

# THE HITCHIN SOCIETY

## NEWSLETTER

May 2008



“Brookers” site on Paynes Park, looking west

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## Editorial

The cover photograph to this issue might have been titled “No pressure, then!” Whilst taking it, I realised that in the far distance was a plane climbing steeply out of Luton, but was too slow with the camera to catch it. Such an image well sums up life in Hitchin today: almost continuous traffic, development on five substantial sites in the town – Brookers, Bridge Street, and the former Warrens site, Rose Cottage and the site at the north end of Grove Road – and changes to the stacking regime of airports across the county and beyond.

Since I started work on this issue, there seemed to be weekly developments in the story of the nation’s airports, what with the ‘opening’ of Terminal 5, the stacking issues, the impact of higher fuel prices on executive travel, and the issues around Ferrovial, the Spanish owners of several British airports.

Your Society tries to make constructive comments to all issues which directly affect the town: many are noted and acted upon by developers. A good dialogue continues with Planning Officers at the District Council: long may this be so. A steady dialogue builds respect on both sides, and whilst we might not always agree with planning decisions taken by the District Council, we also recognise that there are sometimes pressures and legalities which we cannot influence.

### **The Society’s President**

The Society is delighted to announce that Mr. Paul Brennan, MBE, DL, has agreed to be our new President. He has always supported the work of the Society, but has indicated that he wishes to play an active part as President. We look forward to meeting him at future meetings.

### **A Visit to Moggerhanger Park**

Monday August 18<sup>th</sup> 2008-04-30

We will use our own cars and give lifts to those who need them.

Moggerhanger House was designed by Sir John Sloane who was also the architect of the Bank of England and the interiors of 10 and 11 Downing Street. It is set in 33 acres of parkland landscaped by Humphrey Repton, and which are currently being restored.

The house has a very pleasant tearoom where we can meet, and I’ll arrange that we take the 12 ‘o clock tour of the house, which lasts about an hour and a quarter and costs £5.

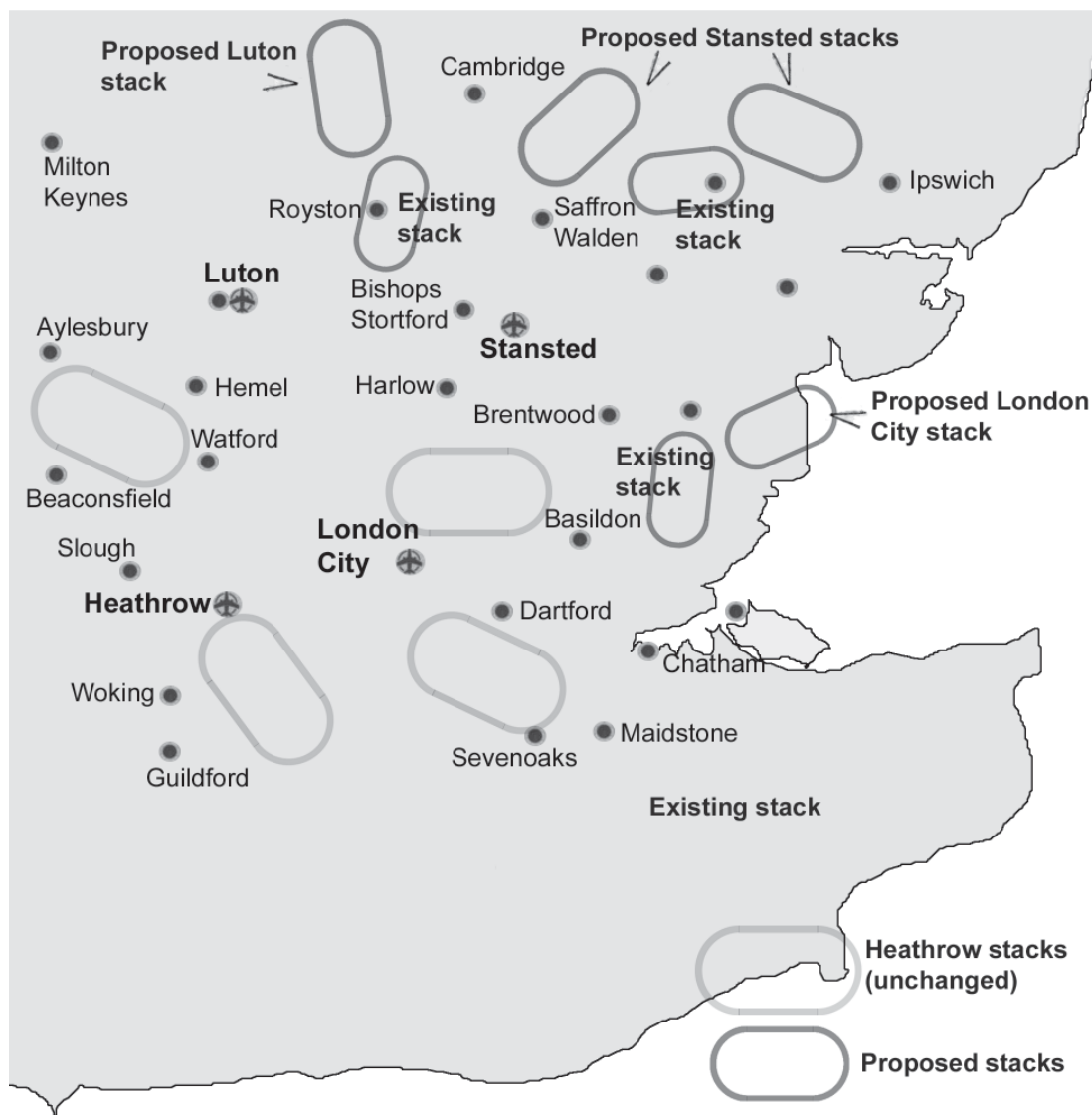
Moggerhanger village is situated on the A603 approximately 3 miles from Sandy roundabout on the A1, travelling towards Bedford. Once in the village, follow the brown ‘historic house’ signs.

