



## *Newsletter Winter 2019-20*

Our first lecture for 2020 was listed in our Autumn Newsletter and we have now been able to finalise the rest of our Programme of talks and a Summer outing - this is laid out below. We also plan to hold our Hertford Civic Society Awards for best recently completed buildings and public spaces this year, culminating in a tea party when the Awards will be presented.

A Happy New Year to all our members and special thanks to all the volunteers who help to deliver the Newsletter.

### **PROGRAMME 2020**

#### ***Developing Hertford as a sustainable travel town: lessons from elsewhere Lecture, Wednesday 22 January 2020***

Stephen Joseph, expert/campaigner in sustainable transport at the national level, will talk about lessons that can be learned from other places. This comes at a time when Hertford Civic Society, in partnership with the Town Council, East Herts Council and other organisations, is seeking to help enable Hertford to become a 'Sustainable Travel Town', under a scheme promoted by Hertfordshire County Council. We know that we need improvements of this kind in Hertford, so do come to hear the suggestions of an outside expert, and to join in the discussion.

#### ***Green Corridor for central Herts: where should it be and how wide? Lecture, Wednesday 18 March 2020***

Biodiversity experts Jonathan Fisher and Peter Oakenfull, who are locally-based and much involved in influencing plans for the Welwyn-Hatfield area in particular, will talk about the importance of safeguarding biodiversity. With considerable amounts of new housing expected to the west of Hertford, we need both to protect wildlife and to make sure that people have suitable access to the countryside. A protected 'Green Corridor' would help - but how big might it need to be, and where should it be?

#### ***Redeveloping Hertford Theatre Brief AGM then presentation and discussion, Wednesday 29 April 2020***

Hertford Theatre faces imminent redevelopment and expansion, in an imaginative scheme which has already undergone some reappraisal. It is therefore good to have the opportunity to hear about the plans from Rhys Thomas (Director of Hertford Theatre), Tamara Jarvis (East Herts Council) and Simon Lewis (project manager of the emerging scheme). Following a not-too-long presentation, there will still be plenty of time for questions and discussions. Rhys Thomas and his colleagues are very keen to hear the views of a broad cross-section of the people of Hertford, so do please come along.

### ***Visit to Flag Fen Bronze-Age village and Huntingdon***

***Wednesday 20 May 2020***

We will have a guided tour at Flag Fen, to help to bring alive this amazing prehistoric settlement, which includes a surviving section of a water-logged causeway, and even a small flotilla of Bronze-Age canoes: both exceptional survivals. A slightly out-of-the-way place (not far from Peterborough), and not necessarily well known, Flag Fen has been described by the Time Team of TV fame as “one of Time Team’s favourite sites, combining two magical qualities: organic preservation and deposited bronze objects.” (Tim Taylor, *The Time Team Guide to the Archaeological Sites of Britain and Ireland.*) Our tour will last 90 minutes, and the key parts (the preserved causeway, the canoes and a reconstructed hut) are all under cover. Cambridge University archaeologist David Gibson says that the site allows people to “visit in exquisite detail everyday life in the Bronze Age.” Visits to the “Pompeii of the Fens” benefit from a visitor centre with café. The site is on flat ground and does not involve strenuous walking: it is accessible to wheelchair users, and mobility scooters can be provided.

We will then head to Huntingdon, in good time for lunch - there is no shortage of venues. In the afternoon, you will be free to explore the town, perhaps by yourselves (booklets can be made available) or perhaps with the benefit of a brief exploratory walkabout. Additionally, there is the Cromwell Museum, which reopens in March following a major refurbishment. Oliver Cromwell, who once quelled a mutiny of his army in Hertford, was raised in Huntingdon, and spent much of his life there.

The cost of this outing is £27, which includes the guided tour of Flag Fen as well as the coach journey. We leave in our comfortable coach at

8.45 in the morning (from a layby alongside Tesco or Hertford East), and return to Hertford by 6pm or thereabouts. Please make your bookings by contacting Malcolm Ramsay. Most people now do this by email: his contact details are email [malcolm.ramsay789@btinternet.com](mailto:malcolm.ramsay789@btinternet.com) or phone 01992 500002.

### ***Tea party - celebrating Hertford’s best new buildings***

***Date in late summer (to be confirmed later, together with venue)***

For 2020, we are trying out a new kind of party: a more informal event, without pre-booking, at which tea and cakes will be available, also with the possibility of prosecco or some other wine. Think of it as a town fete, for we will be celebrating the conclusion of a reinvigorated awards process, in which the best buildings in Hertford over the last few years will be discussed and celebrated. The party will be the final act of a reviewing process in which we hope members of the Civic Society will all have the opportunity to take part.

We are still developing the format both for the updating of the awards process and also for the concluding party. It will be an informal event one afternoon in late summer. Final details of the awards process and party will be publicised a bit later in the year.

### ***The building of the House: Hertford Quakers and their Meeting House over 350 years Lecture, Wednesday 21 October***

The Hertford Quaker Meeting House of 1670, now the oldest purpose-built Meeting House in continuous use in the world, was constructed at a time of great adversity for Quakers and stands as testimony to the faith of those early Friends. One of the 200 or so Meeting Houses built before the Toleration Act in 1689, its history and architecture have some distinctive features, but still more unusual is its survival into the twenty-first

century. This talk by Dr Chris Skidmore, a national expert, will cover the history of Hertford Quakers and their Meeting House in comparison with other contemporary Meeting Houses, bringing out the distinctive features and attempting to discuss the possible reasons for its survival. It celebrates its 350<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2020, and this event is a joint one involving both Quakers and Civic Society in Hertford. It will take place at the Meeting House itself, in Railway Street, Hertford.

