



# NEWSLETTER

## *Autumn 2019*

Hertford faces further delays and uncertainty in the re-development of Bircherley Green since the withdrawal of Wrenbridge's planning application, on the grounds that the plan was no longer commercially viable, and the Diageo Pension Fund's sale of the site to Chase New Homes (see p6). The hollowing out of town centres is becoming a common problem as High Street retail declines and solving it will not be easy.

At a public meeting on 22<sup>nd</sup> October chaired jointly by Josh Dean of *We Are Hertford*, a non-political forum representing local people, and HCS chair Malcolm Ramsay, Hertford residents were able to voice their hopes and concerns for the future. Would there still be a significant role for retail outlets in Bircherley Green, and of what kinds? Should we be campaigning for greater community uses, such as a health centre or support for business start-ups? How important are bus services and parking in attracting people into Hertford? What kinds of housing should be included and in what style of design? Could the River Lea become more of a feature?

Chase New Homes has shown a willingness to listen and consult on these issues, but as the site is privately owned, it will be expected to be commercially viable.

Turning to more domestic issues, we are working on next year's programme, and our first event will be on 22<sup>nd</sup> January when Stephen Joseph will talk about *Developing Hertford as a sustainable travel town: lessons from elsewhere*. As we try to reduce traffic congestion and pollution in our town, it is very important that we learn as much as possible from communities facing similar problems.

Volunteers can help their communities in many ways and we would like to thank HCS members Susie and David Hunt for their work over the years with the Oral History Group. This project, which is supported by Hertford Civic Society, Hertford and Ware Local History Society and Hertford Museum, enables volunteers to record and transcribe interviews with local people about life in our area. Details are available at [www.hertfordmuseum.org/oralhistory](http://www.hertfordmuseum.org/oralhistory). If you think you might be interested in joining this group, they will be seeking volunteers in the near future.

Members are reminded that subscriptions are due in January. If you pay annually, please contact Annette Robinson, details p7.

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**PLANNING MATTERS**

The quickening pace of development in Hertford means that there is a lot to report this time about the Society’s involvement in planning applications and other planning issues.

**Tamworth Road**

After consultation with members living in the area, we submitted a comprehensive objection to this proposal for 11 houses and 81 flats in eight blocks up to 4 storeys high, with office space at ground floor level in one of the blocks.

Although the Council’s surveys identify only a small demand for apartments (12%) rather than houses (88%), most recent developments have concentrated on flats. Tamworth Road is made up predominately of two storey houses so this form of redevelopment would be more appropriate and would contribute to addressing the present imbalance. The apartment blocks proposed do not respect the height, scale and density of occupation of the surrounding area, and would be so close to the site boundary that adjacent houses would experience a loss of privacy.

Whilst the number of parking spaces proposed may just meet minimum requirements, some of the flats are bound to be occupied by couples needing two vehicles. This, and residents’ likely reluctance to use the proposed basement parking area when leaving their vehicles for short periods, would mean more pressure on parking space in Tamworth Road itself which is already heavily parked. We also pointed out that the provision of outdoor amenity space and play space for children is woefully small, and that the application offers no affordable housing.

The applicant has recently submitted a large number of amended plans, but almost none of the concerns expressed by ourselves and others have been addressed. There is still no clear offer of how much, if any, affordable housing is proposed, the ratio of flats to houses is still far too high, and the changes made to the height and massing of the apartment blocks are immaterial in terms of the character of the area.

**Hartham Leisure Centre**

Although they do not operate it directly, the Council own the leisure centre and now propose a two-storey extension incorporating a ground floor café with outside seating. Although we fully support the decision to invest in the improvement and expansion of the centre, we submitted an objection to the planning application because the external appearance of the proposed extension is not appropriate to its setting. The site is in one of Hertford’s precious Green Fingers, and in the Green Belt; it is also on Hartham, the town’s iconic and much appreciated public greenspace. One would not normally expect any additional building to be permitted in such a location,

but it obviously makes sense to improve and develop the existing centre rather than build an entirely new one somewhere else. We submitted that the objective should nevertheless be to maintain as far as possible the open, verdant character of Hartham, not urbanise it by creating a new building which stands out and draws attention to itself. The proposed addition is utilitarian in appearance, dour and stark, and the loss of nine trees makes matters worse.

