

Local Plan 'saga' continues

St Albans District Council's repeated attempts to draft a Local Plan acceptable to central government inspectors have entered a new phase, following rejection of the most recent version, as reported in our Autumn newsletter. SADC's controlling Liberal Democrat administration, under its leader Cllr Chris White, made the decision in mid-November to withdraw the failed Plan altogether and prepare a replacement draft from scratch, rather than attempting to tinker with the rejected draft.

Cllr Jamie Day, portfolio holder for planning, said 'we felt we had little choice but to withdraw the draft, given the disappointing response of the (government) planning inspectors. By starting anew, we have an opportunity to better address issues which have become ever more pressing since the withdrawn draft was composed.



Reduced Green Belt threat in prospect

'These include the need to recognise the impact of climate change and the need to ensure that any new developments will meet strong sustainability standards. We also have to bear in mind that the government has proposed major changes to the planning system and that may alter the whole Local Plan system'.

Opposition parties, notably the Conservatives led by Cllr Mary Maynard, have been vociferous in their criticism of the LibDems' handling of the Local Plan issue. Julian Daly, the councillor representing Harpenden West, claims that 'work on the Local Plan has drifted'. He says that eight of the eleven scheduled planning policy committee meetings were cancelled.

Just before Christmas SADC revealed its 'Corporate plan and budget plans' with the tackling of climate change and COVID recovery as prime objectives, along with the provision of more social housing'. Measures to achieve those aims were, said council leader Chris White, included in a draft Corporate Plan (*Editor's note: not to be confused with the statutory Local Plan discussed above*) and budget for the period 2021-2026 agreed by the council cabinet on December 17. He made clear that SADC, in the next financial year, faced a 'huge' gap

between income and expenditure of between £2 million and £4.7 million.

On social housing he said the council would itself need to become 'a large-scale housing developer by various means, including through partnerships with other (unspecified) organisations'. Projects controlled by the council should, he said, involve 40% social housing, measure by projected value.

Conspicuously absent from Cllr White's pre-Christmas statement was any mention of the much-criticised radical plan unveiled a year earlier, for SADC to purchase, for some £18 million, the 'mixed block of commercial lets (ie shops) and flats' on the west side of Harpenden High Street, extending through to Leyton Road between Church Green and Lloyds Bank. The proposal, reliant on substantial borrowing, would, it was claimed, provide the council with ongoing rental income. But it has clearly been thrown into question by the COVID-driven drop in demand for town centre retail premises and their realisable rental income.

According to Cllr Daly the LibDem administration says it still wants to go ahead with that acquisition but is now hamstrung – pending legal advice – by a change (in November) of the lending rules imposed by the Public Works Loan Board.

Government U-turn could reduce Green Belt threat

Immediately following the departure from Downing Street of the Prime Minister's special adviser Dominic 'Barnard Castle' Cummings, housing minister Robert Jenrick signalled a U-turn in the government's house building strategy – which had been formulated, allegedly under Cummings' influence, only a few months earlier.

There now promises to be a reduction in the number of new homes which local authorities such as SADC will be required to provide in coming years. A key aim of the policy reversal is to address environmental concerns, most obviously by easing the pressure to build homes on Green Belt land.

Given the SADC LibDems' frequent pledges on sustainability and protection of the local environment, the government's housing U-turn should prove positively influential in the council's drafting of its 'all new' Local Plan.

COVID delays Sports Centre opening

While much of the the country’s attention on Christmas Eve was focussed that day on the finalisation of the Brexit deal, another, less definitive, announcement was made by St Albans District Council – that the official opening of Harpenden’s new Sports Centre had been postponed because of tightening COVID-19 restrictions.

The eye-catching facility on the edge of Rothamsted Park had been due to open its doors on Monday January 4. But Hertfordshire’s late inclusion into the Tier Four pandemic category regrettably required all gyms and swimming pools to be closed.

The centre will now open, says SADC, as soon as possible after the district is moved back to a lower tier, adding that some time will also be needed to allow for staff training by 1Life, the company contracted to manage the centre.

