked for some sponsorship). NHDC found that there had been a muddle in transferring land owned by HUDC to NHDC and a small strip was in limbo (but obviously not owned by anyone else). This 'problem' was easily solved by a realignment of the bridge. All that was left was for them to complete the transfer of the land from the developer (which, as I set out above, should have been done at the completion of Jill Grey Place). This has taken an eternity, but we are now advised that the legals have been completed, the land has been transferred to NHC and the project can go ahead.

We have no information yet as to the timing. The funds set aside by Hitchin Initiative have been spent on other projects but they are happy to contribute what they can and to assist with fundraising if required by NHC. Perhaps the local architects and engineers would still complete the work pro bono as a community project.

I originally set a target of getting it done while I was still chairman of Hitchin Initiative, and then by the time I was 70 and now hoping that it will be within my lifetime! It would be good to have it as soon as possible, hopefully before the 100th anniversary of it being proposed.



Proposed Riverside Walk between Bridge Street and Churchgate (courtesy Wastell & Porter)

Where the new bridge would connect to the existing footpath between the two trees

Brent Smith – member of Hitchin Forum

Readers might be interested to know that Brent Smith will be giving a talk about the life and work of the Austrian architect Friedensreich Hundertwasser on 7th October. Details can be found using the following link: https://secure.c20society.org.uk/Default.aspx?tabid=62&EventId=1074&mc_cid=bd7fbde0aa&mc_eid=cb7e8a4c99

Hitchin Community Forum

The Hitchin Committee of North Herts Council has recently been transformed into the Hitchin Community Forum (yes! try not to get confused!) and it seems now only has grant-giving powers. Doubtless there has been a report to some executive committee at North Herts Council about why this is a good idea, but it does seem a reverse microcosm of the devolution agenda of the new national government. It also seems a retrograde step in the context of potential far-reaching proposals for the regeneration (redevelopment?) of Churchgate and its environs, and who is best placed to take the far-reaching decisions that will be needed here.

However, there is a great deal to interest Hitchin residents, and the purpose of this article is to tickle your interest into attending these meetings (only quarterly so no great commitment) because they are so informative about the amazing work being done by Hitchin's community groups. At the June meeting, there were presentations from the Sadie Centre, Herts Vision Loss and the Triangle Garden as part of grant applications.

Among many other 'wellbeing' classes, the Sadie Centre* (opposite the nursery on Harkness Hill) offers "Positive Movement" classes for older people with mobility problems or living with long-term conditions. This is an amalgam of techniques drawn from the Alexander Technique, Adaptive Yoga and mindfulness. It helps to reduce anxiety, stress and fear of falling, improving self-confidence, increasing energy and enabling attendees to better look after themselves in their own homes. The Centre is currently training up more people so the programmes can be delivered in more community facilities in Hitchin, ultimately offering 'Positive Movement' as a more local, free and preventative service.

Herts Vision Loss (HVL)* is a charity covering all of Hitchin to support and empower those who are blind or visually impaired. More than 80 Hitchin residents aged over 65 receive its help. HVL is hoping to establish a 'Sight Life' social group in the town to provide information, advice, advocacy, counselling, assistance with technology support, home visiting and befriending. Having such a group in the town will increase access to essential services, providing a supportive community, thereby building social networks, increasing confidence and self-awareness of the condition, resulting in improved mental health and overall wellbeing.

The Triangle Community Garden* (based at Ransom's Recreation Ground) helps people of all ages and abilities to connect and grow through gardening and contact with the natural world. A new project is 'Triangle Tribe', a monthly evening of Bushcraft for Wellbeing, for families with teens aged 12-16. All sessions are promoted as neurodiverse inclusive. Activities vary with the seasons and include outdoor survival skills, ancient fire skills, open fire cooking, whittling, foraging, nature observation and making useful and decorative things from natural materials. Intended outcomes are to build individual and community resilience, strengthen family bonds, tackle isolation, create new networks, nurture interests outside the digital world, foster environmental awareness, reduce anxiety, and encourage safe exploration of risk boundaries.

I discovered not only community groups that I didn't know existed, but the brilliance of what they offer and the dedication behind their work is simply awe-inspiring.

*Information obtained from application forms by these groups for grants from the Hitchin Community Forum.