Similar criticisms have been made by others, including the Town Council, and amended drawings have been submitted in response. Unfortunately, the extension still looks more suited to an industrial estate than open parkland surroundings, and we are likely to renew our objection.

### **Sites allocated for Housing in the District Plan**

Applications have been submitted for two sites in Sele – *Archers Spring* and *land west of Thieves Lane* – and for the former *Bengeo Nursery site*. The proposals largely comply with the requirements of the District Plan and it would therefore have been inappropriate to object, but we have submitted observations on certain aspects. All three schemes raise serious issues, mentioned below, about travel and the provision of health facilities which it is probably not realistic to expect individual developers to address, but these wider issues do serve to indicate some priorities for the development of the Council's planning policies.

#### *Archers Spring (342 dwellings) and Thieves Lane (254 dwellings)*

For Archers Spring (north side of Welwyn Road) the application is in outline and does not give a clear commitment to affordable housing but indicates a figure of about 20%. We therefore called on the Council to insist on compliance with the affordable housing policy in the District Plan, which requires 40%.

Neither site makes provision for medical or retail facilities, although there are financial contributions towards education. We argued that, for a combined development of this size, the need for facilities like shops, schools and surgeries should be considered at the outset, in terms both of funding and of physical location too. We also called for a reappraisal of the pedestrian and cycle links between Sele and other parts of the town.

#### *Bengeo Nursery (52 dwellings)*

As in Sele the main concerns about this application are about social infrastructure and travel. Although the developers have agreed to make a number of financial contributions to, for example, schools and library services, there would be no contribution to any aspect of health services. The reason seems to be a systemic one, in that contributions can only be accepted in support of specific schemes which are 'in the pipeline', but the relevant health service bodies are unable, because of the way the NHS is structured, to compile a programme of committed schemes. The regulations do not allow contributions to be made towards future expenditure which, though clearly necessary, is as yet unallocated to a specific scheme. The result is a gap in provision which will reduce the quality of life both for existing residents and newcomers. The developers have confirmed that no request has been received from the NHS.

As to travel, despite the proposed free passes, the reality is that there is no hope of any significant reduction in car use based on the present infrequent and unreliable bus services; and for cycling to become a realistic proposition for most people there would need to be a network of segregated cycleways radiating from the town centre and the stations. Given recent government recognition of the need to give serious consideration to measures to combat climate change, tokenistic references to 'sustainable transport' are no longer acceptable.

## Mangrove Road

District Plan Policy HERT5 provides for around 50 homes on land to the west of Mangrove Road, and is the only residential allocation in Hertford for which no planning application has yet been made. Members of the committee have, however taken part in preliminary ‘master planning’ meetings with the developer, the Council and local residents.

## Hertford Theatre

In June reports began to appear in the *Mercury* and on the web about bold and forward-looking plans for the future of Hertford Theatre. But the picture illustrating the *Mercury* article (*Support for a ‘smaller version of Southbank’*) was a timely warning of what could happen if the design of the building were indeed to emulate the dated ‘South Bank’ style of architecture, and several members expressed misgivings about the artists’ impressions. We wrote to the Leader of East Herts Council, Cllr Haysey, supporting the project in principle but warning that it is unwise to assume that all the elements justified as part of the business case can be accommodated satisfactorily on the site, especially as the project involves the extension of an existing building rather than a new structure. To ensure that the refurbished theatre is an iconic building worthy of its central position in the town and in the life of the town we suggested that some form of architectural competition would be needed to secure a design which is striking and innovative, but sympathetic to its setting.

Since then design work has started and the theatre director and the architects have made presentations to people associated with the theatre and to the public. We took the opportunity to question whether the Council should be investing so much in this project at a time when public investment may be needed to kickstart the redevelopment of Bircherley Green. As to the design, it appears that the option of building upwards has been discarded for structural

reasons, and that the design approach will be to remove the single-storey elements wrapped round the main auditorium (which would remain) and replace them with new structures to accommodate the additional facilities proposed. There are no plans yet about where theatre patrons will be able to park. The committee will comment further as the evolving plans emerge in exhibitions or on the Council’s website, and we encourage individual members to do the same.