Liberal Democrat councillor Anthony Rowlands, portfolio holder for leisure activities, said ‘Having toured the building several times, I know that the people of Harpenden are going to be hugely impressed by what is on offer and feel that it was well worth waiting for’.



The new centre incorporates the town’s existing 25-metre-long swimming pool, albeit now with large windows looking out on to the park, as well as an all-new learner pool, 80-station gym, multi-purpose sports hall, sauna and café. ‘Early Bird’ sports centre membership is being offered for £29.99 a month, offering full access to all facilities and exercise classes.

Meanwhile work is progressing on the adjacent Harpenden Culture Centre, embodying, within the shell of the former sports hall, what will be the 511-seat Eric Morecambe theatre, together with a new Harpenden Museum and two meeting rooms. It is on schedule, says councillor Robert Donald, SADC’s portfolio holder for commercial development, to open in the late spring.

Harpenden Trust takes Seniors Forum under its wing

Effective January 1, Harpenden Seniors Forum became an integral part of the Harpenden Trust. The creation of Harpenden Cares during 2020, in the light of the COVID pandemic, was thought to replicate many of the HSF’s aims and aspirations, in catering for the needs of the town’s older and/or more vulnerable residents. It is hoped that bringing Forum activities under the Harpenden Trust umbrella will help simplify the management of the service and, more importantly, avoid confusion among its former ‘clientele’.

Accordingly, the HSF helpline is replaced by the Trust’s helpline, that is 01582 460457, while members

of the HSF committee join the Trust’s Care Fund committee. Organisation of the annual Senior’s Fair is passed to the Trust, though ‘lockdown’ uncertainties prevent date and venue details for a 2021 Fair being set. Erstwhile recipients of the HSF newsletter can ‘enrol’ to receive the Harpenden Trust’s newsletter by sending a brief email to: newsletter@theharpendentrust.org.uk.



Springtime Special for Society members. Photo your spring flowers and win Garden Vouchers from Notcutts in Smallford. The competition is open from March 10th - April 20th. Take a photo of your display when your flowers are in peak condition. E mail the photo to publicity@harpendensociety.org Details on www.harpendensociety.org

Award judge John Davis gets his own Award!

John Davis, a lifelong Harpenden resident and a stalwart member and supporter of the Harpenden Society for many decades is, at the age of 83, bowing out from the society's hard-working committee. For over 20 years he has been the society's representative on environmental issues, ranging from potentially damaging impacts on our beautiful Common to more mundane matters such as overflowing litter bins.

He has been particularly involved in the ongoing battle to oppose the expansion of Luton Airport, liaising with the long-established LADACAN pressure group formed in the 1970s, with the expressed aim of striving to control noise from Luton Airport and in the skies above Harpenden.

As John points out, 'thanks ironically to Covid-imposed travel restrictions, we are currently enjoying some respite from aircraft noise, and the airport expansion plans have for now been put on hold. But we cannot afford to relax our efforts to hold the airport to account for the continuing environmental cost of its operations, exacerbated by climate change considerations'.

Among John's other key roles was a compilation from the society's extensive archives of a history of its activities over a period of some 60 years, from its founding in 1930. In the form of a 'commentary' it is available today on the society's website. He has also been a judge on our Awards group, helping to select the winners among the contenders voted to receive our Harpenden Society Awards, presented each year for new building or other developments which have enhanced or helped maintain the town's character as a desirable place to live or visit.

In recognition of John's invaluable contribution to the Society's work and activities, he was presented with his own very special **'Without Whom' Award**, marking his 'Outstanding Service to the Town' by our chairman Phil Waters.



Some of John's roles can be seen in the 'Without Whom' photo Award. Top. Environmental issues at Society public meeting Oct 2015 with Transition Streets. Middle. Presentation of Society Annual Awards. May 2017 to Shanly Homes. Bottom. Another Society Annual Awards. Oct 2015 to Oakbridge Homes.

