

## ***THE HITCHIN SOCIETY***

*Hitchin's Civic Society since 1962*

[www.hitchinsociety.org.uk](http://www.hitchinsociety.org.uk)

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The Hitchin Society is affiliated to  
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Registered with the civic trust

### **How to contact The Hitchin Society:**

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## **THE HITCHIN SOCIETY**

### **NEWSLETTER**

September 2005



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### Forthcoming Meetings

**October 17<sup>th</sup>** Cardington & Its Airships; A Talk by Gp-Captain P. A Garth (retd.)

**November 21<sup>st</sup>** A Journey Along the Fosse Way from Cirencester to Lincoln  
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### HERITAGE OPEN DAYS – 8-10 September 2005 – Jill Calder

Heritage Open Days in Hitchin were organised by the Hitchin Society in conjunction with the Civic Trust, which in turn works with English Heritage on this annual and countrywide event.

Properties which are not normally open to the public, open their doors on these days, so that the public can see the treasure of our heritage.

This year we were very pleased to include St. Ippolyts and Ickleford churches in our list for the first time, and we also included three town walks. The walks were led on Friday by Alan Fleck and on Saturday and Sunday by Terry Knight. They were very well attended and were most interesting, advising about the history and the lovely historic buildings of Hitchin.

Members of Hitchin Society “manned” the Biggin and also the British Schools. In addition to St. Ippolyts and Ickleford churches, St. Mary’s, Holy Saviour and Tilehouse Baptist Churches were all open. Also the Town Hall and Hitchin Museum and Princess Helena College were open for visitors.

The properties and walks were well attended, particularly on Saturday. Sunday turned out to be very wet so, unfortunately, deterred visitors. However, overall it was a good weekend although numbers of visitors were down on last year, in spite of the very excellent publicity we received.

I would like to thank the members of the Heritage Open Days group – Pam Skeggs, Dorothy and Tony Sudweeks who helped me enormously with the publicity and arrangements. I would also like to thank NHDC who gave us a grant of £250 to help with our expenses.

### Chairman’s Comments

The Churchgate issue seems in great danger of going nowhere very fast. Having looked again at all the options, the Society is convinced that the renovation of the market on its existing site is an urgent necessity. So much so, that it cannot wait for protracted negotiations on the eventual future of Churchgate itself. Instead, we believe that the future of the market must be uncoupled from whatever is to happen to Churchgate. And on present form, it looks far from clear whether the Churchgate redevelopment or refurbishment options are sufficiently attractive to justify investment any time soon on a stand-alone basis .

Meanwhile, a broadly sensible Planning Brief has been drawn up by the Council to which the Society has commented constructively. It is hoped that this will be adopted without further delay to provide the necessary guidance to the urgent renovation of the market, the enhancement of the adjoining car parks, and any eventually redevelopment of Churchgate itself. But any further delay in securing the long-term future of the market would do the town a great disservice.

***The Churchgate issue .... going nowhere very fast***

At the same time the Museum Service has come under review; the last time was 1990. The proposal is currently that there should be one central museum in the District. Both Hitchin and Letchworth Museums were founded not by well-meaning Councils, but by individuals whose perceived that their town was unique, and wanted to show in what ways that was true. Hitchin Museum was strongly advocated by Reginald Hine as early as 1919, although it did not open for another 20 years. Letchworth Museum was founded largely at the behest of Percival Westell, a local natural historian. Both museums benefited immensely from the hard work and generosity of local people and philanthropists, and the local Councils ultimately took over the running of both of them.

It seems now that the Council has lost track of the major idea upon which all Museums are founded: they reflect their homes. Hitchin Museum reflects how Hitchin is, as Letchworth reflects several aspects of that town.

Hitchin contains many traces of its former trades and industries: many of its streets still have street furniture by Gatward, Innes or Kings. This Society has protested about the poor execution of the Sun Street and Bucklersbury enhancement scheme, and how one such drain was crudely concreted in. Almost a year on, Sun Street still has street furniture painted in the wrong colours, with the masking tape still in place, while recent visitors commented how appalled they were by the street clutter at the end of Sun Street. All this has been brought to the attention of the Council, all the way to the Chief Executive, but nothing has been done. The drain cover and the bollards are far from crucial to the life of the town, but every little loss diminishes us all: nibbled away like this, Hitchin is in danger of becoming no different to anywhere else.

