

NEWSLETTER

September - October 2026 No. 193

Thoughts from the Co-Chair

I was one of only a few who attended the latest 'Hitchin Community Forum' – a meeting of local councillors at Hitchin Town Hall. And it was very good! Council officers attended to do presentations on three topics of interest.

It started with an update, feedback and discussion on the Green Space Consultation. One of the emerging themes is the need for more trees. There was a brief diversion to Oughtonhead and the long-awaited resolution of the problems with the 'waterfall' which they are working on. Really.

The Riverside Walk now seems to be getting sorted. Planning permissions need to be applied for and granted but the hope is that work will begin on that by next spring.

The process of developing the Local Plan is under way with information on the Council's website (<https://www.north-herts.gov.uk/new-local-plan>). The current stage in that process is a consultation (lasting until 25th November) on the sites that have been suggested by potential developers (<https://www.north-herts.gov.uk/call-sites>). It is time for us all to have a look and comment on those sites. If you do make comments, please send a copy of them to us at planning@hitchinforum.org.uk ! We will be assessing all sites and sharing the results with members, well before the deadline, before submitting them to the council.

Our Town Centre Manager then gave a brilliant blast of news about recent events in the town, ending with an understandable moan about the Queen Street roadworks, lasting three months up to Xmas, with no prior consultation with him.

The grant applications were inspiring! They included Caring Herts <https://caringhertscic.co.uk/>, which was set up earlier this year to replace the service run by the local hospice to provide "Wellbeing Hubs and the Healthy Memory Café across North Hertfordshire and Stevenage, providing safe, inclusive environments where people can build friendships, access support and enhance their wellbeing". Also, GRIT (Growing Resilience in Teens) <https://gritcharity.org/> is all about supporting 11- to 24-year-olds. A crucial service after the decline of so many youth support activities.

In closing, the problem of HGVs and the metal recycling companies was raised. Councillor Ian Albert mentioned meetings he and our MP held with the County Council and the Environment Agency and also continuing contact with Global Ardour, one of the metal recycling companies. The next Community Forum will include discussion on the Health Impact Assessment concerning HGVs and possible short- and long-term action. Put the next one in your diary, details of which are in the Dates for your Diary section at the end of this newsletter.

Meanwhile I hope you find items of interest in this newsletter. Brent has written an excellent guest piece with detailed observations about the town centre over many decades. This inevitably leads into thoughts about any possible redevelopment in the Churchgate area.

Andrew, with the experience of a former council officer, considers the local government reorganisation.

Bill continues to follow the flight of the Luton Airport expansion, with LADACAN now turning attention to Heathrow – the promised landing of economic growth or a pothole of empty promises?

Stuart asked for feedback on this two-monthly publication and we are grateful for the positive responses from a few – but always keen to hear more from this readership!

Mike Clarke – Co-Chair

Litterpick

The Forum's autumn event will take place on Sunday 18th October between 10.00 and 12.00. As I've noted previously, we tend to be supported by upwards of 120 volunteers, and I'm frequently contacted by people wanting to join us, often as a result of posts on our Facebook page and website. My contact list is now approaching 300, so it's hardly surprising that volunteer numbers are growing. We tackle something like 15 different areas throughout the town. If you'd like to join us, especially if there's an area that you would like to improve, please email me at hflitterpick@gmail.com. Invitations have already been sent to contacts but there's still time to get involved.



Bill Sellicks – Co-Chair

Hitchin Town Centre – a personal view by Brent Smith

Hitchin town centre has weathered the decline in town centres far better than most, but resting on past success is no longer an option. Over thirty years ago, a group of us formed Hitchin Town Centre Initiative in response to rising vacancies, paving the way for being able to have town centre managers and today's Business Improvement District (BID). We are lucky to have the enthusiastic Danny Pearson tcm@visithitchin.com as our present Town Centre Manager.

We recognised early on that hospitality and community services had to step in where traditional retail was reducing. Today, we face an equally pivotal turning point.