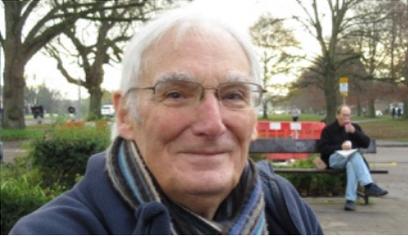
Reminder: 2021 subs now due

For those Harpenden Society members who don't pay their annual subscription by Standing Order can we remind you politely that 2021 subscriptions (£8 single/ £10 family) are now due. Payment should be made into the Society's bank account – sort code 60-10-07, account number 28772946 – or by cheque made payable to 'The Harpenden Society' to our Treasurer Harry Downie at 66 Eastmoor Park, Harpenden AL5 1BW. Direct any subscription queries please to the treasurer@harpendsociety.org

At the same time can all members please ensure that we have your email addresses. It would be helpful if members could let Hester Gabbutt, on membership@harpendsociety.org have – or even confirm – their up-to-date email addresses.

Thank you.

Watching out for the birds



A recent survey by Hertfordshire Bird Club, a section of Herts National History Society, revealed a concentration of known bird watchers in the Harpenden area. It confirms the enthusiastic membership, of around 400, of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) in the town, under local chairman Geoff Horn, who also leads most of its monthly bird-spotting walks, sometimes setting out at dawn-chorus time, with binoculars at the ready.

Among the more active RSPB members is David Anderson, (*above*) who runs the society's local garden bird survey. He reports that during last winter, 2019/20, no less than 43 different species were spotted, by 17 observers, in their own gardens. The survey does not therefore include sightings, for example, on the Common or in the town centre.

Vying for top spot and seen by all the garden watchers in relative profusion were the wood pigeon (as distinct from the feral pigeon) and the magpie. Almost equally numerous in the survey results were, in roughly descending order, the robin, blackbird, blue tit, great tit and dunnock (hedge sparrow).

David points out that the numbers recorded can be skewed by a number of factors. Rooks, for instance, 'don't like gardens', presumably because, in contrast to their lookalike carrion crows, they congregate in large numbers, more readily attracted to farmers' fields than domestic gardens. Evidence suggests that, across rural areas especially, rooks, along with crows and other 'corvids' such as jackdaws, magpies and jays, have grown in number in recent years because they are much less victimised by farmers than in the past.

Few people walking along Harpenden High Street can have failed to notice the number of jackdaws around Leyton and Church Greens, as well as on the Common nearby. They like to make their nests – usually comprising an untidy pile of sticks, lined with wool or hair – in holes or crevices, often in a tree or the chimney of an old building. Their omnivorous eating habits lead them to look out for scraps left by humans, outside takeaway food outlets for example.

As even the most casual bird watcher is aware, house sparrow numbers have declined significantly in recent decades, even in built-up areas of inner London where they once characterised the cheeky cockney spirit. The RSPB garden bird survey put them down around number 17, with the majority of watchers failing to see any. However, the drop in sparrow numbers is not geographically uniform. Throughout Harpenden thriving but tightly-circumscribed sparrow 'colonies' can be found, usually based around a favourable piece of fairly thick undergrowth, where their nests can remain relatively undisturbed, but where their presence is all too apparent through a chorus of cacophonous chirping.

Also well down the list of birds seen in Harpenden gardens are starlings, at one time a common sight on nearly everyone's lawn. A key factor in their evident decline, says David Anderson, is the design and

construction of modern houses, which tend to lack the 'open eaves' of older, say pre-war, buildings that offered more secure nesting sites. The same architectural trend is apt to deter other species, perhaps most pointedly house martins, where smooth plastic soffits make it almost impossible for martins to build their characteristic under-eave mud nests.

Martins, in common with their relatives, the swallows and swifts, are primarily insect eaters and their numbers in Britain, not just locally, have regrettably fallen with alleged advances in agriculture based on increasing use of insecticide. Other insectivorous birds, including some like blue tits and wrens, which were a traditionally common sight in domestic gardens have, sadly, similarly declined, even though the Harpenden RSPB survey results show blue tits to be 'holding on' reasonably well.