## Aldi supermarket

The new Aldi, on the site of the *Which?* offices, is now under construction. The planning approval was accompanied by a Planning Agreement, negotiated between Aldi and the Council, which commits Aldi to contribute towards the cost of improving the existing pedestrian underpass. We pointed out that this particular subway is a lengthy and particularly unappealing one, more prone to flooding than the others on Gascoyne Way, and suggested that it would be far better to replace it with a pelican crossing. Spare capacity in the Aldi car park in the evening could potentially be useful for patrons of Hertford Theatre, and perhaps help to avoid any need to construct a second storey in the St Andrew St car park – a possibility which has been mooted but which might run into considerable opposition from nearby homes and businesses. In view of the prospect of the theatre being enlarged and the uncertainty surrounding other parking in the town centre, we urged the Council to reconsider the option of a surface crossing of Gascoyne Way at the Aldi site.

It is no secret that the County Highways Department, who are responsible for the A414, have been opposed to any more surface crossings, but that could change in the light of current thinking about the need to improve conditions for pedestrians and cyclists. Cllr Deering responded to our letter, thanking us for contributing to the debate.

### **The Corn Exchange**

The proprietors of the Corn Exchange approached the Society for help in ensuring that the building remains available as a music venue. They reported that their landlord had expressed an interest in converting the building to residential apartments. We said that we would certainly wish the Corn Exchange to continue in its current use, both for its value as a public venue and for its historic and architectural interest, and offered to work with them to get the building designated as an 'Asset of Community Value'.

ACVs were introduced by the Localism Act 2011. They are defined as buildings or land the use of which is of value to the community and which the community wishes to continue in that use. The local authority has to keep a list of them, and nominations can only be made by community groups, not individuals - hence the need for the Society to become involved. ACV status can be a material consideration when deciding whether or not to grant planning permission for a change of use, and the ACV procedure has most often been used to try to save pubs, but other things can be nominated. The formal nomination was submitted to the Council in October and a decision is expected in early December.

### **Rickneys Quarry**

The County Council have still not determined the application to extend Rickneys Quarry. However East Herts Council (who cannot decide minerals applications but have to be consulted on them) wrote to the County in July asking them to reconsider whether the application is in fact valid; they cited the same point of law which we had previously raised with the County Council. The case officer had advised us that he was taking legal advice and would let us know the outcome; he later said that advice had been received, but then we heard nothing more. Surely, if the lawyers had decided the application is valid, the officer would have told us so and the Council

would have proceeded to determine it one way or the other.

In his most recent email the case officer says "We are still waiting to hear from Hansons to see whether they wish to pursue the planning application in its current format or whether they intend to withdraw the application and submit a fresh one." But in the meantime the existing "mothballed" quarry remains unrestored and local residents have no certainty about what is likely to happen. The County should not be waiting on the quarry owners, but should take action now by either rejecting the application or deciding it, and then pursuing the owners to carry out the restoration work which the original permission for the quarry required.

### **The Gasworks site, Marshgate Drive**

The application for over 380 dwellings, over 80% of them flats, was refused for a large number of reasons, including those which we included in our objection reported in the Spring Newsletter. The applicants have appealed, and the inquiry was scheduled to begin on 20 November.

### **The Bridge House**

The proposal to replace this former pub with a two-storey building with retail on the ground floor and 14 flats above, to which we had objected, was refused and went to appeal. In July an Inspector dismissed the appeal. An alternative scheme for nine houses on the site already has permission, and work seems to be in progress.

### **Media House, Ware Road**

In August last year the Council refused permission for an extra storey of flats to be added to Media House, the former office building in Ware Road once occupied by the *Mercury*. We had objected, because the resulting building would have been more bulky and taller than most of its neighbours, and would have dominated the street scene, including the adjacent Listed building occupied by Network Homes. The applicants appealed. The Inspector concurred with our view and that of the



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planning officer, and in September the appeal was dismissed.

### Gates of Hertford

In June Renaissance Retirement Ltd applied to build 36 sheltered apartments on the Gates site in Gascoyne Way. We objected, mainly on the ground that the proposed building would be too high when seen in relation to the historic houses in West Street, and taller than the adjacent Pimlico Court. We also expressed concern about the continuing loss of employment land in the town. However, the matter was never decided, because in November the application was withdrawn.

Report by Peter Norman

### Bircherley Green Diary

*February 2016* - Hertford Town Centre Urban Design Strategy (prepared jointly by County Council, East Herts Council and Hertford Town Council) published - containing policies for redevelopment of Bircherley Green (essentially “mixed development”) - preparation of the strategy involving Stakeholder Visioning Workshops. Policies adopted by East Herts Council for purposes of Development Management.