Please let me know if you’d wish to join us for the visit to Moggerhanger, so I can let the house know the numbers.

Daphne Birch  
01462 459435

## Flight from the countryside

Several changes to the locations of 'stacks' of aircraft awaiting landing slots have been announced. A recent article in The Times (February 21<sup>st</sup> 2008) indicated those proposals.



The changes in flight paths announced by National Air Traffic Services are intended to come into force in March 2009: they do have impacts on North Hertfordshire. Clear and useful maps can be found on the NATS website at [www.consultation.nats.co.uk](http://www.consultation.nats.co.uk). These maps indicate the proposed routes into and out of airports.

These indicate clearly that aircraft leaving Luton westwards in order to fly eastwards will now bank to starboard and over Hitchin, whereas formerly they banked to port and crossed Harlow, many miles to the south of Hitchin.

Aircraft arriving from the east to land westwards at Luton will pass Hitchin further to the north than at present, whilst aircraft landing westwards will change their path little whilst close to Hitchin: there will be greater impact on those living in Royston and the villages around it, as the holding stack will move northwards away from Royston.

Flights landing westwards at Stansted will have slight impact on Baldock, as the planes will be around 1000 feet lower at 6000 feet, but a slight improvement for flights landing eastwards at Stansted, but there will be little change for this area for flights leaving Stansted in either direction.

However, The Times (February 21<sup>st</sup> 2008) notes that the fine print of the consultation document indicates that those affected by the 57dB contour (inside which the Government considers residents suffer disturbance) will more than double near Luton, and rise by 9 per cent at Stansted.

There are some other issues which are not covered in the Times article. Those who live close to, or under, flight paths will acknowledge that departing aircraft are noisier than arrivals, but arrivals are not silent.

The NATS site offers downloads of several documents relating to changes in routing and the environmental impacts, area by area. The consultation will close on May 22<sup>nd</sup>.

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## Heritage Open Days 11-14 September 2008

Every year in September Heritage Open Days celebrates England's rich architecture, history and culture. Thousands of buildings of every age, style and function open their doors free of charge. The Civic Trust in partnership with English Heritage provides guidance and central coordination.

According to the Civic Trust, Heritage Open Days is England's No.1 voluntary cultural event. The Hitchin Society is the local organiser for our town and adjacent parishes. In 2007 a record number of twelve properties were available at various times during the weekend. Already The Biggin, Friends Meeting House, Princess Helena College, St Ippolyts Church and British Schools have agreed to participate.

This year the Heritage Open Days weekend is later than usual, 11-14 September. Leaflets with a map, times and places should be available by 1st August from Hitchin Town Centre Initiative, libraries and David's Bookshop Letchworth. The committee responsible for the 2008 event is once again Tony Freeman (coordinator), Pam Skeggs plus Tony and Dorothy Sudweeks.

TS

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## Ringling Some Changes #1



Walsworth Road

## Why hasn't Hitchin got a cinema?

Hitchin's first cinema was Blake's Picturedrome in Ickleford Road, which in one postcard advertises the showing of the 1911 Coronation Celebrations in the town, shortly after the cinema opened. It was not much more than a large shed, seating 400 patrons. Subsequently it was rebuilt with an imposing three-storey façade, and after several re-incarnations was recently remodelled into an apartment block: it closed in 1939 only on the opening of the Regal.