There are some examples of bird species which, until 20 or 30 years ago were essentially unknown in Britain but are now to be seen flying quite regularly over Harpenden gardens, albeit rarely spotted on the ground. The most prominent in this category is the red kite, (*pictured below*) a spectacular bird of prey with a wing span of up to nearly 6ft. Kites, subject of a successful reintroduction programme, are usually seen soaring to and fro, mainly above the altitude of most other local birds, and ever on the look out for live prey or carrion. A survey participant reported seeing a red kite dive on to the remains of a chicken carcass in his garden.



Green ring-necked parakeets, which originated in India, are the other notable newcomer species in Harpenden skies. They became established in the greater London area in the 1970s, after a number of captive birds escaped or were released and have since spread out across most of south-east England. Despite their tropical origin, parakeets are able to cope with the cold British winters, as long as a food supply – of fruit, berries, nuts, seeds, grain or even household scraps – is available.

Recent years have also seen an influx of black-headed gulls into the countryside around Harpenden which, to the surprise of less knowledgeable bird watchers, remain here in the area all year round, living on worms and on scraps where they can get them.

David Anderson points out that the local RSPB garden survey necessarily has its limitations in reviewing the wider bird population in the greater Harpenden area. There are numerous species which he categorises broadly as 'countryside birds' which rarely show themselves in all but the largest and most open domestic gardens, but which are to be found for instance on Harpenden Common and along the Nickey Line. He cites as examples the tiny goldcrest, the chiffchaff and members of the bunting family such as the yellowhammer.

Anyone interested in contributing to the RSPB's local garden bird watch can get in touch with David Anderson on Harpenden 712604 or at dandkk@outlook.com

Airport expansion ‘unjustified’

Covid restrictions on foreign travel have reduced the number of flights in and out of Luton Airport by about two thirds, bringing welcome relief for aircraft noise sufferers in and around Harpenden. But it is clear from statements put out by London Luton Airport Operations Ltd (LLA) that its commercial ambition of increasing capacity beyond 18 million passengers per annum remains in place.

Anti-noise pressure groups, notably LADACAN, HarpendenSky and STAQS (St Albans Quieter Skies) are, with the support of the Harpenden Society, pressing for a Covid-driven reassessment of the airport expansion plans, describing them as unjustified and unmerited. LADACAN spokesman Andrew Lambourne, in a reference to aviation’s impact on climate change, says ‘the industry is innately carbon inefficient’. He points out that air traffic control measures are such that departing planes cannot climb away steeply to reduce their ground-level noise and pollution footprint. They are forced into holding stacks causing Luton departures to be held low, sometimes for 15 to 20 miles.

At the time of writing the airport is awaiting revised rulings from NATS (the National Air Traffic Service). They are expected to concentrate permitted flight paths in and out of Luton within narrower boundaries,

the aim being to ease the plague of aircraft noise over more densely populated areas. Whether the intended measures will benefit people in Harpenden, sitting in their gardens on summer afternoons, as post-lockdown airport activity resumes, remains to be seen. Currently, many Wizz flights taking off to the west immediately ‘turn sharp left’ over north Harpenden as they head for Eastern European destinations.

After exceeding noise control limits for three consecutive years, LLA has indicated it wants to break four more of the planning conditions laid down by Luton Borough Council in 2013. Hertfordshire County Council, whose area extends right up to the airport boundary close to Breachwood Green, has long objected to expansion proposals, and has since sent what it calls a ‘robust 18-page rejection’ of the plans, affirming that they run directly counter to HCC’s declared ‘sustainable Hertfordshire strategy’ which includes the aspiration of ‘clean air for all by 2030’. Cllr Derrick Ashley says that ‘in the current climate, low-cost flying (by easyJet, Wizz and others) is not an option for a sustainable future’.

