

## ASSOCIATION OF NORTH THAMES AMENITY SOCIETIES

Welcome to this trial paper issue of our new online Newsletter, collated by your webmaster from contributions from seven ANTAS member societies during the run-up to our 2012 AGM. We are very grateful to contributors and we hope to repeat this process regularly in the future.

### Herts welcomes Surrey

St Albans Civic Society was very pleased to welcome members of The Guildford Society on a visit to St Albans in July. We haven't had a visit like this for some years, so it was with slight trepidation that we set about organising the day.

Following a specific request from The Guildford Society, a presentation was arranged that centred on the 2009 'City Vision' exercise. This had been set up by the Council, with wide support from the community. The Guildford Society is trying to promote a similar 'Vision' for Guildford and was interested to hear how it had worked in St Albans.

The coach party from Guildford arrived, and assembled in the historic headquarters of Samuel Ryder (of Ryder cup fame). An officer from the Council's spatial planning team described the City Vision exercise, and a Councillor shared his views on the public realm. The visitors were then taken on a guided walk round the city centre, picking out buildings and development areas highlighted in the City Vision. Lunch was in another building associated with Samuel Ryder's seed business.

The afternoon included a walk through the historic mediaeval streets of the city, and finished with a special visit to the second

oldest building (after the Abbey) in St Albans - a 14th century agricultural barn still in remarkable condition.

The overall visit seems to have been well received. Personally, I was surprised and pleased at the level of knowledge and interest in our local affairs from members of another society. My concluding observation is that such inter-Society visits can be very worthwhile, and I advocate them to all ANTAS member societies.

*Peter Trevelyan,  
St Albans Civic Society*

- Contents
- Herts welcomes Surrey
- Town Hall saved by Community action
- A Transport Hub for Oxford
- Impact on Boroughs from County policies
- Neighbourhood Plans – a tactical dilemma
- Have a Voice - a Professional One
- The Cookham Society and 'Inappropriate' Development

# E-NEWSLETTER SUMMER 2013

## Town Hall saved by Community action

Something quite remarkable has just been achieved in Hitchin. Two separate decisions in principle had been made by the local authority, North Hertfordshire District Council, both seen as unavoidable if essential cost reductions were to be achieved. The first concerned the Council's Museum service, with separate town-based museums in Hitchin and Letchworth Garden City. A review in 2005 recommended that both museums should close and be replaced by a new district-wide museum. At the same time, the costs of operating and maintaining Hitchin Town Hall were seen by the Council as unsupportable, and there was a very real possibility of the Town Hall, a fine example of late-Victorian and Edwardian civic architecture, would be closed and the building offered for redevelopment. The Council then devised a plan to convert the Town Hall into a District-wide Museum, thinking that Hitchin people would be so pleased to get the museum that they would not object to is said to have one of the finest sprung dance floors in the country. All this would have been lost in the conversion to a museum. The local community, and most specifically Hitchin Initiative (a not-for-profit company representing business and civic interests in Hitchin) mounted a campaign to save the Town Hall. Hitchin



Hitchin Museum – Now Closed

provided the leadership for an imaginative scheme whereby the main hall could be retained as a public venue while other ancillary areas consisting of a gymnasium and workman's hall would be converted into a new museum. The creation of a separate entrance to the museum

required the acquisition and eventual demolition of an adjoining shop, adding to the capital cost of the conversion. With essential refurbishment, making the building DDA compliant, and the provision of a café and other facilities, there was inevitably a considerable funding gap over and above

the Council's original scheme.

Key to raising the necessary capital has been the offer of a grant and loan from the government's Adventure Capital Fund, linked to money raised in the local community. That part of the Town Hall to become a community facility would be vested in a new company, Hitchin Town Hall Limited. A complex agreement was then negotiated to satisfy the needs of the government's fund, the District Council as freehold owner and operator of the museum, and Hitchin Town Hall Limited, itself a Registered Charity. The complexity of the deal was exacerbated by strict time limits imposed by the government fund, time-consuming procedures of

the District Council, a separate Trust covering the gymnasium and workman's hall, and issues relating to the acquisition of the adjoining shop. Indeed, Adventure Capital Fund has said this is a unique example of the fund working in conjunction with both a community group and a local authority. Ultimately the whole deal depended on approval by the District Council no later than 15 October 2012, otherwise it would have lapsed and the finance would have been lost. On that date the Council gave the necessary approvals and this remarkable and imaginative community-based scheme is now going ahead.