Ellie Clarke –member of Hitchin Forum

Hitchin's 'New' Parliamentary Constituency: A Longer Look

The recent General Election, on the heels of a Parliamentary Boundary Review, has raised the profile of Hitchin's 'new' constituency. MPs are meant to be elected on a basis ensuring all votes count equally, albeit in a first-past-the-post system, across the country. But ideally constituencies should also embody a sense of local identity and shared interests in how their boundaries are drawn.

Historians debate the precise details of when Parliament emerged as an effective institution. But the basic structure of 'historic counties' in England is at the heart of Parliamentary representation, however that has been delivered. Counties in this part of the country (and their subdivisions into Hundreds) date from decisions of the Saxon Kings of the 9th century as they gradually reclaimed territory that had fallen under Danish control. These counties reflected basic units of local identity – Hitchin was a very early Minster (church) centre and soon had its own Half Hundred - and came to provide representatives for the lowest Parliamentary tier beneath the monarch, the nobility and the clergy.

By about 1430 Hertfordshire's representation had come to comprise two burgesses for both Hertford and St Albans (the two boroughs) and two knights-of-the-shires for the county. Hitchin, already the key urban centre in the north and one of the biggest towns in the county, had no distinct parliamentary representation of its own. This county wide structure of four burgesses and two knights became hallowed and lasted until the Great Reform Act of 1832, the first attempt to 'modernise' Parliament with the aim of making it more representative of the population at large at a time of rapid economic and political flux.

The changes of 1832 were crucial in principle (altering a system basically untouched for several centuries) but relatively limited in impact in the numbers and types of people who were granted more direct political power; in Hertfordshire, away from the northern areas of growing industry, the county component was only increased by one member to three. Further change soon followed with St Albans losing (in 1852) its separate Parliamentary representation because of corruption. After the Second Reform Act (1867) Hertford also lost one of its MPs. Again Hitchin remained, despite its continued importance as a local centre, subsumed in the county component of Hertfordshire's representation.

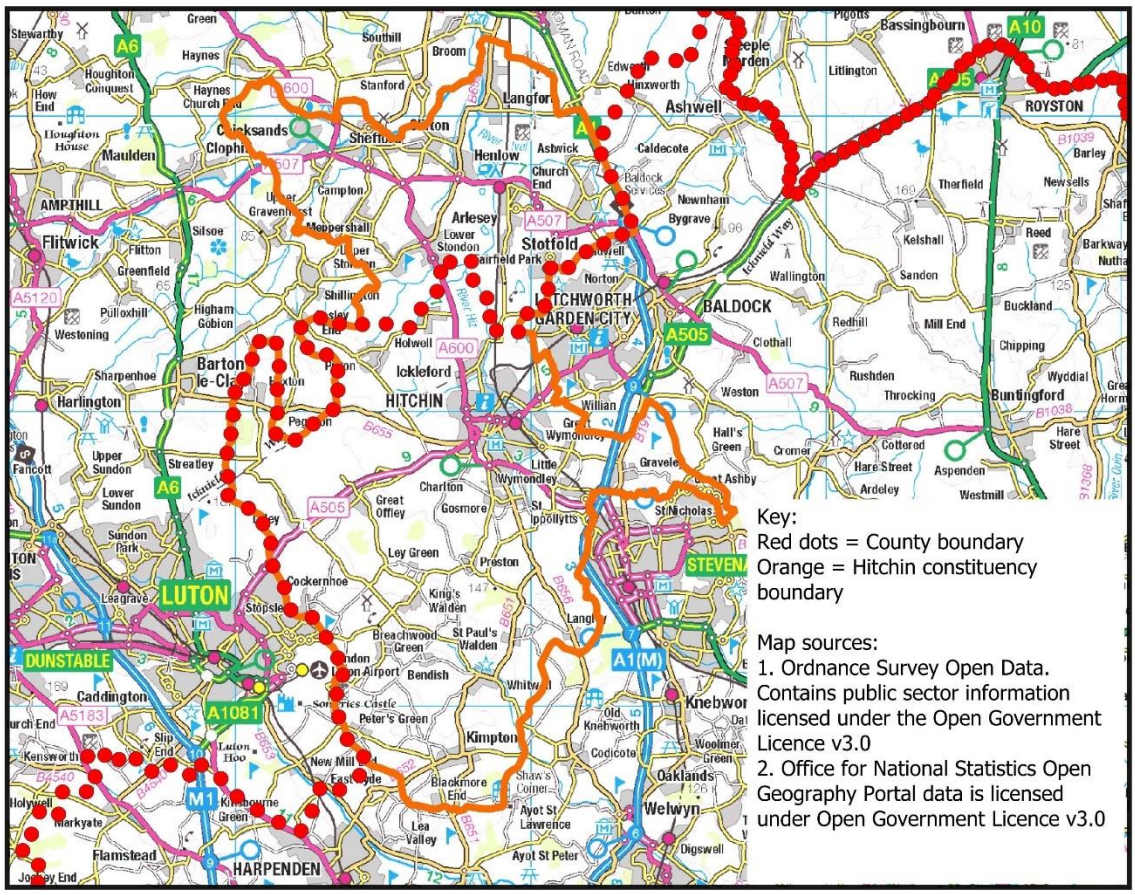
In 1884 the basis of our modern political system emerged. A Third Reform Act substantially increased the numbers of householder electors and equalised the voting qualifications between boroughs and counties, the latter having hitherto been more restrictive. In the linked Redistribution Act of 1885, which further overhauled the pattern of constituencies, Hertfordshire was divided into four divisions each with one MP and Hertford lost its dedicated member. Hitchin became centre to the Northern Division: the town was its largest settlement and natural social and economic focus. Nineteenth century developments had expanded its pre-existing roles. Hitchin, a court location, became centre to a Poor Law Union and an early Board of Health; in addition it acquired a main railway junction, became a post town and, after 1894, was home to both an Urban and a Rural District Council.