In response a spokesperson for the airport’s owner Luton Borough Council has said that further expansion will require a development consent order and whether or not to approve that order will be determined by the Secretary of State and not – as was previously the case – by LBC.



Nickey Line Friends win CPRE Award



Hertfordshire County Council’s Countryside Management Service has nominated the Friends of the Nickey Line for a CPRE (Council for the Protection of Rural England) annual Rural Living Award for 2020. After a CPRE Herts trustee came to view some of the group’s efforts and discuss its work, the Friends were duly awarded a Commendation (effectively being ranked second out of six contenders). The nomination mentioned the range of achievements since the group’s inception in 2006, including those achieved through active lobbying (for example the Ambrose Lane ramp and Park Hill steps projects, *right*), as well as through direct action by the group’s dedicated army of volunteers.



'New life' for Rothamsted's iconic building

Refurbishment work is underway at Rothamsted Research to bring the historic Russell Building which faces on to Harpenden Common, and which has been standing largely empty for many years, back to life, as a hub for high-growth agri and food tech businesses and entrepreneurs. A £1.7 million investment from Hertfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) and Hertfordshire Innovation Quarter (Herts IQ) is enabling the building to be renovated, with the aim of providing start-up and growth office space for 21st Century agriculturally and food technology related businesses.

Peter Oxley, CEO of Rothamsted Research's parent Lawes Agricultural Trust says the renovated building, housing 22 offices, will enable such companies 'to join a thriving ecosystem of agri-tech, food tech and innovation businesses already based on site'. It is expected that the building will accommodate up to 118 people in office unit spaces ranging from 200 to over 1200 sq ft (18.6 to 111 sq m). These will include an open plan 'innovation space', where new and existing

businesses on the site can work together on collaborative projects.

'Increased demand is driving the expansion of our facilities', says Mr Oxley, 'augmenting our other buildings occupied by external businesses, namely Daniel Hall and the Lawes Open Innovation Hub, currently at full capacity.' He points out the further benefit locally of providing more jobs in the area. Demand for more office space on the Rothamsted site has also been increased by the launch of the privately-funded 'Shake Climate Change' programme, targeting agricultural and food production research specifically, in efforts to combat global warming.

The imposing Russell Building was officially opened as the headquarters of Rothamsted Experimental Station in 1919, its construction having been protracted by the First World War. Initially housing Rothamsted's soil laboratories, it became an iconic landmark for those approaching Harpenden along St Albans Road.



AWARDS 2020

This year we are hoping to cast our net wider in inviting nominations for the Society's now well-established Awards Scheme.

We are welcoming votes from anyone in Harpenden, not just Society members. So please ask friends and neighbours in the town to let us know of any new building developments or facilities being completed during 2020 that are worthy of recognition.

Go to the Society web site to nominate your entries by March 31st:

www.harpendensociety.org

OR email to awards@harpendensociety.org

Our Awards Committee will visit and examine all nominations and select the winners. These will be announced at the AGM and in the Newsletter.

CATEGORIES for 2020

The Harpenden Society Plaque
A Harpenden Society Certificate of Merit
A Letter of Commendation

Did You Know? From Harpenden's history 'Highfield Oval and the NCH'

Harpenden is rightly – maybe even jealously – proud of its green open spaces, most notably its Common and, close by, Rothamsted Park, while Church Green and Leyton Green in the town centre, as well as the broad greensward 'margin' along the eastern side of the High Street, contribute so much to what is unquestionably a 'country town' character.

But another, admittedly less public, green space, uniquely oval in shape and a part of Harpenden's history as a Hertfordshire village, is Highfield Oval, off Ambrose Lane, nowadays the UK home of YWAM (Youth With A Mission). However, to older Harpenden residents it is best known as the former National Children's Home and Orphanage – familiarly 'the NCH'.