*January 2018* - Planning permission issued, in line with adopted Strategy, including residential uses, retail uses and a hotel to be provided by Premier Inn. Subsequently buildings were demolished on the part of the site to be used to build the hotel.

*March 2019* - Spring edition of Civic Society Newsletter referred to *Mercury* report that work on site had “ground to a halt”. Subsequently the car park, bus station waiting room and toilets closed and centre boarded up.

*May* - Following Open Letter from Grahams Jewellers regarding declining footfall, Civic Society sought clarification from agent Savills, developer Wrenbridge and East Herts Council regarding reasons for delay.

*10<sup>th</sup> June* - Wrenbridge announced that although proposed Premier Inn hotel might still go ahead, they no longer intended to proceed with the rest of the approved development.

*16<sup>th</sup> July* - Civic Society members sent “Call for Proposals” inviting ideas for consideration in preparation of a new scheme. Responses were received from over 30 members and from a local residents Association. In edited and, later, summarised form these ideas were passed on to Councillors and to the subsequent new owner.

*31<sup>st</sup> July* - Site sold to Chase New Homes Ltd.

*11<sup>th</sup> August* - Open Community Campaigning workshop organised by Local Labour Party - “to give local people an opportunity to share their concerns about Hertford and want to work together to find solutions”, “inviting

thoughts about what’s happening in our county town”. From this meeting arose a non-political campaign titled “We are Hertford” focussing on a “vision” for the town centre and particularly Bircherley Green.

*August 21<sup>st</sup>* - Peter Godfrey, Peter Norman and Terry Betts met Linda Haysey (East Herts Council Leader), Richard Cassidy (Chief Executive) and Kaye Mead (Principal Planning Officer, Policy and Implementation). Linda Haysey confirmed that an opportunity to purchase the Bircherley Green site had been offered to the Council but that the price requested had been considered unacceptable. Purpose of meeting to discuss Bircherley Green generally.

*16<sup>th</sup> September* - Gary Barton Managing Director Chase New Homes receives suggestions from Civic Society members - “passed to Project Director”.

*14<sup>th</sup> October* - Meeting setting up Hertford Hub (traders and town centre businesses organisation) - aim “to preserve, promote and protect commercial viability of Hertford”.

Martin Berry, Harry LeCarpentier and Tony Emmott (Civic Society member) had previously met with Ausra Bitinaite (Town Council Town Centre Officer), Andrew Figgis (EHDC Economic Development Officer) and Ben Wood (Communications and Marketing for EHDC).

This meeting had led to Martin Berry being invited to attend East Herts Council Bircherley Green Steering Group.

*15<sup>th</sup> October* - Initial meeting of East Herts Council Bircherley Green Steering Group. (Group consisting of County, District and Town Council members and officers. Terry Betts (representing Civic Society) and Martin Berry (representing traders and town centre businesses) invited to attend meetings. Chase New Homes showed Design Concept images of their proposed mixed-use scheme to include space for NHS facilities.

*22<sup>nd</sup> October* - Public Meeting attended by over 100 people chaired jointly by Civic Society Chairman Malcolm Ramsay and Josh Dean representing “We are Hertford Campaign” - 65 Feedback Slips given in. Alan Ward (Planning and Design Director Chase New Homes) present as observer. Video “Highlights” of meeting and comments and suggestions passed on to Chase New Homes and to County and District Councillors representing Hertford and to members of Hertford Town Council. A more detailed report and the video highlights can be seen at [www.hertfordcivicsociety.org.uk](http://www.hertfordcivicsociety.org.uk).

*25<sup>th</sup> October* - Alan Ward gave presentation to members of Civic Society Committee repeating details of proposed mixed-use scheme previously shown to East Herts Council Steering Group.

*5<sup>th</sup> November* - Chase concept for Bircherley Green (Visuals and summary) circulated to Civic Society members and to County, District and Town Councillors.

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*7<sup>th</sup> November* - Chase attended “drop in” event organised by Hertford Hub at Duncombe Arms where details of latest version of proposed scheme were described.

*27<sup>th</sup> November* - Exhibition of proposals.

*Forthcoming* - Meeting with Chase Homes to be attended by Brendan Clifford (representative of Folly Island Residents).

