

NEWSLETTER

May - June 2026

No. 191

Thoughts from the Co-Chair

Welcome to another newsletter – with the usual mix of thoughts about keeping our town and ourselves healthy.

Bill has been thinking about the state of the River Oughton and the water extraction issues. It is very scary that if Affinity did full extraction there would likely be no river left! At the other end of my regular walk there the weir remains in a state of disrepair, but the council hopes to fix that this autumn.

Meanwhile the Friends of Oughtonhead Common and the Countryside Management Service work hard on improving the common itself. If you happened to see BBC's Countryfile on 3rd May it featured the Chilterns including a chalk stream project – all part of our local delights.

Exploring the edge of the Chilterns is undoubtedly within the range of Hertfordshire Health Walks – publicised here by Claire Pullen.

That takes us to a less healthy issue – the current rumble of large HGVs travelling through the town to the recycling sites in the industrial area affecting the health and safety of residents lining the streets they rumble by. We are pleased that our MP and councillors are investing time and money in that issue. A Health Impact Assessment (HIA) has just been published following a six-month study by consultants – [follow this link](#)¹. Neil writes about this abomination of the scrap lorries.

While we await any steps that the powers that be might take, we are also exploring some of the background to how agreements were made to allow such large volumes of scrap metal to be processed here. That whole issue is likely to find its way into the Local Plan, though the issue needs to be improved long before that is concluded – it needs urgent action.

North Herts Council is starting that long process of preparing the Local Plan – they are asking “how you’d like to be involved, what you think the big local issues are - think housing, jobs, transport, climate, and thriving high streets - and how you think North Herts should look in years to come.” No doubt that will take up our attention in the next five years as that leads up to the ‘examination in public’, the final dramatic debate in front of an ‘inspector’ before it is formally

agreed and accepted. Expect more of that in future editions... Quite how this will integrate with the pending reorganisation of County and District Councils into unitary authorities is beyond my imagination.

To take our minds back to some local fascinating history Valerie has explored the links with John Bunyan, author of *The Pilgrims Progress* and a non-conformist preacher who was jailed for 12 years for refusing to stop preaching!

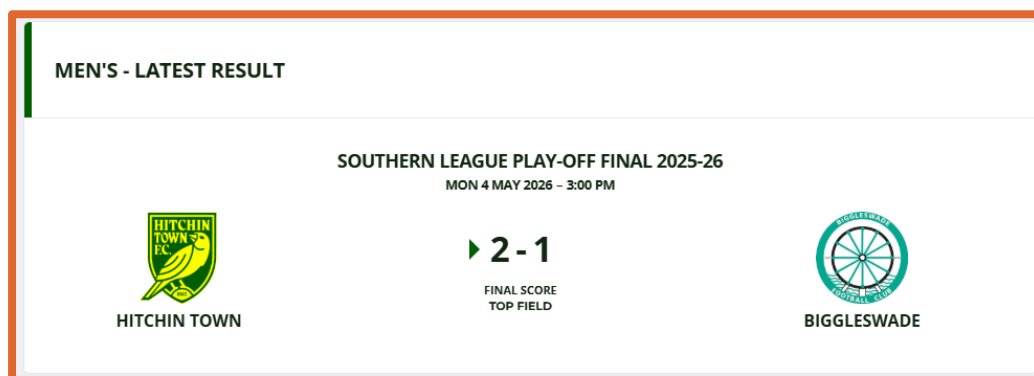
We won't stop preaching about changes that we think would benefit the town and its citizens, but tell us what you think!

1. Hitchin industrial area Health Impact Assessment (HIA):
https://www.north-herts.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2026-05/794-PLN-ESH-00236_Hitchin_HIA_FINAL%20ISSUED.pdf

Mike Clarke – Co-Chair

Hitchin Town FC

Many congratulations to Hitchin Town FC on celebrating a perfect end to a memorable season on 4th May by beating Biggleswade 2 – 1 to earn promotion to the Southern League Premier Division, Level 7. A great achievement in front of a sell-out crowd of more than 3000 local fans who gave the team incredible backing at the final and throughout the 100 goal season, including a large crowd at the semi-final. Well done Hitchin Town FC.



