

AGM Talk 21.04.16

The AGM is always an opportunity to look back and look forwards. Tonight I want to concentrate on looking forward. As you know, much of the past year has been dominated with our responses to the Strategic Local Plan. We've done our best to provide public opportunities to debate the issues and to make representations according to what we feel to be in the best interests of the people of the Harpenden.

Whatever the outcomes of this planning process, I now want to talk optimistically about the future.

As so many people often say, we are very lucky to live in such a lovely place. The Harpenden Society, now entering its 87th year, continues to do all it can to promote what makes Harpenden a delightful place to live. The Society does this by

- using its convening power to bring people together to champion causes, like the redevelopment of the Red House and promoting volunteering and
- We hold public meetings on issues of concern, like school places, public transport, planning and so on.
- We are strictly non-party political but we do press our political representatives on these issues of concern and, hopefully, act as an effective ginger group.
- Finally, where we can, we act directly on issues, such as providing volunteers to keep the library open on Wednesday afternoons, establishing the Volunteer for Harpenden website, encouraging collective action to keep our High Street thriving and providing information and advice on community safety issues.

Looking forward there are three potentially very exciting developments which we will be doing our best to help bring about. The first, which you all know about, is the redevelopment of the old Red House site. There are important meetings still to come and we await the Secretary of State's approval but we have every reason to believe that within the next three years we will have a modern health and wellbeing centre on the site.

Although there are many people who have worked hard to bring us to this stage, I can confidently say that we wouldn't be where we are today without the tireless efforts of a few key members of the Society.

The second development, which I hope we will hear much more about later this evening, is the creation of much better family facilities in Rothamsted Park. As you may remember several years ago we came up with plan for a cafe and community facility in the Park, designed by our architect committee member, Tim Riley. It created a lot of interest at the time but for a number of practical reasons it couldn't go ahead. Since then we have continued to press for refreshment and toilet facilities in the Park, combined with the re-location and refurbishment of the children's play area. We were delighted when Pegasus Life came up with a plan for the redevelopment of the James Marshal Building, which included the kind of facilities we had been arguing for. This is why we supported the plan and why we are pleased that it has finally gained planning permission. I will leave it to Tim and Emma to update you on this.

Our concern now is to press those with interests in the Park to work together to take a holistic approach to this development and redesign the whole area taking in a new children's play area and the sports facilities. Again I hope we will be hearing more about this from Julian Daly later. I say, hope, because the developments I am suggesting are but rumours so far, even if very exciting rumours.

The third development is probably longer term but also now seems to be being talked about in places where it matters and, again, Julian Daly may have more to say about this later. This is the redevelopment, perhaps even complete rebuilding, of the Public Halls. Harpenden deserves a state of the art theatre and an arts hub. Most other towns of our size have much better arts facilities than ours. There is an opportunity to combine such a development with the provision of new flats, which would partly help to pay for the whole thing. We will continue to champion this cause and hopefully this will happen before too long.

I shouldn't finish without clarifying my own position. It has been an honour to lead the Society's work over the last five years. I couldn't have done it without a great deal of support from committee members, particularly from the two people receiving our 'without whom' awards this evening. Nevertheless the job is a responsible one. It requires energy, commitment and imagination regarding the potential of a civic society like ours. I've committed to one more year but will definitely be standing down next April, at the latest. It's not that I couldn't carry on. But I'll have done 6 years and it is time for someone else with fresh energy and ideas to take over. Who that will be I don't yet know. We are busy looking for the right person, probably someone who has just retired and has the time to do the job. If you know anyone who might be interested please let me know and I will follow it up. It would be good to get someone involved early so we can have a decent hand over period.

My thanks to you all for your continuing support.