Arrangements for the 1918 General Election bolstered Hitchin's separate role with a named constituency covering most of what is recognised today as North Hertfordshire even though by now the town's place in the county's urban hierarchy had fallen because of significant growth elsewhere. Between 1918 and 1982 Hitchin retained its own constituency although its geographical extent shrank somewhat as the county population rose overall and its own extent changed: between 1918 and 1982 the number of Hertfordshire constituencies rose from five to nine. After 1982 Hitchin was subsumed in a North Hertfordshire constituency but it regained an autonomy of sorts after 1997 as part of a combined seat with Harpenden. Full independence has, of course, just been restored.

Does all this matter? The answer is yes. Stevenage-based local historian Hugh Madgin notes how Hitchin, still a typical market town, retains '..a hinterland that its large neighbours of Letchworth and Stevenage, expanded massively in the twentieth century, do not possess' (Hitchin Through Time, 2009, p 4). The point is that Hitchin's local role is not just historical but practical: the town exerts a market, retail and services pull over a much larger area in north Hertfordshire and south Bedfordshire than for its own immediate needs. There is a strong sense of local identity that goes with this role despite unrelenting modern pressures, remote local

government and a significant influx of newcomers over the past fifty years: it is a challenge to maintain this identity but it is important to do so for the way the town functions and a dedicated constituency helps.

Finally, there is also a historical twist in the tail of the recent changes. Constituencies now sometimes cross ancient county boundaries. In Hitchin's case the inclusion of a piece of Bedfordshire harks back to the town's very earliest origins when, in Saxon times, the existence of its tribe called the Hicce was recorded – and that tribe's territory extended into what is now southern Bedfordshire and was only divided off by those 9th century decisions that made the two counties themselves. Back to the future?



David Howlett – member of Hitchin Historical Society and Hitchin Forum

One of Europe's most important wetlands on our doorstep - Wicken Fen

Although Wicken Fen is not directly on our doorstep, being roughly an hour's drive away, it is not every town that can boast such close proximity to one of Europe's most important wetlands. Home to a record-breaking 9,300 plus species, including a spectacular array of rare plants, birds and dragonflies, as well as never-before-seen species, Wicken Fen is described in this BBC article[1] as a 'mecca for naturalists'; an 'ancient fenland oasis' that encompasses the most species-rich area in the UK.