Luton Airport Update

As members may remember, Luton and District Association for the Control of Aircraft Noise (LADACAN), brought a judicial review against the grant of the development consent order (DCO) to allow the airport to go ahead with developments which would enable it to increase annual passenger numbers to 32 million. That was dismissed in December last year. On the 19th May this year, the Court of Appeal refused LADACAN's application for an extension of time to file an appeal against that decision. Just before the appeal was submitted, the government had introduced a shorter timescale for such submissions and this was the first time that the new deadline had been applied. It is unclear what further action, if any, LADACAN might take to contest the DCO.

Bill Sellicks – Co-Chair

Step into summer with a Hertfordshire Health Walk

There are more than 70 volunteer-led walks across Hertfordshire – and seven in the Hitchin area - that can help put a spring in your step. Plus, you'll meet new people and explore the beautiful Hertfordshire countryside and urban parks.

What are the benefits and how do I get involved?

Walking is one of the best things you can do for your physical health. It is a full body workout



that doesn't feel like exercise. Walking strengthens the feet, legs, hips and core, supporting mobility as we age. It not only reduces the risk of certain health conditions, but it can also lift your mood, help you sleep and reduce anxiety.

There's no need to book. [Register online](#)¹ as a new walker and come and give it a go! Read our [Advice for walkers](#)² to find out what to expect.

Where are the walks?

We have a range of walks for all abilities and fitness levels. For those new to walking, you can join our First Steps Walk from the Millstream Pub on Cambridge Road. This is a pleasant 30–40 minute walk alongside the River Purwell with plenty of opportunities to rest. The walk is ideal for people who have been diagnosed with a health condition or who are returning to gentle exercise after injury or illness. If you prefer a more urban walk in the centre of Hitchin, winding your way through alleyways and past quaint cottages, why not try our Wednesday walk (2pm) from the North Herts Museum? 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.

Seasoned walkers might want to pop along to some of our longer walks from The Orange Tree Pub or Oughtonhead Common. If you want to explore further afield, join our new walk in Baldock on Fridays at 2pm or our summer evening walk (60 to 90 minutes) from the Three Horseshoes in Norton, on the outskirts of Letchworth (last Wednesday of the month). Children and families are always welcome.

Whichever level you choose, you can be sure that you'll never walk alone. Two volunteers will always be there ensuring the pace is right and everyone stays together. The full list of walks is available online: [North Herts Health Walks Timetable \(May to August\) 2026³](#).



Become a Health Walk Volunteer

All walks are supported by local residents who are keen to share their joy of walking with others. They have been trained to lead safe and inclusive walks.

Melanie, who has been a volunteer at the Millstream Pub walk for the past three years, said:

"I have always been active myself, with an interest in walking, and have developed an awareness of frailty and the importance of activity and socialising when it comes to improving and maintaining health span. When looking for a volunteering opportunity, the Herts Health Walks, particularly the First Steps walks, really resonated with me, as I saw the chance to introduce walking to people who otherwise wouldn't be able to partake. I particularly enjoy welcoming new walkers, and creating a friendly relationship, to support them in establishing walking as a healthy habit, with all the many benefits that that brings. Watching their strength and stamina improve, and their friendships blossom, is very rewarding."

If, like Melanie and our 50 other volunteers in North Herts, you'd like to help others experience the health and wellbeing benefits of regular walking, then why not train to be a walk volunteer? The next training session is on 10th July in Hatfield. For more information and to book your place, visit: [Health Walk Volunteers | Hertfordshire County Council⁴](#) or contact the Health Walk Team on 01992 555888 / healthwalks.cms@hertfordshire.gov.uk.



Volunteers wanted to support local Health Walks



**FREE
Sociable
Local
Short**

Contact us for information about volunteering

www.hertfordshire.gov.uk/healthwalks
Healthwalks.cms@hertfordshire.gov.uk
01992 555 888



1. Online registration:
www.hertfordshire.gov.uk/healthwalks
2. Advice for walkers:
<https://www.hertfordshire.gov.uk/services/recycling-waste-and-environment/countryside-management/hertfordshire-health-walks/hertfordshire-health-walks.aspx#advice>
3. Walks timetable:
<https://www.hertfordshire.gov.uk/doc/env/hhw/2026-02/north-herts-health-walks-timetable-may-to-august-26.pdf>
4. Volunteer training:
<https://www.hertfordshire.gov.uk/services/recycling-waste-and-environment/countryside-management/volunteering/health-walk-leaders.aspx>

Claire Pullen – Hertfordshire Health Walks

History on our doorstep - John Bunyan

If you have never visited the Bunyan Meeting Church in Bedford or the associated John Bunyan Museum, <https://www.bunyanmeeting.co.uk/museum>, I can thoroughly recommend it, especially as it is only a bus ride away from Hitchin and a pleasant one at that. Although the



museum is open Tuesday to Saturday, 11 am to 4 pm, my recommendation would be to visit on a Wednesday morning. This way you could take advantage of the coffee shop within the foyer of the Bunyan Meeting Church, which stays open an hour longer on Wednesdays until 2 pm to serve lunch. However, if you wish to look around



the church as well as the museum, you will need to visit the church well before 1 pm as this is when it closes. As it was, I visited the coffee shop and church before moving on to explore the museum due to its later opening hours.

