

# THE HITCHIN SOCIETY

## NEWSLETTER

JUNE 2007



The Town Hall, 1901, photo courtesy of Hitchin Museum

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## Editorial

### Changing Times

Recent concerns around the future use of the Hitchin Town Hall, and the Council's apparent lack of concern for the facility itself, led the Hitchin Society, the Hitchin Forum and the Hitchin Historical Society to write jointly to the District Council at the end of April. This was an unprecedented step, and indicates the level of concern felt by local residents.

Receipt of the letter has been acknowledged by the Chief Executive, who felt its content more appropriate for the concern of politicians than the executive. Response from members has been largely supportive.

The purpose of the letter was to seek a straightforward discussion about the Council's support for the town as a whole, and your committee are currently collating the various issues they seek to discuss. These will no doubt include the level of maintenance of the town centre, the quality of repairs to the Marketplace, the state of the Sun Street and Bucklersbury refurbishments (still with ponding on the pavements in rain, still with masking tape on the street furniture), and many more.

One of the issues which may arise is that of a Town Council. This Society's Committee is firmly of the opinion that with the present arrangements for local government in North Hertfordshire, a Town Council would constitute a major step backwards for the town. It would interpose a further layer of bureaucracy, and increased costs to the electorate, in order to make decisions about relatively minor issues. Such powers as do exist lie with the District Council, and a town council can do little other than comment on planning issues rather than vote on them, giving no improvement on the status quo.

It might have been very different if Hitchin had been granted a Town Council in 1974 when the Urban District Council was abolished. However, the opportunity was missed and the ownership of Hitchin's civic assets passed instead to the District Council, irreversibly putting them beyond the control of Hitchin people.

No apology is made for the inclusion once again of an article on the Planning Process. Notwithstanding changes made by central government very recently indeed, the power of local authorities to refuse applications for development is small, and based only on well-defined planning issues. Councillors have a fine line to tread on these matters, and have to balance a wide range of concerns whilst being seen to be totally impartial: it's not an easy job.

## **New members**

### **New Members**

A hearty welcome to our new members for 2007-8.

**Mrs K & Mr A Nicoll**  
**Mrs P Currie**  
**Mr M Elliott & Ms R Mclellan**  
**Ms I Leach**

**Mr Mrs C Wakefield**  
**Mr A Worbey**  
**Mr W Thorpe**  
**Ms S Bone**

## **The Society's Coach Outing to Norwich May 9<sup>th</sup> 2007**

We gathered at Woodside Car Park at 8.30am.: the weather was overcast, but there was no rain. We setting off, stopping at the Elveden Estate Café / Farm shop for a welcome cup of coffee. Half an hour later we were on our way to Norwich . The driver lost his way going into the city, as it is poorly signposted for coaches, but only arrived a few minutes late at the drop-off point.

An open-top provided the means to get around the city, for visits to the cathedral, the castle, the river and some of the very fine buildings – Guildhall, Dragon Hall and the Assembly House. We all made our own choice of lunch venue

The coach picked us up at 4.45pm for the journey home, just as it started to rain, as it did all the way home: we stopped off once again at Elvedon for refreshments and a chance to indulge at the Farm Shop. We arrived back in Hitchin before 8pm, having had a very enjoyable day.

### **The 2008 coach outing will be Stratford upon Avon**

Please make a note of the date. This year the outing had only 27 people on the bus, and a quarter of those were guests. Let's try and fill the coach in 2008!

## **Mrs Mitchell's Fruit Cake**

Following many favourable comments at the AGM, Mrs Mitchell has kindly consented to share her recipe for fruit cake.

Grease and line a 7" cake tin.

Into a saucepan mix 4oz. butter, 6oz. soft dark brown sugar, 4oz. cherries, 7oz. crushed pineapple and 12oz. mixed dried fruit.

If the mixture looks too dry, add pineapple juice or lemon juice.  
Bring to the boil and allow to cool.