Wicken, besides being England's most famous fen, also has the last surviving historic wind pump in Cambridgeshire (see adjacent photo). In addition, it is Britain's oldest nature reserve and the first to be cared for by the National Trust, starting in 1899 when two acres of undrained fenland were donated to it. This continues to the present time as the National Trust still owns and manages a large part of the land. It uses progressive wetting, taking excess flood water from the river during the winter months to create a mosaic of different habitats and has introduced the grazing of Highland cattle, mixed cattle and Konik ponies (featured on the BBC's 'Wild Isles' series 1-3 - Grasslands, March 2023) to encourage natural processes. Over time, it has been able to expand the reserve to 830 Ha, thereby assisting in the role of locking up carbon in its wet, peaty soil to help reduce emissions and fight climate change. The National Trust website presents an interesting history of the reserve[2].

At its very heart is to be found the renowned Wicken Fen National Nature Reserve (NNR) which includes 255 Ha of high quality, open fen on deeper peat soils that have never been drained for agriculture (one of the 0.1% remaining fenland in the region). This area, known as Sedge Fen, has been officially designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), a Special Area of Conservation (SAC, a European designation), and a Ramsar wetland (an international designation). A short boardwalk trail can be taken around this ancient part of the fen. See adjacent photo and also this National Trust website[3].

Also, for those interested in geology, there are three sites associated with Wicken, Sedge Fen being one of them. The other two are the Brick Kiln and Clay Pit (see adjacent photo) and Reach Lode Bridge, which is in a more remote part of the Fen on a public right of way: The Cambridge Geological Society website[4] gives an excellent description of the underlying geology.

Given the credentials outlined above, it is little wonder that the National Trust wants to make much of Wicken Fen's 125th Anniversary, celebrated on 1st May this year and, in particular, 25 years of the Wider Wicken Vision Project, a 100-year plan launched in 1999 to protect this special place for wildlife and people. The East of England National Trust has produced this video[5] describing how they, under this re-wilding project, is looking to increase the historic landscape from Wicken Fen to the edge of Cambridge.

Apart from its nature, wildlife and geological attractions, Wicken Fen is an ideal place to enjoy a range of outdoor activities[6]: and, now that the schools are out on their summer holiday, it is a great place to visit with the family[7].

A very popular activity with everyone, whatever their age, is the incredible fenland waterways 50-minute open boat trip on the Mayfly, which runs from mid-March to October and is powered by a quiet electric motor so as not to spoil the tranquillity (see adjacent photo). Be sure to take your binoculars along to look at the marsh harriers flying overhead. In summer you will also spot many damsel and amazing dragon flies. In fact Wicken Fen is now one of the 23 dragonfly hotspots[8] across the UK, recently having been awarded the title by the British Dragonfly Society.

If you can't make it to Wicken Fen this summer don't despair: at 7.30pm on Friday, 7th March next year there will be an opportunity to hear Ajay Tegala[9], wildlife presenter and author, speak about Wicken Fen at The RSPB Hitchin and Letchworth Local Group, The Settlement, SG5 4UB.

Note: All photographs were taken by the author on two separate visits to the Fen, one in Spring and one in Summer.

Valerie Schicker - member of Hitchin Forum Steering Group

1. BBC Cambridgeshire report: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-cambridgeshire-48085334
2. National Trust history of Wicken Fen: https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/visit/cambridgeshire/wicken-fen-national-nature-reserve/history-of-wicken-fen
3. National Trust guide to Wicken Fen: https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/visit/cambridgeshire/wicken-fen-national-nature-reserve/explore-wicken-fen-nature-reserve

4. Dfgdfg:
   http://www.cambsgeology.org/wicken-fen-and-reach
5. Video celebrating the 25 year anniversary of Wicken Fen Vision:
   https://youtu.be/ZgARWCgoPJ0?si=2_t5QI_k5Xz8SxOU
6. Outdoor activities at Wicken Fen:
   https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/visit/cambridgeshire/wicken-fen-national-nature-reserve/outdoor-activities-at-wicken-fen
7. Family activities:
   https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/visit/cambridgeshire/wicken-fen-national-nature-reserve/visiting-wicken-fen-with-family
8. Dragonfly hotspot:
   https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c2e43pz467go
9. Ajay Tegala talk at The Settlement, Letchworth:
   https://www.facebook.com/share/p/icbhsMyRCY1Li26V/

Our Town, Your Say

The author is a project officer for Hertfordshire County Council's (HCC's) Health Walks Scheme. She promotes walking for health schemes throughout Hertfordshire and presents here the walks local to Hitchin.