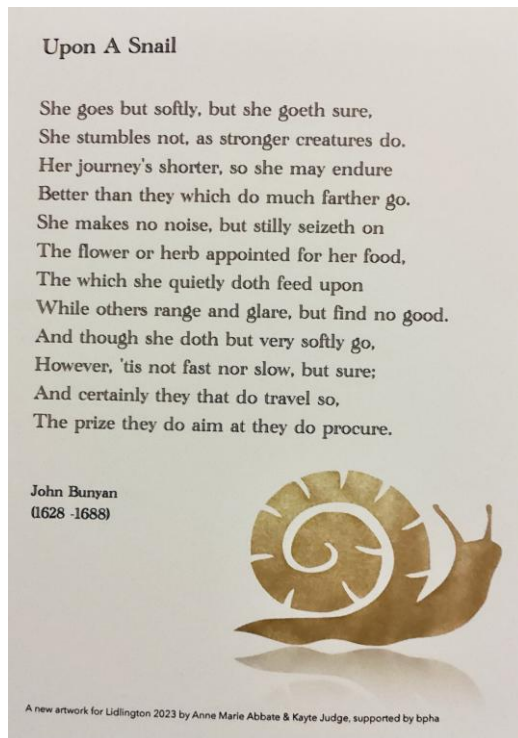


The museum and shop are free to enter but donations are welcome. There is a lovely peaceful garden of remembrance alongside it. While I was there, a family with three children was at the reception desk excitedly picking up boards with activities to complete whilst in the museum. Although the use of photography is restricted in the museum itself, I was able to put together the photo collage above which displays photos of the museum, the remembrance garden and the Bunyan Meeting Church.

Originally, where the Bunyan Meeting Church now stands in Mill Street, Bedford, there was an adapted barn where John Bunyan used to preach. On entering the church you will have access

to two information sheets. The first of these provides the history of the church and Bunyan's association with it. Amongst other things, the second sheet provides information on the unique bronze doors gifted by the 9th Duke of Bedford and the stained glass windows, both of which are illustrated in the collage above and depict scenes from *The Pilgrim's Progress*, the book Bunyan is best known for: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/The-Pilgrims-Progress>, which also contains his famous poem entitled 'Who would true valour see'.

Speaking of poetry, as we left the museum we received the adjacent card, which was a nice touch to the end of our visit. Unfortunately, we did not have the opportunity to visit The Basement at Bunyan, a flexible and community-orientated arts centre and the newest addition to the Bunyan Meeting complex that offers creativity to the community in Bedford.



Apart from everything else, John Bunyan is known to have had strong ties with Hitchin and the surrounding area during the 1660s and 1670s. For example, when non-conformist preaching was illegal, Bunyan held services in a natural amphitheatre, aptly called "Bunyan's Dell". This is situated in Wain Wood, just outside Hitchin, near Preston, and whilst he preached villagers kept a look out for law enforcement from the nearby Tatmore Hills. As there was no shelter in the Dell, Bunyan is said to have used a cottage in the vicinity to rest and smoke, which became known as Bunyan's Cottage.

For photos of Wain Wood, the Dell and aforementioned cottage see the blog [By Stargoose and Hanglands](#)¹.

It is some time ago now that I completed a walk that took in Bunyan's Dell and the cottage Bunyan is purported to have used, and although I believe it is still possible to walk this route, I could not locate it via the internet. However, I enlisted the help of Chat GPT to map out a short circular walk for me, starting and finishing in Preston. The result is attached as an appendix to this article. As Wain Wood is renowned for its bluebells, this may be a walk to do in Spring. If you are feeling energetic, you can of course complete the much longer [John Bunyan Trail](#)².