In much the same way, putting Hitchin’s cultural history elsewhere robs Hitchin of it. The case for Letchworth is a little different, as the intervention of the Heritage Foundation in the 1970s caused a schism: the Council’s Museum reflects Letchworth before 1903, and the Archaeology of North Hertfordshire, whilst the Heritage Foundation’s own Museum portrays the development of the World’s First Garden City: this confuses everyone. Rectifying this nonsense would do everyone a favour.

Whilst other discussions aim to reduce dependence upon the motorcar in favour of public transport, the idea of a new, centralised museum will just lead to more travel for many museum visitors. In the absence of high quality, affordable public transport, this inevitably means still more dependence on the private car.

John Davies

### New members 2005/2006

A hearty welcome to our new members for 2005/6

- Mr O'Brian & Ms K Gummer Balmoral Road
- Mr K Page Orchard Road
- Mrs D Taplin Orchard Road
- Mr P Mackenzie Orchard Road

### Likely Ward Boundary Changes in Hitchin

Great Ashby is a part of the North Herts District which lies right on the border of Stevenage. It has expanded in the last couple of years, and needs its own ward councillors. The Boundary Committee is a central government organisation charged with ensuring electoral equality, and they have now looked at all wards in the District, as well as recommending the formation of a ward comprising Great Ashby, Graveley and Wymondley. This new ward will probably be called Chesfield.

The Boundary Committee's review makes recommendations which enable the formation of the Chesfield ward without increasing the overall number of Councillors – this means reducing the number of Councillors in Letchworth by one.

There are some implications for Hitchin. The Boundary Committee seeks to maintain equal numbers of electorate per councillor across all the wards, and changes of boundary are suggested to achieve this. In Hitchin this means increasing the size of Highbury Ward, and decreasing the size of Priory Ward – Hitchin Priory would no longer in fact be in Priory Ward, but in Highbury.

It is arguable whether such boundary changes have significant meaning to the electorate, beyond knowing who their ward Member is. Moving ward boundaries back and forth repeatedly surely does not help community cohesion.

### The Hitchin Society Outing, by Daphne Birch

The destination of this year's Hitchin Society Outing was the historic town of Warwick, founded in AD 914 by a daughter of Alfred the Great. In 1694 a fire destroyed much of the medieval town, and sadly only a few buildings of that era survived. These now contrast pleasantly with the elegant Georgian buildings which eventually replaced those that were destroyed.

Our first visit was to the Collegiate Church of St Mary with its magnificent Beauchamp Chapel which thankfully was saved from the effects of the fire. Much of the remainder of the church was however lost, but rebuilt in a remarkable mixture of gothic and renaissance styles.

The afternoon started with a guided tour of the town, with sights of fine medieval buildings including Oken's House, the home of a remarkable benefactor of Warwick, and past the exterior of Warwick Castle to the banks of the River Avon. A visit to Shire Hall and the Market Place followed, with the tour ending at the splendid medieval foundation of Lord Leycester Hospital. These former Collegiate buildings became, after the dissolution, a charity for former soldiers, which continues to this day to provide accommodation for retired service personnel. We were fortunate to be given a guided tour by the Master, a retired Colonel, who showed us not only the Chapel and Guildhall but also the Master's Garden, an award-winning historic walled garden at its best in the late afternoon sunshine. A day out to remember.

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Over the years the village shops have flourished competitively, but now only the old village stores remains, highly successful and the “fountain of knowledge” for all news, but the recent loss of the Post Office has been a blow to the village.

Like all villages a variety of businesses have existed over the years. Private butchers, bakers, The Forge, metalworks, coach building, undertakers, builders, coal merchants and village stores are just some of the older businesses that have thrived and in some cases still exist. Now car showrooms, glaziers, accountants, garden design are among the business community, dominated in size by Bowmans Mill.

Mills have a long family association with the village, with the Bowman family being closely associated with the business for nearly a century. The modern mill silos dominate the village skyline, and the mill these days possesses the most modern equipment to ensure a profitable and efficient business.