Beat two eggs, and stir in.  
Add gradually 8oz. of self-raising flour and spices.

Cook for 1 hour 40 mins. at Gas Mark 2 or until a testing rod comes out clean.

## The Civic Trust and the Planning System

The Hitchin Society is affiliated to the Civic Trust, and it was thought appropriate to explain a little about the Trust and what it does.

The Civic Trust is an independent, national organisation with charitable status. It is the umbrella body for over 800 civic societies, representing over 250,000 individuals committed to improving and caring for places where people live and work.

It is the leading UK charity dedicated to bringing vitality, sustainability and high quality design to the built environment. The Trust works with people to promote thriving towns and villages, developing dynamic partnerships between communities, government and business to deliver regeneration and local improvement.

The Civic Trust has now joined a coalition of the UK's leading environmental and social organisations - the RSPB, CPRE, Friends of the Earth, Woodlands Trust, Ramblers Association, Wildlife Trust, Transport 2000 and the RTPI - to campaign against the recommendations of the Barker Review.

The Barker Review of Land Use Planning was commissioned by the Treasury as a review of the UK's planning system, primarily focusing on the link between planning and economic growth. The Civic Trust has greeted many of the recommendations with great concern, as the majority of these focus on reforming the planning system for the benefit of businesses and developers. This may have implications for the protection of the built and natural environments and for local communities. Our key concerns include:

- The reduction of public involvement in inquiries in order to speed up major projects
- Increased domination of supermarkets in town centres at the expense of local shops
- The reduction of people's right to have a say in planning proposals for their area
- The threat to wildlife, habitats and green belts from development

A website has been launched, [www.planningdisaster.co.uk](http://www.planningdisaster.co.uk), to allow the public to email their concern to Gordon Brown or their local MP. The coalition believes that the Chancellor should:

- Ensure that major projects such as roads or nuclear power stations are decided with local input, democratic accountability, and in the framework of sustainable development.
- Support local shops and town centres by retaining and strengthening the needs assessment requirement.
- Ensure sustainable development principles guide development so that wildlife, habitats and greenbelt are protected, regeneration is encouraged and town centres remain vibrant.
- Safeguard people's right to have a say in local plans by retaining and strengthening the issues and options discussion at the beginning of local plans, and funding greater positive participation in planning.

The Civic Trust and other environmental organisations believe that recommendations will have an adverse impact on the natural and built environment and will not allow local communities to have any involvement in planning decisions.

The Civic Trust's website is well-worth visiting at [www.civictrust.org.uk](http://www.civictrust.org.uk).

## **A very short guide to how the Planning System works**

Planning legislation exists to regulate the development and use of land in the public interest: it is not there to stop development. It doesn't exist to protect the private interests of one person against the activities of another, though private and public interests may sometimes coincide. Development must fit with agreed policies, and planning decisions are not determined by any formal or informal referendum of interested parties.

Under the law, planning permission should always be granted unless there are strong objections raised on planning grounds. Councillors cannot refuse permission simply because people are against it. Only relevant planning matters can be taken into account, and these include:

- whether the application is in accordance with Council policies, as defined in the Local Development Framework (the former District Plan)
- the effect on nearby residents such as noise, fumes, loss of sunlight and loss of privacy
- whether it would cause dangerous highway conditions
- whether its appearance is in keeping with the character of the surrounding area
- if it's an out-of-town commercial application, what effect it might have on the town centre

The Local planning Authority cannot take the following examples into account when considering the application:

- loss of value to a neighbouring property
- loss of view from someone's home
- what is proposed is not needed
- a small loss of sunlight or daylight to a neighbouring houses
- a small loss of privacy to a neighbouring house
- competition with other businesses
- boundary disputes and building on adjoining land (these are civil matters which your own solicitor may be able to help you with separately)

What can be changed by well-argued comment might include the height of the proposal in the context of the surroundings, the appropriateness of proposed surface finishes or colours, or the need to address personal safety issues in the layout, for example. The Planning Officer will report on all correspondence s/he has received when the matter is put before the Area Planning Committee; comments received early may be included in negotiations between the developer and the Planning Officer. Constructive comments are always welcome. Comments are often made by local amenity societies, many of which have considerable experience of the process. If you wish, you can address the Council's Area Committee when it meets. If you wish to do this, you should contact the Council's Committee Section on 01462-474403 at least 3 days beforehand to register your wish to speak.