The days of traditional town centre retail dominance are gone. The town being rammed on our Tuesday Market Days for the livestock auctions in the Lairage (I am not old enough to have seen them in Bancroft!), rows of buses off Queen Street bringing people in from the villages to the market, and day-long sales at Jacksons now all belong to history, outpaced by supermarkets, retail parks with effortless free parking, Amazon and other e-commerce giants. Town centres have been further hamstrung by outdated business rates, a disparity glaringly obvious when comparing the rates paid by retailers in Hitchin versus nearby out-of-town parks. We have lost all our fishmongers and all but one of our specialist haberdashers and butchers. Private equity buyouts have gutted national chains which were trading successfully in our town.

The future demands an entirely different blueprint. As property developer Sir Stuart Lipton has argued, the high street must become Britain's modern village green: a social contract rather than a purely commercial pitch. His ideal breakdown offers a practical template, with which I broadly agree:

- One Third Retail: Independent shops and specialist stores that cannot be replicated online in addition to the national multiples that we will retain.
- One Third Hospitality: Cafés, restaurants, and al fresco dining that bring energy to the streetscape.
- One Third Civic & Community Infrastructure: GP surgeries, diagnostic clinics, library (which we have), flexible workspaces, and childcare facilities.

Locating healthcare and civic services centrally would drive the footfall that retail once provided, while tackling modern isolation. Mental health issues are exacerbated by impersonal, automated living - from unmanned self-checkouts to ghost-like delivery drivers. When we had the small Morrisons store in Bancroft it served as an unofficial community lifeline, where residents visited as much for a chat as for groceries. Human contact is vital for our mental health. Communal facilities like repair sheds, training kitchens, and accessible council hubs offer far more social value than isolation at home.

The redevelopment of the Churchgate Centre represents Hitchin's greatest opportunity in half a century. Built in the late 1960s, it isolated our historic market and has blighted the town for decades. With North Herts Council having repurchased the leasehold, the site must not be squandered on short-sighted profit or packed with residential flats.

Back in the 1960s our councillors were convinced that Hitchin needed a modern shopping centre to remain viable. Sadly, the scheme was poorly executed. Cheaply constructed and badly designed, its lease terms effectively prevented improvements being financially viable. It separated the market from the core of the town. Worse still is what the town lost in assembling its site. Not only the Spurrs Department Store which framed the eastern side of Market Place

but also the St Andrews School and the buildings which fronted Biggin Lane. The only good thing that I can think of about Churchgate is the rather splendid "Market Development" mural by Anthony Hollaway above its entrance.

Between Hitchin, Ickleford, and St Ippolyts, the immediate population is over 42,000, swelling to roughly 60,000 when accounting for the surrounding villages which look towards our town. These numbers will swell by 2,000 – 4,000 on just the known new developments.



*The cottages demolished in the 1960s. The attractive Victorian building with patterned brickwork on the far side of the river was St Andrew's School, demolished at the same time.
Photographs courtesy of North Herts Museum.*

Combined residential and commercial property across the core area represents an estimated asset base of £10 billion. Investing in generous public open space - much like Central Park uplifts the real estate value of the whole of Manhattan - creates long-term economic yield through council tax and commercial vitality. We should prioritise open space, creating pedestrian-focused areas built for outdoor dining and year-round gathering. The one upside of climate change is the better weather for enjoying the town centre. We must address persistent infrastructure delays, from paving maintenance to stalled riverside access, and restore genuine civic pride. The policy of Herts County Council carrying out “temporary” repairs to pavements by removing the existing paving and filling in with tarmac has given us a “missing tooth” appearance which is unsightly. Many of these temporary repairs are over ten years old. And they make no sense economically. We have seen perfectly good pavements which only needed re-bedding. I have made attempts to discover whether there is a store of these, carefully marked up with their previous locations awaiting being used in their “permanent” repair, but suspect that they have all been disposed of.

While Hitchin's wider town centre maintains strong occupancy, the High Street itself is faltering. It has become noticeably shabby. Even with rents having fallen by about 40% in the last few years, it has failed to draw a coherent, vibrant mix of independent businesses. The southern end of Bancroft has become the de facto High Street. It urgently needs to be part of a coordinated master plan rather than piecemeal survival.