Terry Betts

### **Civic Society Visit to New Social Housing in Sele**

“A massive regeneration that will hopefully give the new residents a sense of pride.” That was how one of our group described the major redevelopment on The Ridgeway at Sele Farm, by Network Homes. It delivers 50 new homes for shared ownership and 70 for ‘affordable’ rent, with a relatively high number of family houses. There is deliberately little difference in appearance between the houses for sale and those for rent. In addition, 17 existing homes are being refurbished. The former buildings were vast, linked, deck-access 1960s creations, which had remained a hard-to-let management problem despite a £6m Council refurbishment in 1990-91.

Our visit was on a sunny evening in May 2019, just a few weeks before new residents arrived to fill the houses and apartment blocks. The Network Homes team including their architect explained that they had consulted extensively and had also thought long and hard before opting for demolition rather than refurbishment of the previous buildings. It was concluded that refurbishment would not be able to address the inherent design faults of the homes, and therefore new-build, despite costing twice as much on the same number of housing units, delivered better homes and better financial value. In this short account we can only cover a few indicative details. The new family houses are intended to be ‘lifetime homes’, and come complete with ‘soft spots’ where, in later years/life, lifts can be

installed with relatively little difficulty. The possibility of including solar panels had been investigated, but the 18-year payback period had been prohibitive. Instead, the houses have extremely high levels of insulation - and not only gas central heating but also sophisticated ventilation whereby, in the winter, outgoing hot air helps to warm cold air coming in. The buildings incorporate appreciable amounts of storage space including roughly the same number of cycle racks as there are car parking spaces. Streets have been created in place of ‘no-man’s land’ around the old buildings.

Our group of eight Civic Society members was accompanied by a smaller group of Councillors, some of them familiar faces and others only just elected for the first time. It’s fair to say that we were all impressed by more or less everything we saw. This included the fantastic views, from the higher levels, out over the Goldings estate in one direction and towards the outlying trees of Panshanger Park in another. Network Homes are rightly proud of what they have achieved for people at Sele Farm.

Malcolm Ramsay

### **Hertford Bypass/A414 Corridor and Tramway: Update**

The saga over a potential Hertford bypass continues its permutations. At the end of 2018, Hertfordshire County Council (HCC) proposed a strategy for upgrading the A414 which had a Hertford bypass as its key feature. A Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) came a poor second, in terms of East-West transport across the County.

In January 2019, Hertford Civic Society organised a public meeting at which HCC presented its plans - which were resoundingly rejected by most of the 200 people present. Might this have influenced Hertford Town Council and East Herts Council when they subsequently responded critically to the HCC transport consultation? EHC argued strongly for the MRT to be prioritised. Members of the public also tended to be critical of the bypass



proposal in their responses to the consultation, as was the Civic Society.

HCC only published these results in October, alongside its fresh thinking. This time, the MRT was prioritised, with the development of the bypass being put on hold at least for the time being.

HCC has given itself plenty of room for manoeuvre. It is still investigating what the MRT might comprise. The Civic Society has been pressing the case for an East-West tramway, not least by means of a video. In a letter in October to Councillors attending the HCC transport meeting to authorise the new strategy, we restated key aspects of the tramway which the Civic Society has been championing from the outset (see note below), and made two other points. First, we remained sceptical about the feasibility of restricting half the lanes of Gascoyne Way just to buses, given that only 40% of the traffic on the A414 in rush hour is ‘through traffic’. Secondly, we highlighted the awkward fact that 30% of the rush-hour traffic on the A414 in Hertford comprises staff in local government commuting to/from their workplaces, notably County Hall. At the start of the October meeting, the chairman, Councillor Derrick Ashley, made a point of publicly thanking Hertford Civic Society for our letter. And, during the meeting itself, one of the other Councillors quoted from the script in the video, when he said that it might be better to spend a billion pounds on a tramway benefitting a string of towns rather than half that amount on just the Hertford bypass.

Unfortunately, the controversy about the bypass has diverted attention from aspects of the A414 strategy which could command wide support: improving existing local bus services; making cycling and walking for short journeys safer and more pleasant; and reducing the need for travel by encouraging more home/remote working. We have argued that the time for action on these is now - it is not enough to mention them as something which it is desirable to consider in the

future. So, whatever happens next, Hertford Civic Society will continue to take an interest in these sustainable travel issues - preferably in partnership with other local organisations, such as the still-very-new steering group for Hertford as a Sustainable Travel Town.