The success of the Picturedrome encouraged others to start the 760-seater Playhouse, a curious building accessed from a front door on the Marketplace immediately to the north of the Corn Exchange: a long corridor ran through the building then on the site, into the cinema itself at the back. The Playhouse opened in 1913 and flourished, taking the introduction



The Playhouse Photo: Hitchin Museum



The Hermitage Cinema Photo: Hitchin Museum

of 'talking pictures' in its stride. It was taken over by the operators of the Hermitage, and was briefly renamed the Regal in 1935 and closed in 1937.

The much larger (1,386 seats) and purpose-built Hermitage Cinema opened in 1932, also hosting many local amateur-dramatics performances on its capacious stage.

A second cinema, the Regal, was built in Bancroft by the same operators and opened in November

1939, acting as a second string to the Hermitage, showing second runs of films already successful at the Hermitage.

The Hermitage was sold in 1963 to make way for a new Post Office, and the Regal survived as a cinema only until 1977. It enjoyed a brief second career as a recording studio and concert hall, but was demolished in 1985.

Thus came to an end 66 years of cinemas in Hitchin. Why? In 1933 Hitchin had three cinemas at once – the Playhouse, the Picturedrome and the Hermitage. There were then – and clearly are now – audiences to be had. Ask young people in other cinema-free towns what they want most, and a cinema will be high on their list. The arrival of DVDs and downloads of recent films, whether legitimate or not, are no substitute for the sociability of a shared experience. The product itself need not be up-to-date: a film club thrives in Letchworth right under the shadow of the triplex cinema there: art and experimental films may not be everyone's cup of tea, but there are enough people interested to make occasional showings viable.



The Regal Photo: Hitchin Museum

# Town Quiz

We all walk around the town about our own business, and often fail to spot changes or additions to the townscape. The following quiz is intended to amuse you for a little while with details of the town and its scenery – see if you can tell where these building fragments are. They're all in clear view, there are no sneaky tricks here! Thanks to Pansy Mitchell for devising this quiz.

Answers on page 10



1.



2.



3.



4.



5.



6.

## Planning Notes, 2007 – 2008

There have been many planning issues, both major and minor, for the Society to address since the last AGM in March 2007. An over-arching change has been that a year ago the Hitchin Committee ceased to have responsibility for planning decisions within its own area, this power having been taken over by a Central Planning Control Committee.

The Society remains involved with major issues such as Churchgate and the Town Hall, but for various reasons there has been little movement on these fronts lately.

Arguably the biggest threat this year to Hitchin and the surrounding area has been 'SNAP' (Stevenage and North Herts. Action Plan). In early January the Society sent in a robust response to the consultation document, objecting to such proposals as inappropriate boundaries, and making a strong case for high design standards and genuine sustainability in any eventual development.

During the last year the Society has also been actively involved in the following issues in the town itself:

**Gainsford School, Radcliffe Road** – The Society was happy to support a sensitive and thoughtful proposal for the restoration of this landmark Victorian building, and permission for this plan to proceed was granted last June.

**Hitchin Museum** – At the time of writing there has still been no news of further working party meetings on this subject.

**Public Conveniences** – Despite objections, two locations in the town have now been closed. The refurbished site in the Arcade has had teething problems, but NHDC have carried out remedial work on the faulty locks, are considering erecting a barrier to guide passers-by away from the potential danger of the outward-opening doors and have promised to monitor the issue of unisex cubicles.

**Trees in the Conservation Area** – The Society is still in touch with NHDC about trees which have been chopped down behind Sun Street, but progress is slow on this.

**Burymead Road** – Towards the end of last year the County Council put forward a proposal to use a site not far from a residential area to stockpile and process construction waste; the Society objected to this, along with residents and other groups, including the District Council. HCC has yet to announce a decision on this.

**Corn Exchange Signage** – The Society, in concert with the other Hitchin organisations, strongly objected to the garish new sign and window stickers, quite inappropriate for the building and the Conservation Area. Thankfully, retrospective permission to keep the signage was refused by the Planning Control Committee in January.

EJA

## Ringling Some Changes #2



Grove Road



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*Please hand, or send, the completed form to: The Membership Secretary, The Hitchin Society 49 Grays Lane, Hitchin, Herts., SG5 2HH. If you don't want to cut the magazine, please ask for a form.*

## Quiz Answers

1. Halsey's, Marketplace.
2. Warner's Almshouses in Churchyard Walk.
3. Tilehouse Street.
4. Cemetery Lodge, Standhill Road.
5. Planet kitchens, Bridge Street.
6. New houses at top of St Andrew's Place, off Kershaw's Hill.



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The Hitchin Society is affiliated to  
The Civic Trust, Association of North Thames Amenity Societies  
(ANTAS), CPRE – The Hertfordshire Society and The Chiltern Society



Registered with the civic trust

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

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