Our public realm needs TLC. Our pavements are in need of repair and renewal, as is our street furniture. It is sad that the Council chose not to act on David Morgan's proposal to take the opportunity of the recent renovation work to have trees planted in Hermitage Road.



David Morgan's proposal for trees in Hermitage Road. Visual by Mark Werne.

It would be great to stop the centre being used for through traffic. If Brand Street were made one-way (up the hill) there could be a single-track road, similar to High Street, accessed by a left turn from Hermitage Road. This would allow the section of Bancroft between Hermitage Road and Brand Street to be made into a wide piazza (suited to my suggestion for the location of the market and its Saturday expansion) and end-on car parking, with trees between bays in Brand Street. This scheme would ease traffic in Bancroft – currently akin to a slalom – by only having northbound traffic coming from Hermitage Road with southbound traffic having to turn left into Hermitage Road.

Cycling should be encouraged and a secure bicycle parking compound provided.

Hitchin is a market town and safeguarding that identity must be central to any redevelopment of Churchgate. Hitchin Markets Ltd have done an admirable job keeping trade alive, but decades of unresolved planning have cast a long shadow over the market. Earmarking the lower Portmill Lane car park for residential flats would be a mistake; it is the natural location for a purpose-built home for the market's secure core.

My proposal, developed with Michael Collins, presents a practical, cost-effective blueprint with substantial benefits for the town:

- Moving to lower Portmill Lane positions traders right beside Bancroft – at the town's highest footfall – ensuring that the market can genuinely flourish rather than just survive.
- The proposal relies exclusively on council-owned land, eliminating the need for prolonged third-party acquisitions. Bancroft already needs repaving, and the 50-year-old stalls require replacement regardless.
- Because the construction would occur away from the current footprint, traders would avoid disruptive temporary relocations (the cause of most market failures). The final transition could take place across regular non-market days, allowing trade to reopen without a single day being missed.

- Moving the market footprint vacates the market's existing area, yielding an estimated net gain of 30 parking spaces overall and freeing up the Churchgate site.
- Its permanent covered core would expand outward along Portmill Lane and into Bancroft on peak trading days, with Farmers' Markets still along the river. This flexible footprint would end the perception of empty stalls on quieter days, presenting a busy, thriving scene year-round. A tensile roof could be provided as a centrepiece, which could be used outside market trading hours for community events and evening food courts.
- Such a contemporary tensile roof structure would also screen unsightly rear views of the Bancroft shops while providing dependable weather protection.
- Opening a café within the Cloisters would secure a neglected heritage building. Overlooking St Mary's and the river, this gateway site would transform into a vibrant public asset rather than a neglected shell.

I believe that relocating to Portmill Lane is the most financially viable and logistically clean route to giving Hitchin the modern, resilient market it deserves.



The entrance from Bancroft with demountable stalls for the Saturday markets



Aerial view of the market

The Biggin must not be overlooked in the Churchgate master plan. Hitchin United Charities assisted Hitchin Urban District Council in assembling the land for the Churchgate site, there is now a generational opportunity to repay this help and to integrate this extraordinary asset into the heart of the new redevelopment.



Painting of the Elizabethan east elevation which I commissioned from our local artist, Arthur Siburn.

Dating from 1361, The Biggin is Hitchin's second-oldest surviving building. Despite its Grade II* listing, it now sits boarded up, damaged by vandalism, and on the National Heritage at Risk Register. Hitchin United Charities deserve immense credit having rescued it from near-ruin in 1908 at the request of the Charities Commission, fending off demolition in the 1950s and maintaining it in good condition whilst providing low-cost accommodation. Its upkeep has remained a continuous financial strain on the charity.