### **Tramway: Brief Note**

The original published proposal for the tramway, by transport expert Reg Harman, can be downloaded from the home page of Hertford Civic Society, and the home page also offers access to a short video (8 minutes) prepared by the Society about the tramway principles, benefits and possible route round Hertford. There was a big-screen showing of this video at Welwyn Film Society on 24 November. Otherwise: <https://www.hertfordcivicsociety.org.uk>

Malcolm Ramsay

## **PREVIOUS TALKS TO MEMBERS AND OUTINGS**

### **The Cowpers at Hertford Castle**

“Those of a nervous disposition should leave immediately!” The warning from historian Clare Gittings could not have been starker. “These people I am going to talk about are pretty ghastly.”

But no-one left, riveted to their seats at the March meeting of HCS, as she sketched-out the dysfunctional lives of the Cowpers at Hertford Castle 300 years ago. It was a family embroiled in intrigue, depravity, murder allegations and the rescue of a witch condemned to death.

Over the course of sixteen years—from 1700 to 1716—Lady Sarah Cowper kept a truly remarkable diary - seven leather-bound volumes totalling more than 2,300 pages of intimate commentary - revealing the depth of her discontent. On one level, the diaries are about the spiritual life, with observations aiming to be life elevating, Clare Gittings said. However, the were also “a safety valve at moments of impotent rage”. It was an

age, she said, of extreme restrictions on women's lives, when property, money, everything was handed to the husband on marriage.

Sarah Holled, orphaned and wealthy by the age of 20, married Sir William Cowper, impoverished son of a Royalist, who had died in prison for his allegiance during the English Civil War, when William was a child. He had title but no wealth; she, wealth but no title - a classic C17 marriage. Though they married for love, it was disastrous. He was a tyrant prone to violence, the diaries suggest; she saw procreation as the only point of marriage. She was 26 when her fourth child was born, "since when I have remained pure".

As a result, William thought whoring was the least of sins in a marriage that dragged on for 40 years. He was affectionate in his letters when absent. But Sarah's response was to write: "... 'twas a pity that such good meaning could be spoiled in the management." And when he died suddenly, she noted in her diary: "This surprising providence has hit us in astonishment". Then she said no more, as if he had never been.

Sarah had four children, two died in the Plague and Great Fire. William and Spencer survived only to disappoint her. Sarah writes of the "...trouble my sons have caused..." of "much weeping" and having "...turned me into stone". Both had mistresses. William (twice married) was nicknamed Will Bigamy by Jonathan Swift, for good reason. Elizabeth Cullen, William's favourite, even bore him two sons. Sarah's disdain for Elizabeth is shown in a diary reference to her as "an habitual and impenitent sinner" after her death in 1703. Sarah later wrote that she intended at her death to be laid in a churchyard "near the whore, and I shall not be the worse for that".

The sons may have had notable careers in politics and law, William was the first Lord High Chancellor of Great Britain, Spencer was a lawyer then a judge. But they still brought Sarah misery. At one point, Spencer was tried for the murder of Hertford Quaker, Sarah Stout. Dubious medical

evidence got him off and the death was judged suicide, or else he would have hanged.

Was it murder or suicide? Clare Gittings said: "We do not know what happened but the likeliest thing is that Sarah did drown herself but as to how far Spencer was responsible for this, it is very likely. He should bear moral responsibility if nothing else."

Another strand of the diaries explored in the talk looked at Sarah's appalled view of the servants. Her diary reports their cursing, swearing, cheating and, since servants were forbidden to marry, illicit sex and abortions. London servants coming to Hertford were bored out of their minds. One reason Sarah gives for not wanting to come to Hertford in the summer was: "I'm ashamed to carry such rogues and whores into other people's families".

One redeeming action of the Cowpers in this period was William Cooper's decision to adopt the cause of Jane Wenham, the last woman tried and convicted for witchcraft in 1711 at Hertford assizes. Earl Cowper pleaded with Queen Anne for a pardon and she lived under the protection of the Cowper family for the rest of her life.

Ian Nash

### **Essex visit: Templar Barns, Coggeshall and Bardfield Winery**

Our summer expedition was to Essex, with a focus on some of the finest timber-frame buildings in the country.