Boost your mood – join a Health Walk today

Hertfordshire Health Walks (HHW) are free, sociable walks, led by friendly volunteers who will lead the way. Join us to explore the countryside, get fitter and meet other people who enjoy being outside.

Walks range from a 20- to 30-minute stroll alongside the River Purwell near Walsworth Common to a faster paced 90-minute walk from The Orange Tree Pub. There are five walking opportunities in Hitchin plus other walks in nearby towns and villages. You'll soon find one that suits your ability levels!

What do people get out of going on a Health Walk?

Walking in the company of others brings real mental health benefits as well as physical benefits. Health Improvement Coordinator at Hertfordshire County Council, Jesse Eyoma, said: "Sharing a walk with someone is brilliant for emotional wellbeing and companionship. You can also set a goal and track your progress which provides a sense of achievement and boosts self-esteem."

He added: "The release of endorphins you get from walking is good for stress, anxiety and depression, promoting feelings of happiness, improving your quality of sleep and improving mental health."

The simple act of putting one foot after the other strengthens our heart, bones and muscles, lowers blood pressure and reduces our risk for many health conditions. When you concentrate on moving and the path ahead and people alongside, your mind is calmed and any worries drift away. It can be comforting to know that all you have to do is walk.

How do I know which Health Walk is best for me?

Health Walks are graded so that you can identify the walk that is most suitable for your fitness level. For those new to walking, you can join one of our First Steps Walks[1]. There are two of these in Hitchin which meet at the Millstream Pub and Westmill Community Centre. These are ideal for people who have been diagnosed with a health condition or who are returning to gentle exercise after injury or illness. These popular, short walks are a great way to find out if walking is for you. And there's also the added benefit of going for a cuppa afterwards.

Volunteer Marion, who leads a First Steps Walk in Hatfield Town Centre, said "Whenever people go on a Health Walk, they tell me they are glad they came along and feel better for it. It's mood lifting, relaxed and free. Not many things are these days!"

People who join our walks can expect a:

- fun, enjoyable walk
- tried and tested, interesting route
- trained leader at the front and back
- opportunity to meet new people
- supportive encouraging group

To find a walk near you view the North Herts Area Timetable[2]. This covers walks in the whole of North Herts.

If you need further information, please email: healthwalks.cms@hertfordshire.gov.uk

The walks are coordinated and funded by Hertfordshire County Council (Countryside & Rights of Way/Public Health).

1. First Steps Walks: https://www.hertfordshire.gov.uk/services/recycling-waste-and-environment/countryside-management/hertfordshire-health-walks/hertfordshire-health-walks.aspx#firsttime
2. North Herts Area Timetable May to August 2024: https://www.hertfordshire.gov.uk/doc/env/hhw/2024-02/north-herts-health-walks-timetable-may-to-august-2024.pdf

Claire Pullen - project officer for HCC's Health Walks Scheme

Have Your Say on North Herts Council (NHC) Matters

If you wish to make your feelings known on any NHC-related matters, 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 Councillor Surgeries. Hitchin Market Place.	10.30 am to 12.00 noon	First Saturday of every month
Churchgate public consultation starts. This will be followed by a special Hitchin Community Forum meeting on Monday 9th September for councillors to discuss it with the community.		Monday 2nd September
Churchgate themed special Hitchin Community Forum meeting for councillors to discuss the above consultation with the community.	7.30 pm	Monday 9th September
Public meeting on all things transport, with Jeff Clayton, Strategy & Programme Manager, Highways Implementation, Growth & Environment, Hertfordshire County Council. Venue: Gainsford Room, Woodside Hall **Note:** any members wishing to raise questions for Jeff should please email them to chair@hitchinforum.org.uk	7.30 pm for 7.45 pm start	Tuesday 10th September
Autumn litter pick	10.00 am to 12 noon	Sunday 20th October
Annual General Meeting to be followed by the postponed talk from Elizabeth Hamilton of CPRE: 'A Recent History of Hertfordshire – and how CPRE continues to campaign to protect the countryside' Venue: Friends Meeting House	7.30 pm for a 7.45 pm start	Wednesday 6th November