The current fallback plan, converting the building into luxury bed-sits, was conceived simply as a stopgap to fund essential structural maintenance. There is now the possibility of Historic England and other grants. The building deserves far more than residential subdivision. I have known the building throughout my years here, supervising the completion of work on it was my first assignment in 1965 when I arrived in Hitchin. It has remained my dream to have it as Hitchin's Visitor Centre. It is ideally located between St Mary's and the Hitchin British Schools Museum. Its ground floor could accommodate the visitor centre, café and shop – imagine tea on the lawn next to the river with the ghastly Churchgate gone. The six upper suites would become affordable artists' studios or small business offices, injecting daily activity and sustained rental income.

Leaving The Biggin isolated or locked behind private residential doors would repeat the mistakes of the 1960s. By placing this 14th-century landmark at the centre of the Churchgate project would safeguard its heritage and give the public a riverside asset worthy of the town's history.

Hitchin is a beautiful town, but what we love and enjoy has come through organic growth over more than a millennium. Some major projects have gone well. Frederic Seeböhm (we owe a great deal to Hitchin's public-spirited Quakers) donated his land to form Hermitage Road to provide an elegant drive from the town centre to the railway station and then to John Ray turning it into a shopping street in the 1920s. The Queen Street slum clearance was brutal but the scheme to reroute the river, embank it and create the wonderful views of the east end of St Mary's are now so important to us. But we lost a lot in the 1960s. The Hermitage Cinema replaced by a row of cheap ugly shops (two of which have now been rendered over – was any attempt made to have a cohesive scheme for the whole block?). The beautiful Hall House in Bancroft replaced by a Co-Op, which has itself been redeveloped since. The quirky range of medieval buildings at the junction of Portmill Lane with Bancroft replaced by the tile-hung monstrosity which tries to reference their multiple gabled roofs. The Waters Building replaced by the Safeway Supermarket (now, but perhaps not for much longer, Poundland). But none of these compare with the horror of Churchgate. When I opened my office in Market Place, I had to watch its completion and then had to look at it for about eight years until we moved to Tilehouse Street.

So, what are my conclusions regarding the redevelopment of Churchgate? It is essential to appoint a design team with vision and flair. We don't want something designed by a committee trying to reflect whatever comes out of public consultation – it needs to serve the Hitchin of the future. Prioritise beauty and joy. Create usable public open space, remember that the centre needs to be the focus of all who live in the town and its surrounding area. Look at the whole town and see what can be done to improve High Street. Don't only consider schemes designed to make a profit for whoever takes over the development, the land belongs to the town – as I have tried to set out above, the financial value of this site is small in comparison with the value of the whole town. Move the market to a new site before the redevelopment starts – most markets that suffer temporary relocation wither and fail. Give The Biggin the use and setting that it deserves.

Anyone who has visited the beautiful city of Ljubljana will know of the work of Jože Plečnik. Tempted back from his successful career in Vienna and Prague back to Ljubljana in 1921 to teach at the University of Ljubljana and given the chance to replan the city, he made it into what it is today but not at great cost. His now famous "Three Bridges" was cheaper than the proposal that it replaced. Good design is not more expensive and its results enrich our lives.

It is understood that North Herts Council (NHC) propose to team up with a development partner. This is a very poor idea. The interests of the town cannot align with those of a developer. NHC should be focusing on what is best for the town, whilst the developer must be looking towards profit (nothing wrong with that, it's just not appropriate for this situation). Have we learnt nothing from the debacle with the Simons Group? They just strung things out while waiting to sign up an "anchor" tenant. We would be in a real pickle now if their scheme had been built.

Ending on some great news. We are getting a branch of the Danish store Søstrene Grene in the former Morrisons unit in Bancroft. Danish design at bargain prices. I love their salted liquorice (the layout of their shops is done to lead you round rather like IKEA, but you finish in sweets rather than meatballs!).

I must stress that this article represents my personal opinion and does not necessarily reflect the views of Hitchin Forum. I would welcome feedback, either through Hitchin Forum or directly to my email brentwalden7@gmail.com

Brent Smith – member of Hitchin Forum

Luton Airport Expansion

All attempts on the part of the Luton and District Association for the Control of Aircraft Noise (LADACAN) and other local groups to prevent the grant of the Development Consent Order for the proposed expansion of Luton airport have now failed. An account of the final stages of the process can be found here.