We went first to Cressing Temple, where we had a guided tour of some splendidly preserved farm buildings, including one of the biggest medieval barns in Europe. The estate was given to the Knights Templar in 1137 by Matilda, wife of King Stephen, and was one of many they held in England. They were a military religious order with the task of protecting pilgrims and Crusaders in the Holy Land, funding this activity from the profits of their estates, exemption from taxes and by setting up an early international banking

system. By 1300 this single estate covered about 2,000 acres and included five mills, two markets and an annual fair.

The great aisled barns each required up to twelve oak trees in their construction and have been said to resemble cathedrals, the largest measuring 118 by 45 feet. Using tree ring dating and the style of the joints holding the timbers together, we know that they were constructed in the first half of the C13 and were roofed with tiles made from local clay. Crown posts were added to some buildings in the C16 to strengthen the roofs, which could weigh over fifty tons.

Wagons piled high with the harvest sheaves would enter by a large door in the side wall and leave unloaded by a much lower door on the opposite side. The differently sized doors also created a through-draft which helped in winnowing the grain after threshing. In the storage barns, holes in the gable ends just under the roof line allowed for good ventilation, which kept the temperature within a range of 7°C all year round.

Nowadays, the barns are home to several types of bats as well as swallows and house martins, who help to preserve the barns by eating pests that could damage the timbers.



Cressing has many other interesting features, such as a reconstruction of a medieval garden, which includes scented plants for deodorising the house, and herbs for medicine, brewing and dyeing as well as vegetables and fruit for the table. There is also a knot garden, an arbour and a brick fountain, which had been a highly prestigious feature in the C16, although due to the flatness of the land it only operated when pumped by a team of three boys. A mulberry tree recalls the Huguenot silk workers who came into England as Protestant refugees from France in the C17.



*Life-size model of agricultural workers*

The Templars became very rich and after the Crusaders lost all the territory they had gained in the Holy Land, they concentrated their activities on money lending, which made them unpopular, particularly with King Philip IV of France. They were accused of blasphemy, some seem to have 'confessed' under torture and the whole order was suppressed by Pope Clement in 1312, who transferred their property to the Knights Hospitallers. In England, this property was seized by Henry VIII at the Reformation and much of it passed eventually into private hands; in the case of Cressing, to the Smyth Neville family. After



passing through many other owners, the estate was finally split up in 1987 and the farm buildings came into the possession of Essex County Council.

Our lunch break was in Coggeshall, which is also blessed with a wealth of timber-frame buildings. In particular, there are two National Trust properties -the Grange Barn and Paycocke's house and garden. The house was built in 1509 for a wealthy cloth merchant, but went through very mixed fortunes, including being turned over to industrial uses. It was restored in the early C20 by its then owners, the Buxton family, who also created an Arts and Crafts style garden, and now houses collections of furniture and household goods.



*Arts and Crafts garden at the rear of Paycocke's house*

More information at

<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/paycockes-house-and-garden>

We ended our tour at Bardfield Vineyard, where we were able to sample still and sparkling white wines produced from the Bacchus vines planted here in the 1980s and a rosé made from Pinot Noir

grapes planted much more recently. The vineyard is now fully organic.

The wine tasting took place in another large timber- framed barn, this time constructed in the 1540s in a Continental style of workmanship. The estate was part of Anne of Cleves' settlement on the annulment of her marriage to Henry VIII and the barn was used to store the hay that was winter feed for the deer in the park; appropriately, one of Bardfield's wines is named after her.

Both Crossing Temple and Bardfield Vineyard are interesting examples of how agricultural businesses have diversified in recent years into activities such as wedding venues, holiday accommodation and general interest and educational activities.

Sue Jones. Pictures - Ian Nash

## A WIDER VIEW

### **Should Permitted Development Rights be extended to help High Streets diversify?**

In order to help the high street to diversify its activities, the Government, after consultation, has extended Permitted Development Rights. This allows property owners greater scope to alter, extend and change the use of their premises outside of local authority planning controls.

Civic Voice has warned that while change of use and some conversion of buildings is necessary, there is a danger it will lead to poor design and developments at odds with the best interests of the community. Joan Humble, chair of Civic Voice, warned that town centres could suffer without "collaborative planning and long-term visioning with the community at its heart, and the historic environment as its USP". Read the report at <http://www.civicvoice.org.uk/news/civic-voice-responds-to-the-governments-high-streets-pdr-consultation//>

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