Farming has always continued to flourish for the families involved, and more recently one of the oldest farming traditions of lavender farming has been revived in the village. Cadwell Farm has since 2000 developed 12 acres and five varieties of lavender, producing handmade soap and body lotions, oils and dried lavender. The wonderful sight of the lavender growing can be seen for miles and reminds the walkers of the country delights.

### ***Cow Commoners Live Here....***

Finally Ickleford boasts within the village four Commons, Upper and Lower Greens and a variety of footpaths around the village enabling visitors to experience and enjoy the Flora, Fauna and Bird Life that can be found. The commons are looked after by residents whose properties have grazing rights historically attached to them, known as The Cow Commoners, With good husbandry and financial assistance the Commons have been cared for and established to their current levels.

Ickleford remains a village full of interest and character. Whilst many of the older generation who established much of the village have passed on, the interest has been maintained through other generations of established families, and made what it is today “A much sought after village”.

Philip J. Crowe  
Chairman – Ickleford Parish Council

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### **Hitchin Society Sweatshirts**

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### **Following Your Nose around Hitchin, by Pansy Mitchell**

I consider myself a very lucky and privileged person to have been born in Hitchin and to have known it as the real market town it was intended to be. To me, as a small child and growing up in the town, it was a friendly, safe, almost a magical place full of adventures. As the years go by the character of Hitchin has gradually died. So many of the noises and smells of the true market town have gone. Tuesdays were so exciting with the cattle market in Paynes Park and the market in the Market Square. The pubs were open all day and the coaches came in from surrounding villages so that the village women could do their weekly shop.

We always knew what was going on in the town by the smells that wafted over the town or by the shops that we passed. The most unpleasant smell was from Ransom’s Distillery when they were making cough medicine. I’m sure many people will remember other smells too: the lovely scent of lavender when the flowers were being harvested in then fields at to top of West Hill, the smell of leather from Russell’s tanyard, wood from Barker’s wood yard at the bottom of Hermitage Road, a meaty smell from the Bacon Factory in Nightingale Road, a soapy smell from the steam laundry in Queen Street, and so many more that were part of the character of the town.

Bob Early, who died in 1973, was the newspaper seller in the High Street and around the town centre. He was known as ‘Blind Bob’. He found his way around the town by his senses of smell and hearing. He collected his papers from Mrs. Harding’s in Tilehouse Street: when there was no sound of traffic he would cross the road and would smell the baking bread from Bliss’s bakehouse. Along Bucklersbury he would smell ale from the pubs, new clothes from Hawkins and milk from Squire’s Dairy. The smells from chemists’ shops, fishmongers, butchers, greengrocers, grocers, shoe menders and other shops would have told Bob whereabouts he was in the town. If he were alive today he would be completely lost.

I miss ‘Blind Bob’ and all the shops which are gone from the town – Spurrs, Nicholls, Munts, Garratts, Chalkleys, Cloutings, Tomlins, Paternoster & Hales, Maison Gérard – but mainly of course the cattle market with the noise and smell of the animals.

‘Nothing is forever’ is a well-known saying, and this is certainly true as far as the market town of Hitchin is concerned.



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## Encouraging Access to Hitchin

The Council have commissioned Harrison Webb Transport Planning Consultants to prepare a Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) setting out maximum parking standards for each of the four towns. This is to be compatible with Government guidance and provide a basis for varying actual parking provision according to non-car accessibility and other important sustainability parameters (the so-called zonal approach).

This work will support and contribute to the formulation of policies in the emerging Local Development Framework (the successor document to the Local Plan). The zonal approach to parking provision for new and/or re-developments is one of the objectives of the NHDC Car Parking Strategy adopted in June 2004. The approach is to be applied locally to the four towns within North Herts and will be based on the Hertfordshire County Council's (HCC) parking standards, as set out in *Hertfordshire Structure Plan Policy 25: Car Parking - Supplementary Planning Guidance: Parking Provision at New Development (adopted 18 December 2000) and accompanying Best Practice Guide*.

The Society's view is that until we have a usable and sustainable public transport system we should not be setting **maximum** parking standards (although this is already enshrined in planning policy). We must reduce car usage in Hertfordshire, but we must have positive as well as negative strategies to achieve this. Some of the village bus services are running with very few passengers, often actually empty.