<https://ladacan.org/ladacan-to-consider-appeal-of-high-court-ruling/>

LADACAN has now turned its attention to other issues, one of which is the proposed expansion of Heathrow. The project will inevitably have consequences affecting other London airports including Luton. In a remarkably well-researched draft response to the government's consultation on the Heathrow expansion, which closed on 1st September, LADACAN identified a wide range of issues which have caused public concern. Among these were the validity of assumptions about jobs generated based on a methodology dating back to 2009, the government's continued reliance on the belief that 'sustainable aviation fuels' will enable aviation to effectively reduce its carbon emissions, and failure to address the worsening noise environment for those under the flightpath. A summary of LADACAN's submission can be found here

<https://ladacan.org/governments-own-evidence-undermines-heathrow-expansion-case/>

At the end of that article is a link that will take you to LADACAN's full submission document.

On an anecdotal level, a recent trip to Scandinavia prompted some thoughts about Luton Rising's predicted job increases which Luton airport provides, and which rely on the same 2009 assumptions used by Heathrow. Waiting for a flight from Helsinki to London, I had ample time to watch the arrival, preparation and departure of a Finnair aircraft. The entire process took about 40 minutes and was a very slick operation. The workers were unhurried, and much of the time they were sitting in stationary vehicles or chatting. I didn't count them, but something like 10 people were involved alongside about half a dozen specialised vehicles. As far as I could tell, just one person was involved in safety checks. As a crude estimate, I would say that each worker was actively involved for 10-20% of the 40 minutes the team were working on the aircraft.

The previous day I was crossing a road at a busy junction in Helsinki. The road was cobbled and the kerbstones had been damaged to the extent that they were trip hazards. Having reached the safety of the pavement I turned to find that I was being followed by a 6-wheeled food delivery robot. After a couple of abortive attempts to deal with the broken kerbstone, its third try was successful. At the moment, these robots



don't move very fast, and I suspect they are little more than a gimmick, but their ability to cope with the obstacle was impressive.

Such a machine could I think cope, not only with the flat concrete surfaces of an airport, but also the relatively simple and repetitive tasks currently performed by ground crews. Other industries already exploit the sort of technologies which could be applied in an aviation context. Combine harvesters are now capable of harvesting vast fields of wheat with massive precision using GPS guidance, simultaneously checking the moisture content of the grain and bailing the straw for easy collection later. Such machines are controlled by one worker. It isn't difficult to envisage the range of hoists, lifts and towing vehicles currently employed at airports being controlled by AI rather than human workers. Tokyo's Haneda Airport is trialling robots for some [baggage handling tasks](#)¹ – apparently to make the workers' jobs easier.

It is hard to believe that similar technologies will not soon be employed to cut labour expenses incurred by ground crew operations at many airports, just as check-in jobs have almost disappeared over recent years. Unsurprisingly, technological advances mean that job forecasts are inflated for the purpose of justifying airport expansion in the full knowledge that many jobs will soon cease to exist.

1. Japan Airlines Trials Humanoid Robots as Ground Handlers. BBC News 26th April 2026: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cpwp87j1llvo>

Bill Sellicks – Co-Chair

Local Government Reorganisation, A Personal View

In April 1974, England's local District Councils were deemed too small to cater for the growing needs of their populations. The reorganisation amalgamated districts into new larger areas, while keeping their functions and those of the County Councils unchanged. Thus, Hitchin Urban, Hitchin Rural, Letchworth, Baldock and Royston became North Herts District Council (now North Herts Council).

This reorganisation was sensible: the new larger Districts had a greater population and financial base, which enabled them to offer a greater standard of service. However, their functions remained as before: housing, environmental health, planning, and civic functions such as playing fields and car parking. The County remained as it was, being responsible for highways, education, social services and other county-wide matters.

The current government now wishes for a new reorganisation which destroys the County Council and creates unitary authorities out of the districts. Four such unitaries are proposed:

1. West Herts, comprising Dacorum and St Albans City and District,
2. South-West Herts, comprising Hertsmere, Three Rivers and Watford,
3. Central Herts, comprising North Herts, Stevenage and Welwyn Hatfield, and
4. East Herts and Broxbourne, comprising Broxbourne and East Herts.