It is worth noting that a chapel was built in Bunyan's name in Preston in the late 19th century to commemorate his preaching in the area. It is now a [Stockbroker's office](#)³. Stones inlaid in the brickwork of the chapel make reference to the Foster family, Bunyan's loyal supporters and friends who offered him protection and hospitality during his preaching rounds.

You may also be interested to know that the existence of the [Baptist church in Upper Tilehouse Street](#)⁴, owes a great deal to Bunyan's ministry. Indeed, the church, established around 1670, was a direct result of Bunyan's open-air preaching, and Bunyan arranged for his friend John Wilson to minister there to his followers in Hitchin. Also in connection with Tilehouse Street is the story of Agnes Beaumont, a member of the Tilehouse Street congregation, which involves a dramatic incident where she rode behind John Bunyan on horseback, causing a scandal and leading to various accusations. This is [her story in her own words](#)⁵.

It is also claimed that the 16th century barn attached to Maydencroft Manor, now a wedding venue, was once used by Bunyan. Thus, it appears that Bunyan's influence in the Hitchin area was not insignificant as regards providing a foundation for the non-conformist largely Baptist community there in the 17th century.



Valerie Schicker - Member of Hitchin Forum Steering Group

1. Blog entitled By Stargoose and Hanglands:
<https://bystargooseandhanglands.blogspot.com/2021/04/a-pilgrimage-and-pilgrim.html>
2. John Bunyan trail:
https://www.wildlifebcn.org/sites/default/files/2021-09/john_bunyan_trail_-_book.pdf
3. Bunyan's chapel in Preston – currently a stockbroker's office:
<https://hertfordshirechurches.uk/2015/04/20/bunyan-chapel-former-preston/>
4. Baptist church in Upper Tilehouse Street:
www.ths-baptist.org.uk/history.htm
5. The story of Agnes Beaumont:
www.ths-baptist.org.uk/agnes_beaumont.htm

Appendix – Wain Wood Circular Walk

Preston → Bunyan's Dell → Bunyan's Cottage → Preston via Wain Wood
Distance: ~5–6 miles (8–10 km). Time: 2–3 hours. Difficulty: Easy–moderate
Best season: Spring (bluebells in Wain Wood are excellent)
Start in Preston near the village green or pub parking area.
Route details:
1. Preston to Wain Wood
From the village centre, head south-east on the public footpath leaving the village toward the Wain Wood and Dead Woman's Lane area.
You quickly leave the open fields and enter the woodland edge. The paths are generally well-marked bridleways and footpaths.
2. Wain Wood to Bunyan's Dell
Once inside Wain Wood, take the western woodland paths toward Bunyan's Dell.
This is the secluded hollow where John Bunyan is said to have preached illegally in the 17 th century. It's atmospheric rather than dramatic — a quiet wooded depression.

3. Bunyan's Cottage

Continue east/south-east through the wood on the internal tracks. The traditional Bunyan's Cottage lies among the woodland cottages within Wain Wood. It is a private residence, so should only be viewed from public rights of way.

This middle section of the walk is the prettiest with:

- mature beech woodland,
- old boundary banks,
- occasional open views.

