



# NEWSLETTER

*Autumn 2015*

Welcome to the Autumn edition of the Newsletter.

What does Hertford town centre need in order to thrive? East Herts Council, working with the County Council and Town Council, has commissioned the design group Tibbalds to come up with a strategy.

Following an initial public consultation in March this year, Tibbalds put forward some proposals and consulted again in September. The Society arranged a special meeting at which members were addressed by, and were able to question, planning officers Kay Mead and Jenny Pierce from EHC and Chris Allen-Smith from HCC.

We then set up a working group, consisting of Peter Norman (chair), Malcolm Ramsay, Richard Threlfall, David Kirby, Reg Harman, David Hunt and Sue Jones who met to discuss the proposals further and formulate a response, which was compiled by Peter Norman. This has been circulated to our members by email and is summarised on p6 of this Newsletter. The documents put forward by Tibbalds are available on the EHC website at <http://www.eastherts.gov.uk/hertfordtcuds>

We have been fortunate with the weather for our outdoor activities this year. We enjoyed an idyllic evening for our walk around the town with Elizabeth Eastwood to hear about the contrastingly dark and macabre aspects of crime and punishment in the past, which you can read about in this newsletter. Our garden party, as guests of Geoffrey and Fay Thornton, was another outdoor treat and will be reported in our next edition. For our last event of the year, we return indoors to our usual venue in the church hall on November 18th, so please put this in your diaries - details on p2. We look forward to seeing you.

As ever, non-members are welcome to attend our talks for a small fee of £2. If you have any issues to raise regarding the welfare of Hertford or about membership of the Society, details for contacting members of the Committee and the Membership Secretary are given in this newsletter and on our website at [www.hertfordcivicsociety.org.uk](http://www.hertfordcivicsociety.org.uk)

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**PROGRAMME**

*Lecture, Wednesday 18 November 2015*

Our final speaker is Anne Rowe, well known locally as President of the East Herts Archaeological Society. Anne is also a widely-published author on local landscapes, and is familiar to some of you as a lively WEA lecturer. While her talk has a historical theme, it also carries extra resonances at a time when East Herts Council is updating its plans for the district. The venue is as usual the church hall in St John’s Street, at the normal hour of 8.00pm, preceded by tea, coffee and biscuits from around 7.45pm.

Malcolm Ramsay

**PLANNING MATTERS**

*Proposed Waitrose at Van Hage:*

The proposal for a new Waitrose superstore next to Van Hage’s will not now be referred to the Secretary of State, as we had expected. Following the Council’s resolution in the Spring to grant permission, solicitors acting for Asda (whose Ware store would of course be in competition with a new Waitrose) wrote to East Herts. They alleged that the committee’s decision had been made unlawfully, because Members had not properly considered all the things they ought to have considered and had not given adequate reasons for going against their own policies; they threatened legal action unless the Council agreed to look at the decision again. After taking their own legal advice, the authority accepted that the decision made by the old committee in the Spring was not made according to the correct procedures. So the proposal was put on the agenda for the new committee (which now of course consists of different people, following the May elections). The officers acknowledged that Members are entitled to reach their own conclusions, but reiterated their previous advice that the proposal should be rejected on policy grounds – mainly because the site is in the Green Belt and the new store would take trade away from town centres.

Rather than risk an outright refusal, the applicants decided at the last minute to withdraw the application, so in the end it was not reconsidered. But they wrote to the committee saying they still wished to pursue the scheme and said they ‘would also like further opportunity to present proposals to Members which can only take place when an application is not under consideration’. In addition, Waitrose wrote to at least some Councillors saying, ‘We felt it better to withdraw to allow time fully to address the issues and

enable a more open discussion with you than is possible with the application pending.’

Given the controversy that has surrounded consideration of the withdrawn application we have complained to the Council that it would be totally wrong for Van Hage, Waitrose, or indeed any other potential occupier, to be granted a special opportunity to present proposals direct to Members now that there is no application on the table. We have demanded that, if any presentation or discussion with Members of the kind suggested were to be agreed to, the meeting should be held in public and webcast.

### *Bengeo Scout Hut:*

Another application to which we objected that has been withdrawn is the Council’s own proposal to sell the site of the Scout Hut in Watermill Lane for housing, and build a new scout hut and community building on part of the adjacent public open space. Local residents mounted a strong campaign against the idea, which would have been in clear conflict with policies in both the existing and emerging local plans. Let us hope that this one, unlike Waitrose/Van Hage’s, really has gone for good.