*John Davies,  
Hitchin Society*

## A Transport Hub for Oxford

Oxford has suffered from an inadequate railway station for decades. The current building is wholly unworthy of the city, and at a practical level there is very limited capacity for bus stops at the station, and totally inadequate bicycle parking; hence interchange facilities between transport modes are appalling. To cap it all, the station discharges buses, taxis, cars, and thousands of bicycles and pedestrians into Frideswide Square, the euphemism for a traffic maelstrom forming the gateway to the black hole of the Botley Road railway bridge.

The situation has been exacerbated recently by enormous increases in both rail freight and passenger traffic. Commuting trains out of Oxford are the most congested in the country, with passenger numbers

50% up on 4 years ago. Line improvements outside Oxford have resulted in a 47% increase in freight traffic in a 12-month period. Further of all traffic growth is now stifled by the track configuration at Oxford station – the biggest bottleneck in the western region.

Oxford Civic Society harbours a vision for a new station, part of a genuine transport interchange, which would really present a gateway we could be proud of, to not only the city, but to the increasingly-important economic region. Unfortunately, inadequate space is now available at the existing station to enable addressing all the issues properly. However, a site some 600 metres south of the current station has become available, thus opening up a once-in-a-

century opportunity to develop a radical solution to all of Oxford's public transport woes, and release other benefits besides. Meanwhile, the Government has announced £9bn of funding for rail improvements in the western region. The Oxford Civic Society has been lobbying Ministers, MPs, all the local dignitaries and officials, Network Rail, the train operating companies, and commercial developers, for proper evaluation of the benefits, as well as the costs of a completely new station. This would combine rail, bus and bicycle facilities, straightforward access to the commercial centre of the city, exemplary design, and commercial development. We commissioned Arup to demonstrate the technical feasibility of this. A report prepared for Network Rail

shows that where stations have already been reconstructed, a 30% uplift in commercial property values resulted. If this was reproduced here, we are convinced our vision would be viable.

Whilst it may be more expensive than a cobbled-together, minimalist, expedient solution to the railway problems at the existing station site, we are urging that some vision be applied, to seize this unique opportunity. We are pressing for some joined-up thinking from all the parties which should be interested in providing Oxford, the whole of the local public transport network, and the region, with a comprehensive facility of which we can all be proud. This is, after all, no more than has already been provided at countless towns

and cities elsewhere in Europe. What is needed is some 19th century-style

entrepreneurial spirit and dynamic leadership; is this still around in the 21st

century? We shall have to see!

Peter Thompson, Oxford Civic Society

## Impact on Boroughs from County policies

Changes are taking place at County level that will impact local Boroughs in a way that make it much more difficult to exert any influence on what is to take place.

Examples of this in Welwyn Garden City, Hertfordshire, include:

The apparent refusal of County to pay for replacement or new lights in Conservation areas that match existing lighting goes against the entire "Conservation" idea as we will end up with "identikit" lighting and much else besides if we are to agree to

allow Herts County Council to go down this route. A similar decision suggests that County also no longer wish to match local lighting that may be outside a Conservation Area is also one that also fails to reflect local identity. Essentially, we have been told that the County is only willing to pay for standard lighting wherever this might be. We were told that either the Borough would have to pay for the extra cost of non standard lighting or else it would have to come from "locals" or local sponsorship.

We have recently seen off a plan to install advertisements on 26 roundabouts in this – a "garden city" – where advertising has been largely banned for more than 90 years but we expect it to be resurrected as an attempt by County authorities to capitalise on its ownership of certain other roundabouts. For our part we intend to resist any further attempt to detract from the amenity of the place. This initial attempt was withdrawn as we objected to all 26 planning applications.

The Welwyn Garden City Society has managed to exert a substantial influence on the local Borough and its policies over the years but decisions made by County are more remote and may be less liable to be influenced. For that reason, we do think that that these are issues that ANTAS should broach with County authorities as they are likely to influence many other amenity groups within the County.

*Shaun O'Reilly, Welwyn Garden City Society*

## Neighbourhood Plans – a tactical dilemma

With the increasing interest in exploring the pros and cons of pursuing a Neighbourhood Plan a tactical question will soon arise in the civil parish of Welwyn, which spreads over three physically separate settlements, linked administratively but with

distinctly different characters. The question will be whether to develop smaller and localised Neighbourhood Plans for each settlement which would perhaps bring greater community involvement in preference to a 'composite' Plan for the entire parish,

which might appear more logical to our Borough Council but risk a weaker identity across our disparate community. Practical issues such as the attitude of our local authority and the costs of preparation and implementation are clearly likely to be the determining

factors, but it will be helpful to learn the views and better still the experience of members who have faced a similar quandary.