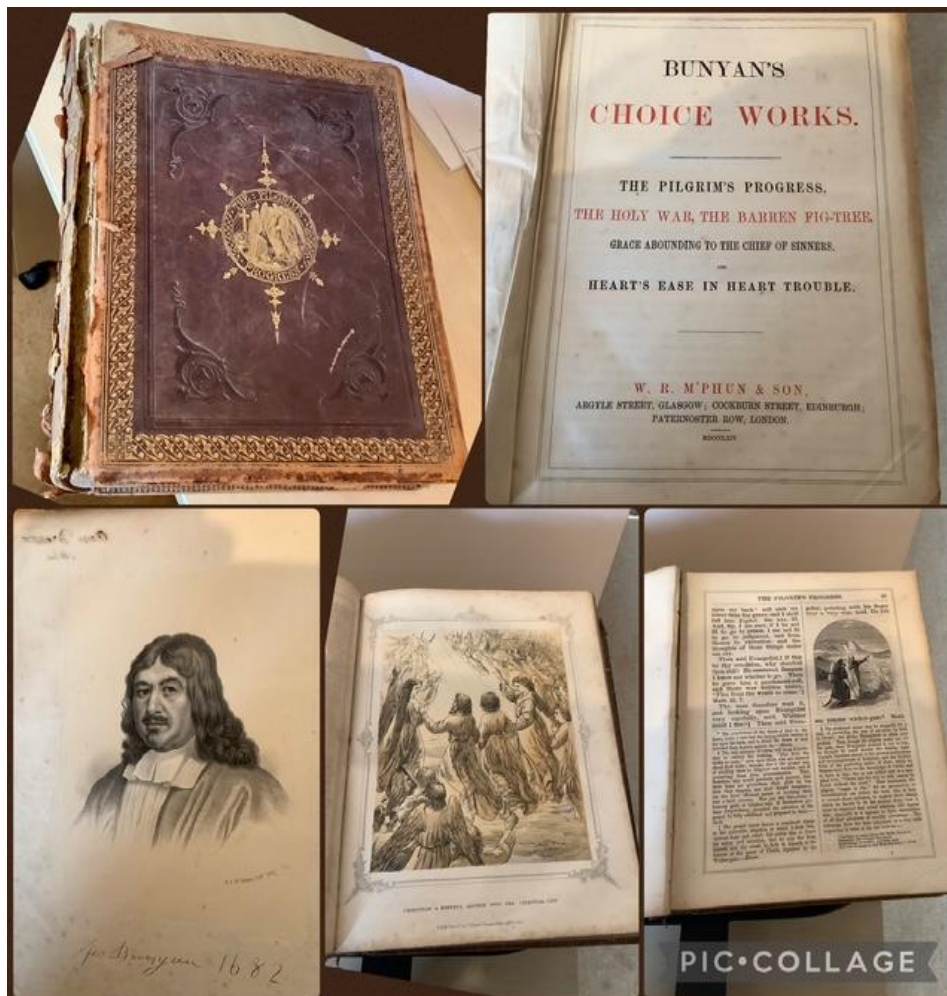
4. Return loop via southern edge of Wain Wood

Rather than retracing your steps, continue south-west along the woodland edge paths, loop around the southern side of the wood, then pick up footpaths north-westwards back toward Preston.

You'll emerge back into open farmland with good views toward the Chiltern edge and Hitchin area. The Red Lion pub at the start and end of the walk is an ideal place for refreshment.

John Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress - an early edition

One of our steering group members, Andrew Wearmouth, has this amazing family heirloom copy of The Pilgrim's Progress and other works and is happy to share images of it with you.



Pilgrim's Progress - 1864 printing, with tooled pigskin cover

What is happening at Oughtonhead Springs?

Given the prevalence of pollution incidents, supply outages and what appear to be undeserved rewards to water company executives and shareholders, it's hard to say anything positive about water companies without opening oneself to charges of naivety. Nevertheless, I might have some observations to help restore the balance.

In 2023 we invited Sarah Perry, River Catchment Coordinator of the Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust, to speak about chalk streams at our AGM. Unfortunately, due to internet problems, Sarah's talk was something of a gallop, but she did provide us with her slides, which are accessible on [our website](#)¹ and which provide some useful background.

Chalk rivers are very rare globally. There are well over 200 of them, and the majority are in the southeast of the UK, an area of relatively low rainfall when compared with other parts of the country. Hitchin is surrounded by a number of springs. By the time water emerges from a spring, such as at Oughtonhead, the rain has permeated through the soil and into an aquifer in the chalk. The slight acidity the water possesses due to the carbon dioxide in the atmosphere is neutralised by the chalk. This creates unusual conditions supporting diverse communities of organisms not often found elsewhere. The health of the Oughton is doubly important because it helps to maintain the wetland of Oughtonhead Common – the largest area of wetland in Hertfordshire – which is a Local Nature Reserve, owned and managed by North Herts Council. On the northern side of the river is what, until recently, was the Middlesex Wildlife Trust's Oughtonhead Nature Reserve. The management of this has now reverted to the landowner.

Affinity Water has a long-standing abstraction licence allowing it to take up to 450 cubic metres per day from a borehole in the aquifer about 200m west of Oughtonhead Springs. From 2013, nitrate levels were too high for the water from this borehole to be fit for use as drinking water, so there has been no abstraction, at least for most of the period from then until the present. This has led to further pressure on other sources in the Hitchin area. Doubtless the problem has been exacerbated by the number of new housing developments in recent years, and the large development at Highover Farm will increase demand further. Water companies have an obligation to supply water and sewerage services for new developments, so it was to be expected that Affinity Water would attempt to obtain planning permission for a denitrification plant at some stage. An [application from the water company](#)² in 2021 was permitted in June 2022.