### *Retirement village at the former brickfields off Cole Green Way:*

This proposal for a retirement village at the former brickfields, including flats and a care home, was unanimously refused by Councillors last year, and now it has been unanimously refused again. We had submitted an objection in principle because it would have swallowed up a large swathe of Green Belt between Hertford and the village of Hertingfordbury.

However, it is agreed on all sides that there is a substantial and growing demand for this kind of accommodation, and the Council has acknowledged that some Green Belt boundaries will have to change if enough land is to be made available to meet housing needs generally. The developers have put a lot of time and effort into

finding ways of overcoming concerns about flooding of the access to the site, which suggests they may appeal. If they do, we shall support the Council in arguing for the protection of this particularly important strip of Green Belt which separates Hertford from Hertingfordbury.

### *Ware Park:*

Despite its name, Ware Park on the north side of the river and west of the A10 viaduct is in Hertford. An application has been made to replace a run-down barn in a wood yard there with a large five-bedroomed house. Again the land is in the Green Belt and we intend to lodge an objection largely because the scheme would replace the kind of use one would expect to find in the countryside with an urban type use, and would therefore be inappropriate. Even if some Green Belt land ultimately does have to be released for building, it is vital that it is used to the best advantage and to provide the kind of houses people need and can afford.

Peter Norman

## PREVIOUS TALKS TO MEMBERS

### *Crime and punishment walk*

The traditional court usher’s gown worn by Elizabeth Eastwood for her peripatetic lecture reminded us of the continuities in the English legal system, but as we walked around Hertford on a beautiful summer evening, it also became clear that many aspects of the administration of justice in the past were utterly alien to the practices we expect today.

Justice, and to a greater extent punishment, had to be seen to be done and punishment happened in the market place opposite the present-day Salisbury Hotel - the most public part of the town. Here passers-by going about their ordinary business could be confronted by the pillory, the stocks and the whipping post. The pillory was for serious crimes, such as perjury, rape, sedition and witchcraft (short of murder); the stocks for

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lesser crimes, such as stealing milk from a neighbour's cow; and the whipping post for petty larceny (theft of goods worth less than one shilling), anti-social behaviour, such as drunkenness and swearing, or being a vagabond. Alternatively, they might have parts of their bodies cut off or be branded, making rehabilitation almost impossible.

There was a populist element too, which could run over into mob action; those secured in the stocks (by their feet) or the pillory (by their head and hands) were subject to verbal abuse and to having anything from rotten vegetables, to ordure, to stones thrown at them. Not surprisingly, deaths occurred.

From the C16th criminals could also be transported to the colonies, first America and later Australia, where they were used as forced labour. But despite the hardship and danger, transportation could also be a starting point for a new life; pig-stealer Sarah Gregory had time to form a relationship and get married on the voyage and a thief by the name of Freeman became Australia's first hangman.

Under the Normans, the justice system centred on the castle, but as Hertford acquired successive charters, the borough gained the right to try lower cases in its own courts; a timber-framed Sessions House was built in the C17th in the market place, with an open space underneath for a butter market. This building was replaced by the current Shire Hall, designed by James Adam, in the 1770s. Since the Assizes brought many of the gentry into Hertford, it also became the opportunity for socialising and the Shire Hall provided an Assembly Room for balls as well as a criminal court.

Although there was a Bridewell, or House of Correction, in Railway St, prisons were generally places to hold prisoners awaiting trial rather than places of punishment or reform. In medieval times the prison was at the castle and held William Grindcobbe and two other leaders of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, as well as Knights Templars when they came under royal suspicion and two friars from Dunstable, who mysteriously died in their beds while in custody.

As Hertford acquired its own legal powers, it built the County Gaol in about 1700 on the site of the present-day Corn Exchange building and held a number of famous prisoners, including the wife of Dick Turpin, and highwayman William Harrow, who disguised his horse by putting white cat skin on its head. But this prison was poorly constructed and there were not only breakouts but it was also a source of typhus and smallpox and generated constant complaints about the smell. Prison reformer John Howard, who was educated in Hertford, was appalled by the conditions and in the 1770s it was demolished and a new prison built further out of town in Ware Rd

opposite the present-day Tesco.