*Jon Green, Welwyn Planning and Amenity Group*

## Have a Voice - a Professional One

The presentation on the Town Plan by Jed Griffiths, MA DipTP FRTPLI, at the Manor House was an outstanding success and more than fulfilled the Civic Society's objective of meeting the Town Council's request for feedback on the recently published Town Plan. Attendees included Mayor Stan Bull, Cllr. John Warren, Jill Jones Town Clerk, representatives of

BARD, the BCS Executive Committee and numerous townfolk with an interest in the future of Buntingford.

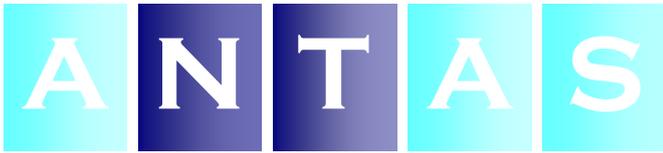
The presentation is too long to reproduce here but can be viewed on the Civic Society website and it is well worthwhile downloading it for future reference and use.

There are three recommendations in the paper which are summarised below. The situation is that at this stage a Neighbourhood Plan is not the first choice for action, but that the third recommendation should be promptly taken up in order to establish an agreed strategy and objectives against which to appraise

the East Herts Council plan for Buntingford.

The lead on this must come from Manor House and our elected representatives.

Recommendation 1: That the Town Council, together with the Civic Society and other local organisations should debate whether or not a formal Neighbourhood



ASSOCIATION OF NORTH THAMES AMENITY SOCIETIES

President
Dr Peter Diplock
Vice President
Diana Wethered
Chairman
Jon Green
Vice Chairman
Keith Robinson
Honorary Secretary
Andrew Sangster\*
Honorary Treasurer
Tony Fooks
Webmaster
Chris Woodman, CBE
Newsletter Editor
Merrin Molesworth

\* correspondence to:
25 West Street
Hertford
Hertfordshire
SG13 8EX
andrewsangster@onetel.com
01992 582594

RECIPROCAL MEMBERSHIPS
Chiltern Society
London Forum
www.antas.org.uk

- MEMBER SOCIETIES
Amersham Society
Aylesbury Society
Beaconsfield Society
Buckingham Society
Bishop's Stortford Civic Federation
Chesham Society
Cookham Society
Harpenden Society
Hertford Civic Society
High Wycombe Society
Hitcham & Taplow Society
Hitchin Society
Hughenden Valley Residents' Association
Marlow Society
Oxford Civic Society
Potters Bar Society
Radlett Society and Green Belt Association
St Albans Civic Society
Welwyn Garden City Society
Welwyn Planning and Amenity Group
Wendover Society

Plan is appropriate for Buntingford.

Recommendation 2: That, should the decision be made to proceed with a Neighbourhood Plan, the Town Council should discuss with other organisations and neighbouring parishes the extent of the area to be designated.

Recommendation 3: That, in the immediate future, the Town Council, together with the Civic Society and other local organisations, should scrutinise the emerging policies and proposals in the East Herts District and formulate a clear view on an appropriate strategy for the future planning of Buntingford.

Derek K Cooper, Buntingford Society

The Cookham Society and 'Inappropriate' Development

The Society is active and needs to remain so in view of the multiplicity of issues it must address. With some 1,600 Members it can claim to represent about a third of the population of the village, which obviously enhances its authority.

The core of the society's work is of course to defend Cookham against inappropriate development. This means that the Society does not oppose development as such but rather those schemes which are likely to be detrimental to the character or amenities of the village. To assist us in determining what is likely to be inappropriate the Society has worked with the Parish Council to produce a remarkable Village Design Statement, which will shortly be released for public consultation. This document carefully analyses the intrinsic character of the village both as a whole and on a street by street basis, with profuse illustrations and guidelines. It is intended to be a Supplementary Planning Document of the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead, playing a strong role in future planning decisions for Cookham by providing a basic reference guide to the core identity of the village. We believe that this is not only in the interests of residents but of all those who from near and far visit the place that our famous local artist, Sir Stanley Spencer, called 'a village made in heaven'.

Surveys have shown that the countryside, with a wide range of landscapes varying from the River Thames to hilly woodlands, is highly valued, to the extent that Cookham can be said to be defined by its green spaces. For this reason the Society has

been highly proactive in fighting against proposals which pose a threat to the Green Belt, which can be exceptionally narrow, in one case giving a separation between Cookham and neighbouring Maidenhead of only 700 metres, the smallest gap between settlements in the Royal Borough, and is seen as essential to preserve the character and distinctiveness of Cookham.

The Society also supports a range of local events to assist in fostering a strong community spirit. The Society's Newsletter is available online at the Society's website and gives a good picture of current priorities and concerns.

Pablo Dubois, Cookham Society