In preparing this article, I have struggled to find clear understandable information to demonstrate that Affinity Water's investment is bringing a benefit to the River Oughton and its associated nature reserves. It appears that I am not alone. Apart from the Wildlife Trusts, numerous organisations are keen to preserve and enhance chalk streams, including the water companies. However, according to the Chalk Stream Restoration Group's [Annual Review of its Restoration Strategy for 2024/25](#)³, first published in 2021:

“There has been substantial investment by the water industry in the period 2020-25 and record levels of investment are planned for the next 5-year period. Despite that, it is often hard to report what the benefits of that investment have been as information is not presented in an accessible way or is simply not available.”

Perhaps one way in which Affinity Water invested in chalk streams is via an Abstraction Incentive Mechanism (AIM), the [most recent report](#)⁴ of which covers the years 2023-24. The aim of this mechanism is to encourage water companies to minimise extraction at times of drought

from vulnerable sources like that at Oughtonhead. As I understand it, some of the water that would have been used to supply consumers can be diverted into the river to enhance flow and to avoid the possibility that the wetland will dry out. This has been doubly important following the collapse of the weir at Westmill in 2022, which increased flow of water downstream of the mill, thus raising the possibility that the [wetland would become drier](#)⁵.

Reading the AIM report, I find it hard to say whether water from the borehole was being used in this way (which the report calls augmentation) when the report was compiled. Surely it would be possible to say when augmentation happened, for how long and what proportion of the daily 450 cubic metres of water was diverted into the river. I am not even sure whether the denitrification plant is operating to enable the Oughtonhead borehole to supply drinking water yet.



The large green denitrification plant and chemical storage at the Oughtonhead pumping station

In the absence of clear information, I can only report what I have seen for myself. The denitrification plant appears to be complete, but it is impossible to tell whether it is fully functioning, and I have never been able to find anybody there to ask. Affinity Water is attempting to create an 'area managed for nature' to the north of the denitrification plant which is encouraging such species as hawthorn and includes bird and bat boxes. Unfortunately, it is possible for motor cyclists to gain access to the area and on at least one occasion in February, several motor cyclists were in the process of churning up some of the grassland there. Water monitoring points have been installed – for example, one in the wetland next to the track alongside the Oughton to the east of the pool known locally as The Chalky, and another in the field to the west of the Temple End pumping station on the road from Charlton to Preston. I think the purpose of these is to assess the water level in the aquifer at these points, but am not sure. On three occasions during the recent dry period, I have noticed unusually large volumes of water welling-up from the normally placid Oughtonhead Springs. I have never seen this before.

A few weeks ago, I spoke to a hi-vis-clad man who was floundering around in the water trying to measure the flow at the spring in its placid phase. Repeated efforts were meeting with failure

(the flow was very small) and he was attempting to get some sort of reading by corralling the water by means of branches which were lying around. His attempts did not seem very scientific, and he didn't seem to know very much about Affinity Water's activities, the river or the status of the wetland.



Oughtonhead springs in its placid phase

If it is the case that flow in the river is being bolstered by water diverted from the domestic water supply, that must surely be a good thing for the health of the river and the nearby wetland. As an example of the effectiveness of Affinity Water's attempts to protect the wetland and the river, I am forced to agree with the Chalk Stream Restoration Group's conclusion that it is unclear what the effect of Affinity Water's investment actually is. It would be good to have information that is current, detailed and authoritative, yet easy to understand showing the anticipated benefits that this

investment should bring.

1. Chalk River Conservation; working with landowners on a catchment scale:
<https://www.hitchinforum.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/Chalk-River-Catchment-Conservation-Hitchin-Forum-Nov-2023.pdf>
2. Minutes of North Hertfordshire's Planning Control Committee meeting Thursday 23rd June 2022:
<https://democracy.north-herts.gov.uk/mgAi.aspx?ID=12977>
3. Chalk Stream Restoration Group's Annual Review of its Restoration Strategy for 2024/25:
<https://catchmentbasedapproach.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/CaBA-Chalk-Stream-Annual-Review-Executive-Summary.pdf>
4. Affinity Water: Abstraction Incentive Mechanism- Methodology and Abstraction in 2023-2024:
<https://www.affinitywater.co.uk/docs/reports/2024/AIM-performance-2023-2024-annual-report.pdf>
5. Oughtonhead Common Greenspace Action Plan 2022-2027:
<https://www.north-herts.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2023-01/Oughtonhead%20Common%20GAP%202022-27%20Final.pdf>

Bill Sellicks – Co-Chair

Scrap Lorries - Councils Ignored Residents' Concerns

Hitchin Forum, along with other organisations and individuals, has been concerned for many years about the number of large lorries going to and returning from the two scrapyards off Wallace Way and Cadwell Lane, Hitchin. According to a traffic study commissioned by the then owners in October 2019, the numbers of HGVs for the Wallace Way scrapyard alone were 236 for a weekday.