***‘Few counties are as interesting as Herts’:  
revising Pevsner’s Hertfordshire  
Lecture, Wednesday 18 November***

Initially, James Bettley will tell the story of how Nikolaus Pevsner came to write the *Buildings of England* series, which has continued to evolve and be revised. Our lecturer was responsible for the new edition (the third one) of the Hertfordshire volume, published in 2019. He explains the process of bringing this volume up to date, and talks about the wealth of exciting buildings in the county. He is a veteran of this process, having also revised the Suffolk ‘Pevsner’. A good communicator, he is High Sheriff of Essex for 2019-20.

### ***Times and venues***

Talks or lectures are, as ever, at 8.00pm on Wednesdays, with refreshments from 7.45pm. With one exception, they still happen in the hall of the Roman Catholic church in St John’s Street. The exception is the talk in October about the Quaker Meeting House which, as noted above, takes place there instead.

Malcolm Ramsay

### **Hartham Leisure Centre - update**

At a recent meeting of East Herts Council’s Development Management Committee (which hears planning applications) Peter Norman was able to put our concerns about plans to extend the

leisure centre directly to Councillors. The main points were as follows:

We support the extension of the Leisure Centre, and we agree that there are special circumstances which justify building in the Green Belt. Our objection is to the appearance of the new building, which is not appropriate to its open, verdant setting.

The lines of the existing pool building are unusual and somewhat quirky. The proposed addition, by contrast, could be anything, anywhere; it appears utilitarian and more suited to an industrial estate than to open parkland surroundings.

One of the salient points made by the Design Review Panel was that “glazing should make the most of the high quality strategic views between building and parkland”. We agree that, in this sensitive open location, a building could respond to its surroundings by the extensive use of mirror glazing to reflect those surroundings, or of clear glass to allow views through the structure.

However, the proposal fails to respond to its open space location in that way and the industrial style building would be, and is intended to be, highly visible. EHC officers have suggested a condition requiring replacement tree planting. However, the condition as worded would not be effective because, whilst it requires details of tree planting to the west of the extension to be submitted, it does not say what should happen if those details prove to be unsatisfactory and cannot be approved. This is not a mere theoretical concern, given that the Design and Access Statement explicitly says that there are underground services along the western side of the proposed building which prevent trees being planted there.

The planning officer’s report finds that, even with the additional tree planting, there would be some harm to the conservation area, but that this is outweighed by the benefits of the proposal. Although that approach is in line with what the National Planning Policy Framework says about proposals affecting heritage assets, we submit

that acceptability is not a high enough test: in public developments we should be striving not for mere acceptability but for excellence – an exemplar building which Hertford can be proud of for years to come. A number of Councillors were highly critical of the building, for design and other reasons, and the Committee decided to defer a decision to allow changes to be made.

### HCS Awards Scheme - initial plans

The Hertford Civic Society Awards scheme is a well-established initiative that has been undertaken over a number of years, most recently in 2016. There has been sufficient change and development to the town since then to warrant a new round of Awards in the coming year. As we have not had Awards for a while there is also a chance to reflect on how we wish to take the process forward.

In particular, we would like to see greater involvement of our members and of the public in making nominations and perhaps being a member of the judging panel.

The overarching criteria for consideration of an Award should be the tangible impact on Hertford of the candidate under consideration: the visible impact, the contribution to sense of place, the effect of the building or space on its users or passers by. There may be other aspects of a development -- accessibility, ecological credentials, quality of refurbishment -- that are worth highlighting. However, we need to bear in mind the existence of *HCC Building Futures Awards*, a biennial scheme of some ten years' standing which focusses strongly on sustainability.

We already have a list of more than twenty possible candidates, and there will be others worthy of consideration. There may be buildings people are particularly fond of that they would wish to see make the longlist.

The longlist would then need to be refined to a manageable shortlist. This should perhaps already involve the judging panel. The scope of

membership of the judging panel could also perhaps be widened and people offered the chance to nominate themselves or others for particular reasons. In any case would need to decide on number on panel and number of shortlisted places.

The shortlist can be more comprehensively documented than the longlist, ideally with a photograph and brief note of date and architect and salient reasons for inclusion in shortlist. The panel would assess. Again, one could invite comments from members and the public and consider a kind of people's vote. (We could even consider a wooden spoon nomination, not so much the least preferred of the shortlist but if there is anywhere singularly unsuccessful that we want to point to as an example of how not to develop?)

Once the judging has taken place, the Award ceremony could take place in the autumn, on a weekend afternoon, with tea and cakes somewhere like St Leonard's Church (which has itself recently undergone refurbishments that successfully allow it to have more wider community function, and to which HCS was an enabling contributor). We may get a different or additional audience for the event over those who would turn out or not to an evening reception.

Finally, we could continue to promote the Awards, and any interesting discussions that arose from people considering varied aspects of the candidates, by collecting the winners alongside previous winners in an HCS Awards Map of Hertford with suggested walk and itinerary. In an historic town such as Hertford, this could help to promote discussion and understanding of how modern developments in architectural methods and styles can co-exist with older buildings and attempt to meet the urgent need for sustainability that our predecessors did not have to consider. More details will be included in a later Newsletter and on our website at [www.hertfordcivicsociety.org.uk](http://www.hertfordcivicsociety.org.uk)

Milena Nuti