This was better constructed and did attempt to reform criminals through work and Bible reading rather than merely punish them, but it used a system common at the time of keeping prisoners in silence and isolation, which often led to mental health problems. Excluding outside stimulation also meant that the railway station had to be built further from the town centre than was convenient, not for fear of escapes but so that prisoners could not hear what was going on in the outside world. This did not prevent public executions from taking place in the street outside, however. These often attracted large crowds and when John Thurtell, who had murdered a man to whom he had lost money at cards, was hanged in 1825, the roof of a barn in the field opposite collapsed from the weight of spectators. Only a small piece of the wall of this prison remains; it was closed in the 1880s and prisoners were then sent to St Albans.

Hertford has also had a number of politically significant cases. Jane Wenham was the last person to be condemned to death for witchcraft, although she was pardoned by Queen Anne. Spencer Cowper was acquitted of the murder of Sarah Stout, daughter of a prominent Quaker and found dead in the river near Dicker Mill in 1699, but the suspicion remained; the Quakers switched their allegiance and the Whig-supporting Cowper family lost their seats to the Tories at the next parliamentary election. The town even had its right to parliamentary representation suspended for a few years in the 1830s due to the violence of the political factions. Finally, the police force was reorganised after a notorious case that made national headlines in 1899 when Mercy Nicholls was murdered by John Smith in Railway Street. He had dragged her up and down the street, even calling for an axe to cut her head off, but local people put it down to the usual bad behaviour from the Butcherley Green slum and did nothing. When the police were finally called, they took an hour and a half to arrive. Smith admitted to the murder, was declared insane and sent to Broadmoor.

Hertford now has few remains of its role in the history of the legal system. The castle still has a dungeon to be viewed by visitors on open days, but the gallows and all other physical forms of punishment have been abolished and have left no trace here. The Crown Court moved to St Albans in 1970 and while the magistrates and family courts are still at Shire Hall, even those functions may be lost in the present moves to consolidate courts. And all that remains of the Ware Rd prison is a length of the outside wall on the east side of Yeomans Court.

Sue Jones

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### HERTFORD TOWN CENTRE URBAN DESIGN STRATEGY

As mentioned on p1, East Herts Council has commissioned design company Tibbalds to devise a strategy for Hertford town centre. The following is a summary of the main issues addressed in the Society's response to the consultation.

*Place-making* - Would the town be more attractive if it were divided into different 'quarters'? We were not convinced that Hertford is large enough for this, although St Andrew St does have its own character. However, we did support the idea of information boards, possibly mounted on poles, showing maps and locations of businesses.

*Retail provision and the market* - While no-one wants Hertford to become a 'clone town' indistinguishable from so many others, we need a mix of stores, including national chains. But many of our retail units are too small to attract them and thought must be given to how we could provide suitably sized units without damaging the character of our historic buildings.

We agreed in principle with the consultants' proposal to enhance the Maidenhead St-Salisbury Sq-Railway St 'spine' as a retail district, although the re-paving they suggest to make the area appear more coherent could be very expensive. We think that Salisbury Sq makes a good focal point but many of the properties along these streets are under-used and could be made more attractive without losing their distinctive historic character. However, making them more attractive to national retailers could require some significant alterations. Control of traffic for servicing these businesses is also difficult as many do not have access at the rear.

The market is an important asset to the town and could be enhanced by removing parking and traffic from Bull Plain, but this would be very

difficult for the reasons discussed below under 'Traffic'.



*Traffic entering Bull Plain has to cross the pedestrian route through the market*

*Fore Street* - The eastern end could be made more attractive as a gateway to the town by removing the parking and enhancing the landscaping in front of Bluecoats Avenue. The main issue in this area, however, is traffic and this is addressed below.

*River Lea* - It would be desirable to open up much more of the town to the river, which is one of its most attractive features. This could be done by increasing and making better use of the open space in Bircherley Green, creating a boardwalk linking Mill Bridge to Dolphin Yard and making the moorings more of a focal point. The consultants suggested a bridge across the river from Dolphin Yard, but this would be expensive and we felt that money could be better spent.

*Castle grounds* - This is one of the most attractive areas of the town, but is little used, except on special occasions. The main entrance is somewhat hidden away behind the theatre and should be enhanced with better links into the town, particularly by improving the pedestrian crossing at the end of Maidenhead St. The consultants also suggested moving the playground nearer to the town and putting a café into the grounds to attract leisure use,

although this would have to be balanced against the existing abundance of food outlets.