This is a very serious matter for the people of Hitchin, and it lowers the quality of life in large parts of the town. Quite apart from the danger, nuisance and pollution caused by fires on the processing sites themselves, the hazards posed by pieces of scrap flying off lorries, pollution from their exhausts and rubber tyres, vibration in dwellings and general fear-inducing vehicle noise are a constant worry for residents and other road users.

This is all happening in a residential environment where residents are living their lives bringing up their children. Is this really acceptable in 21st century Britain?

With the help of Forum member Cllr Ian Albert, we enquired about permitted numbers and were astonished to learn that in 2022 the permitted throughputs for the Wallace Way site were given a huge increase by the Environment Agency. **This was from 1,250 to 2,000 tonnes per day and from 285,000 to 500,000 tonnes per year, being increases of 60% and 75% respectively.**

The Environment Agency, which grants the permits, has advised us that it asked the then North Hertfordshire District Council and Hertfordshire County Council specifically for their views on these increases but received no comments from either council. The increases were apparently approved with no thought of residents' concerns regarding unacceptable impacts on local roads at the existing levels of throughput, never mind if that throughput was increased by 60% and 75%.

We are further astonished to be told that council officers did not even tell their councillors that the EA was asking for comments on the application to increase the scrap throughput. If this is true we consider that our councillors have grounds on which to challenge the decision or at the very least to review the decision-making process that was followed.

This apparent failure of either council to respond is extraordinary as the scrapyards and the large lorries going to and coming from them have been a source of complaints to the councils by residents for many years. In particular, in January 2021 the councils were sent the Grove Road Industrial Area Petition, which painstakingly catalogued the problems residents were having with HGVs from the two scrapyards – including danger to pedestrians.

For the moment, we understand that the present operator of the Wallace Way scrapyard complies with the lower limits of 1,250 tonnes per day and 285,000 tonnes per year. However, we believe that the present or future operators would be at liberty to increase throughput to the higher figures.

Why did the councils fail to comment on these large increases, despite all the representations from residents?

What is going to be done to reduce the permitted tonnages at the very least to the previous lower limits and ultimately to get these HGVs off Hitchin's residential streets?

Neil Dodds – member of Hitchin Forum Steering Group

Notice Board

New Local Plan – Scoping Consultation

At the next Hitchin Community Forum meeting – time and venue details below -participants will be asked to contribute on the following topics:

- How the public would like to be involved in shaping the Local Plan
- What key issues the Local Plan should address
- What should be included in the overall vision for North Herts

Four and Twenty Blackbirds

Hitchin Forum is delighted to host a presentation by Hitchin author, editor and Guardian Country Diarist, Nic Wilson on Tuesday 21st July at 7.30pm in the Lucas Room at Hitchin Town Hall. 'Four and Twenty Blackbirds' will explain how to create a bird-friendly garden that sings in every season. Land Beneath the Waves, Nic's first book, was published last year to wide acclaim, and there will doubtless be a chance to ask questions both about her talk and her book during the event.



Tickets will cost £5, and all proceeds will go to Hitchin's Triangle Garden Community. Find out more about Nic and her many activities and interests by visiting her website <https://nicwilson.co.uk/>

Dates for your Diary

Hitchin Councillor Surgeries. Hitchin Market Place.	10.30 am to 12 noon	First Saturday of every month.
Autumn Litter pick.	10 am to 12 noon	Sunday 18 th October
Talk by Nic Wilson: 'Four and Twenty Blackbirds'. Lucas Room at Hitchin Town Hall.	7.30 pm	Tuesday 21 st July
Hitchin Community Forum. Hitchin Town Hall. <ul style="list-style-type: none">• New Local Plan – scoping consultation• Grant presentations	6.45 pm for 7 pm start	Tuesday 2 nd June
Great Big Green Week, including a screening of 'Power Station' at Letchworth Broadway on Wednesday 10 th June. https://www.greatbiggreenweek.com/		6 th to 14 th June