I have two concerns with these proposals. First is the efficiency of the new councils. To quote Councillor Steve Jarvis, Leader of Herts County Council, *"they have chosen the most disruptive way in which this... could be done..."* and *"This means splitting the teams that deliver care for elderly and disabled people, the teams who support children with SEND and the teams who fix*

our roads into four, making it more challenging and more expensive to deliver these vital services” (quotation from HCC website).

Councillor Jarvis has hit the nail on the head. The proposal effectively reverses the best of the 1974 reorganisation, by reducing the size of the areas needing these services. The ability to consider matters on a County-wide basis will be lost.

My second concern relates to how the county is proposed to be divided. Hertfordshire is a diverse County, ranging from London suburbia in the south to the rural areas in the north. The proposals for the west of the County (1 and 2 above) reflect this, generally dividing the County in a north/south manner, but those for the centre and east do not, splitting the County east/west.

What does Broxbourne, abutting London, have in common with East Herts, which stretches up to the Cambridgeshire and Essex borders? More to the point for Hitchin, what does North Herts have in common with Welwyn Hatfield, which stretches down to its boundary with the London Borough of Enfield? Does Hitchin want its planning decisions to be made (or influenced) by councillors from the outskirts of London?

Faced with legal challenge from some Councils, the government has now withdrawn the proposals in some Counties, while “reviewing” the plans for others, including Hertfordshire. It is understood that the overall reorganisations proposed may not now take place in the life of this Parliament.

I can only hope that common sense will prevail: don’t mess with something that isn’t broken, for the sake of it, and if a reorganisation has to proceed, divide the County on a north-south basis, not east-west.

Andrew Wearmouth - Member of Steering Group, and retired Valuer at Herts County, Senior Estates Officer at North Herts and Head of Estates at St Albans

Our Newsletter – Your Feedback

Thank you very much to the members who provided much appreciated comments on the nature, frequency and subject matter of our newsletter. The main message seems to be that it is well received in its current form, so we will continue as we are.

One point that was mentioned several times was the relative lack of awareness of the www.hitchinforum.org.uk website. It has a disarmingly simple front page, but from there you are able to gain access to information on our current and past campaigns as well as full access to all issues of the newsletter from 2011 onwards. Please do have a look and let us know how it can be improved.

Stuart Howarth – Hitchin Forum newsletter editor

Notice Board

Subscriptions

Members are reminded that subscriptions for the coming year are due on 1st November 2026. These are payable at a rate of £10 per individual, £15 per organisation and £20 per business.

Many of you pay by standing order and that is welcomed as it makes it easier for me to manage.

If you don't pay by standing order and would like to do so, please contact me at kenchapman48@googlemail.com and I will let you have a form for submission to your bank.

Alternatively, if you would like to pay via internet banking our account is with Lloyds Bank, Sort Code number 30-94-30, Account number 02256820 in the name of Hitchin Forum.

If you wish to pay by cheque, it can be sent to me at 5, Claymore Drive, Ickleford, Hitchin, Herts SG5 3UB, again payable to Hitchin Forum.

I look forward to receiving your annual subscription.

Ken Chapman - Honorary Treasurer

Hitchin Forum Annual General Meeting.

Hitchin Forum AGM will be held on Wednesday 21st October.. Following the formal business, our (relatively) new Town Centre Manager, Danny Pearson, will be sharing what he and the Visit Hitchin team have been up to this year and some thoughts about the future of the town centre. The talk is entitled **A conversation about Hitchin. Where we are and where we are going.** Danny will be happy to take questions as we go along.

Dates for your Diary

Hitchin Councillor Surgeries. Hitchin Market Place.	10.30 am to 12 noon	First Saturday of every month.
North Herts Council Community Forum. Hitchin Town Hall	7 pm	Tuesday 8 th December
Autumn Litter Pick.	10 am to 12 noon	Sunday 18 th October
Hitchin Forum AGM		Wednesday 21 st October