### **How do Councillors fit in?**

Council Members are elected to represent the views of their constituents, but there are stringent legal limits on their action with regard to planning issues. They may visit the site, but may not pass comment on their views – this is a legal requirement, and is no reflection on their level of interest in the issue. A site visit is undertaken to gather information and to observe the site; it is not an opportunity

for residents to lobby a Councillor or to find out how they intend to vote on the matter. The role of Councillors in Planning issues is really to oversee the process and ensure that the best compromise is attained between the needs of all those concerned.

### **How do I find out what's going on?**

You can of course look at the plans in person at the Council Offices in Letchworth, but the Council publishes all planning applications on its website, at [www.north-herts.gov.uk/planning](http://www.north-herts.gov.uk/planning). On the website you can see how far any application has progressed along the system.



### **Hitchin's Town Halls**

Some reference was made to Hitchin Town Hall in an article on Brand Street in Newsletter 26, (April 2006), but the current situation perhaps calls for a little more elaboration. Hitchin has of course had two town halls (setting aside other buildings not built for that purpose), and the present uncertainty around the future of the new, 1901, Town Hall may well stem from the history of the two buildings, rather than just the one.

Samuel Lucas wrote in his diary on 17th May, 1839 "attended a meeting for the purpose of considering a proposal to build a town hall; SubCommittee formed." The Victorians were not ones to let grass grow under their feet; the SubCommittee was formed, Samuel Lucas was naturally one of its number, and its first meeting was the very next day.

"May 18th 1839 Fine. SubCommittee meeting. Incline I think [uneasily] to extend the plan I fear there is no chance of our raising the money necessary for such a Building. Cannot expect a larger net income than 40 or 50 a year which on £2000 is only 2½% and on 3 or 4000 is a mere nothing and not likely to induce shareholders to venture to any amount."

This is of course a purely financial view: Samuel is looking at the building as an investment opportunity and considering the likely attractiveness to investors. Clearly he didn't think much of it. He may have been persuaded otherwise: Victoria had been crowned in 1837: perhaps the ascent of a monarch who was not a direct, linear descendant of her predecessors, and was not even a man, inspired confidence. In the years after that coronation, Hitchin developed the new Quaker Meeting House (1839), an Infirmary (1839) and a Town Hall (1840). The context is of development of the railway network, with the line arriving at Hertford in 1843, though not to reach Hitchin until 1850. Improving communications and lowering the cost of bulk goods transport must have had an impact on the local economy: there was enough available equity for Sharples, Tuke, Lucas & Seebohm's Hertfordshire Hitchin bank to open in new premises in the High Street in 1844. Today we know the building as Barclay's Bank. Perhaps this growth in development encouraged Samuel Lucas to take the financial risk, for just five days later Samuel's brother William visited the architect Thomas Bellamy "to ask for a design of Town Hall."

Bellamy was well known to Hitchin, and further afield: he had been the architect for the town's Infirmary (now known as Thomas Bellamy House) as well as for the design of St Peter's Church, Walton on Thames. St. Peter's was probably his first major commission, and his later career included several other churches.