High quality facilities for walking cycling and above all public transport are required before there can be any cut back in car parking provision. The County Council's idea that cutting back on parking capacity is a way of making public transport viable is just not practical. People would just go elsewhere where they can park. The real test is in the government's approach to public transport, and there is currently no hint whatever of a possibility that they will consider bus re-regulation - without it there is no possibility of bus services that will get people out of their cars.

### **... Tram Line for Hitchin....**

This is not just small-town thinking. There are several examples from all across Europe where governments have developed new and innovative transport systems: Florence is just one example:

Florence (pop 374,000) is to have three tram lines - line 1 is now under construction for 2008, and contracts have been placed for lines 2 and 3 for completion in 2009 serving the airport, the hospital and university areas.

Liverpool (pop 482,000) was all set to have three new tram lines. Construction on line 1 was to start last month for completion in 2008. The government has just pulled the plug on this one, with lines 2 and 3 (including serving the airport) now being totally off the agenda, with disastrous consequences for regeneration.

If this is the view for a major city in the UK, what hope can there be for small towns such as Hitchin? Until such cavalier attitudes change, we need to retain car parking capacity in Hitchin!

### **... we will be in touch with them!**

We have been informed that the consultants **may** be in touch with this and other societies. They may rest assured that we will be in touch with them!

## Ickleford – Past & Present

"Ickleford – a much sought after village" and "a vibrant village" are just two of the phrases describing this picturesque community which combines today's modern living with the historic buildings, paths and environmental surroundings that continue to provide the judges of 'The Village of the Year' competition with opportunities to present an annual award.

The Icknield Way, a former trading route and considered to be Britain's oldest road, intersects the village, with the parish boundaries being determined by River Oughton, River Hiz and the Bedford Road. The Icknield Way was used in early times as a through road, from its source in Norfolk to Dorset, for travellers, and excavations over the years have disclosed New Stone Age and Bronze Age communities as having established camps in the area.

### **All Roads Lead to Ickleford**

Since the early years of the twelfth century, the church of St. Katharine of Alexandria has stood in the centre of the village, from an initial simple building to its present imposing position, supported over the years by the community, and even now to have further improvements which are being funded by the residents, in order to comply with current legal requirements. On a historical point, the monks who built the church and the 'Old George', one of the four hostelrys in the village and next to the church, constructed a tunnel between the church and pub, but this has since been blocked up. According to records maintained during the Second World War, Randolph Churchill, son of the wartime leader, his wife and their baby Winston occupied the Rectory, with their baby being christened in the church. Whilst Sir Winston was never seen in Ickleford, his wife Lady Clementine was a frequent visitor over the years.

The present Ickleford School was built in 1848, and additions to the building were made over the years to provide its present day capacity of 210 pupils, and with a constant demand for places always outstripping availability. The survival of the school through two World Wars saw many changes, including the use of the land in the front of the school for growing food, as well as being very overcrowded at times as the result of local children and evacuees being accepted into the school. From the early 1960s extensions were made to provide extra classrooms, indoor toilets and recreational facilities. The school today boasts excellent I.T. equipment and has an excellent academic record.

Prior to 1924 many of the village functions were held in the school, but following the donation of land the current Village Hall was built and formally opened in December 1925. The Hall became an immediate asset to the village, being used as an extension to the school, apart from the many social functions provided by village organizations. Today the Hall is in steady use by all village organizations, as well as for Wedding receptions, Barn Dances, Harvest Suppers and in recent years the Pre-School group, so it has come full circle in terms of educational usage.

The Old George goes back to the 12<sup>th</sup> century when it was built by the Gilbertine monks. The following century it was home to a leper colony and it became an Inn about the 1600s. The Green Man was jointly purchased with the Manor of Ickleford in 1777, but was subsequently sold off as a single building and eventually taken over by McMullen's. The Plume of Feathers, previously a private house, has been serving ale since 1778, and is currently managed as a family business. Finally, The Cricketers, established in the 1800s, and was formerly a cottage known as "The Live & Let Die". The name change came about as the men of the house played cricket on 'Ickleford Common', as did many of the customers and the name has since remained. For many years two elderly ladies, total village characters, ran the pub and when they finally retired the ownership was passed on to their family. The pubs all have their histories, old stories and in many cases strong family connections over many years.