*The entrance to the castle grounds is obscured behind the theatre*

*Traffic* - If Hertford is to be a viable town, there has to be access for traffic and parking facilities for shopping, leisure, servicing businesses, public transport, facilities for the disabled and access for residents. However, this has to be balanced against the safety, health and convenience of pedestrians and the damage done to paving and street furniture when heavy vehicles drive or park on pavements.

Fore St presents particular problems as it is a bus route, a retail and leisure area, part-time taxi rank and provides the sole road access to Folly Island via Bull Plain. The western end is two-way for buses but not wide enough for two vehicles to pass, which makes this section an unpleasant environment for pedestrians; for older people the damaged and uneven footway is a danger. Moreover, the effect of County Hall traffic on the Pegs Lane roundabout of the A414 acts as a constraint on what can be done to reduce or eliminate through traffic.

Although it is probably neither practicable nor desirable to exclude traffic altogether, it is worth considering some experiments to reduce traffic, especially at the west end, e.g. closure to certain types of traffic at evenings and

weekends when Gascoyne Way is less congested and restricting parking here and in Bull Plain to disabled spaces only in order to prevent cruising around looking for spaces. If part-time closure is not considered to be practical, perhaps traffic lights could be installed, such that buses approaching from the east would be given right of way, thus avoiding the need for vehicles to mount, and thereby damage, the kerb.

Removing parking from Bull Plain would have the added advantage of creating more space for the market. Closing Bull Plain to traffic, however, would necessitate providing another access point to Folly Island, which may not be possible due to landownership and differing road levels at the end of Thornton St, but should be investigated because of the substantial improvement it would make to the town centre and the market.

The pedestrian link from Maidenhead St to the castle grounds is important, but reducing traffic in The Wash and Parliament Sq would be difficult as it forms part of the B158 through-route going north to south. The crossing opposite the theatre should remain signal-controlled and the traffic island at the junction of Castle St should not be removed as it not only prevents cars turning right into Castle St and holding up traffic in Parliament Sq but also allows pedestrians to cross a busy road and cyclists to turn right into Castle St safely.

*Walking and cycling* - As well as improving conditions for pedestrians *within* Hertford, we also need to improve walking routes *into* Hertford, with particular attention to quality of pavements and underpasses, especially from the south. People should be encouraged to come into Hertford by bike and more parking spaces for bikes could be provided. There was a lot of criticism of the width and quality of the cycle route from the town centre to Hertford North station, but it is difficult to see what can be done about this in practice because of the narrowness of the road. We suggest that a better alternative might be to route cyclists from Old

## CARING FOR HERTFORD

Cross through Cowbridge/Port Vale and on to Millmead Way to reach North Station via Beane Rd.

*Bus station* - Public transport is an important element in reducing traffic congestion and avoiding social isolation so we have a strong preference for keeping the bus station where it is because it is centrally placed, does not obstruct other traffic or the retail area, allows for passenger interchanges between routes, has some space for layovers and has access to toilets. No other site in the town has all these advantages.

*Bircherley Green* - Despite criticisms that it is 'of its time' and does not fit current retail requirements, the present design has its merits in that it is on a human scale, has some public space and has premises of various sizes, which allow for small, independent businesses as well as national traders. Therefore we would like to keep it much as it is but with better access to the river and without too much residential development, which could make it overbearing in size.



*Can the river front be opened up for better public use?*

Plans to open up the river frontage are welcome, but the suggestion of a row of restaurants on the river front with flats above risks turning this area into a tunnel and could be objectionable to residents of Folly Island. The desire of a supermarket to control its own ground level parking is a particular difficulty in accommodating a very large business on this site. However, this is a privately owned space and EHC will have limited powers to direct change; it will be in the financial interests of the owners to increase residential development and provide the conditions retailers want.

At the meeting with the Society, planning officer Kay Mead reminded us that, following a relaxation of permitted development rules two years ago, Councils now have fewer controls over development than they did, except in the case of Listed buildings. For their decisions to have weight and authority, it is vital that EHC has a viable District Plan and the outcome of these consultations will feed into this work.

Sue Jones. Pictures - Ian Nash



*Broken and uneven paving is a hazard to pedestrians*