So Bellamy provided the design for the Town Hall, and it was built on the south side of Brand Street, but it rapidly became clear that it had a major defect: it was too small. This did not prevent its use for a wide range of official and entertainment uses. Extant bills and handbills at Hitchin Museum show that The Inspectors of Gas used its committee room in 1866, and the list of men fit for jury service was revised there in 1870. Its use for entertainment is better recorded: Hitchin Amateur Dramatic

Club performed "*Still Waters Run Deep*" and "*The Steeplechase*" there in 1873, and it was often used for choral performances: there was a chorus of seventy voices in a concert by the choirs of St. Mary's and St. Saviour's Churches in November, 1866 and the Choral Society sang Mendelssohn's *Lauda, Sion* there in 1895. Bills show many other concerts, including Haydn's *Creation*, Walter George's Light Opera Singers, and a Grand Amateur Theatrical Performance in aid of the funds of the 12th Herts (Hitchin) Rifle Volunteers.

Clearly shortage of space didn't inhibit use that much. What's more interesting, though, is that from its completion, the Old Town Hall was independently run by the Town Hall Company: it was not run by the local authority, as there still exists a draft Deed of Settlement dated 1840.

Nonetheless Geoffrey Lucas drew up plans in 1898 for a new Town Hall. This was a much larger affair, and the existing Mechanic's Institute Hall of 1868 was incorporated into the design. There were ultimately two architects, Hitchin's Geoffrey Lucas, and E.W. Mountford. It's not clear how much design input either of them had: Mountford four years later was to build The Old Bailey in London, having several churches and town halls under his belt already: perhaps it's Lucas' work, overseen by Mountford. The New Hitchin Town Hall cost £7,300, equivalent to £544,000 today, and opened on April 8<sup>th</sup> 1901. Given that there had been concerns over the inadequate size of the 1840 Town Hall, the 1901 designs might be thought to have overstretched the ability of the town to fill the new hall, but this does not seem to have been the case.

The New Town Hall on the North side of Brand Street was a great success both as a hall for large scale performances and events, and as a more intimate venue in the Lucas Room for art exhibitions. Most of the New Town Hall advertising material held by Hitchin Museum relates to amateur drama and light opera performances over 60 years. Hitchin Amateur Light Opera Company produced *Yeomen of the Guard* in 1905, and the Thespians "*Les Cloches de Corneville*" in 1913, together with many other popular shows including performances of Gounod's *Faust* in 1967. The Bancroft Players put on J.B. Priestley's "*I Have Been Here Before*" in 1952. Bazaars and dinners have featured too: from the Japanese Bazaar in 1905 to the Hitchin Imps' dinner in 1927 when Admiral Jellicoe was the speaker, not forgetting private functions such as the Doctor's Revues of the 1990s.

The last item is a flier for an exhibition by Hitchin and District Model Engineering Club in 1984. The documentation is not comprehensive, and it would be unfair to draw specific conclusions from it, but the availability of videocassettes and latterly DVDs, must have had an impact on the usage of the Town Hall. Many more women now work than used to be the case, so people tend to consume entertainment rather than produce it themselves, simply because they have less free time. This has impacted on the availability of volunteers to run local organisations, too. A side issue has been the ability of local organisations to construct their own halls: the Queen Mother Theatre was purpose built, and has the facilities needed to rehearse and perform productions to a far higher standard than could ever have been the case on the small stage in the Town Hall.

However, what of the status of the Old Town Hall once the new one had been opened? It may be that the two were intended to have run concurrently, with one catering for smaller events, and the other for larger. This would have made some sense, as the large scale of the New hall precludes small meetings. But the Old Town Hall was soon in use as offices of the local authority, and any such concurrent use can't have lasted for long: The Clerk to the Guardians, The Clerk to Hitchin Rural District Council and the Superintendent Registrar of Hitchin District all resided in the building by 1906, according to the town's Trade Directories.

The current state of the New Town Hall is perhaps best described as "failing to adapt to changing circumstances": the suggestion that it should be run by an organisation other than the Council should perhaps not be a cause for alarm, for the Old Town Hall was originally run in this way.



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