It was established in Bonner Street, Bethnal Green, in the heart of London's East End, in 1869, by philanthropist Thomas Bowman Stephenson. Its centre of operations moved to Harpenden in 1913, built on 48 acres of land made available by Sir John Blundell Maple (owner of Maples furnishing store in Tottenham Court Road). The location was close to Elmfield sanatorium (whose buildings now house the King's School) established by the NCH for the treatment and rehabilitation of tuberculosis sufferers some three years earlier.

Following the pattern adopted by two other NCH homes, the accommodation took the form of what were called 'cottage homes', albeit comprising separate two-storey blocks, disposed around a large central open green space, oval in shape. The children's houses were in semi-detached pairs, each half containing two homes. In each home a 'family' group of up to a dozen children lived under the supervision of a house-mother or 'sister'. New houses were progressively added, eventually leading to the provision of twenty 'households'.

The most architecturally notable building on the site is the chapel. Dating from 1928 it replaced an earlier structure and was paid for by Joseph Rank, the milling

tycoon (as in Rank Hovis McDougall, and father of cinema mogul J. Arthur Rank), himself a prominent Methodist. Its stained glass windows are the work of another (locally well known) Methodist and renowned artist, Frank O Salisbury, whose work can also be seen in High Street Methodist Church.



As well as basic education, children at the home were given 'industrial training' to fit them for subsequent employment in the outside world. For the girls that meant such occupations as laundry work, dressmaking and cookery, to prepare them for what, in those days, there was steady demand, namely domestic service.

Training for the boys included carpentry, plumbing, shoemaking and farm work. The home had its own farm nearby in Cooters End Lane. Meanwhile the home's printing department moved from Bethnal Green to Harpenden. As well as providing another avenue for training, it produced all the charity's printed matter. Music was another important feature of education at the Oval. Boys could join the NHS wind band, where acquired musical proficiency could lead to a career as a military bandsman; and the home's choir was well regarded and gave regular public performances.

The home closed in 1985, before being occupied by YWAM, though the work of the NCH lives on, under the title of Action for Children. Founded in the USA in 1960 to assist in relief and development work throughout the world, YWAM is funded by local churches. The NCH's obligations to the Charity Commission demanded that the site realise its maximum price which in Harpenden meant housing development. The stumbling block to that was the conservation status and listing of the children's home, which has till now thankfully prevented such development.

Accordingly, YWAM moved in on a rental basis but eight years later purchased the site for £2.1m – a small fraction of its value as a site for housing, though the sale agreement did cover a sharing of profit in the event of sale for housing within the first 10 years.

In 'non-Covid' times Highfield Oval welcomes visitors and hosts a café which is particularly popular with many local mums and kids as well as being the meeting place for YWAM staff and students from all over the world who stay in the original NCH houses.

Acknowledgement: Derek French and the Harpenden Local History Society

EDITOR'S VIEW

Alan Bunting

Getting to grips with Covid parking



Parking remains a contentious issue in Harpenden, especially in the town centre where Covid-19 restrictions have resulted in a significant loss of short-term parking spaces for shoppers in Lower High Street and Bowers Parade.

With many erstwhile commuters no longer commuting, longer-term parking demand has fallen away dramatically, as any observer of Amenbury Lane, Bowers Way and station car parks can readily testify. But it has not eased the parking challenges closer to the shops.

Social distancing requirements, designed to prevent virus transmission, prompted Herts County Council (responsible for highways) to institute the unsightly orange plastic barriers which, in early January remain in place, albeit after several 'repositionings'.

The measure was questionable from the start. It admittedly had the desired effect of allowing pedestrians to step off the pavement safely to avoid close proximity to others. This was clearly worthwhile during the first lockdown when long queues formed along the pavement, waiting to get into Sainsbury's and the Post Office, now in W H Smith.

Somewhat incongruously however, pedestrians on the other (west) side of the High Street, and for that matter in Station Road, walking along a similar-width pavement, were afforded no such 'protection', having to squeeze past what were other regular queues, for example outside Barclays Bank.



Blocking off major sections of the Lower High Street has also meant a significant loss of short-term parking spaces, to the dismay of several retailers whose customers understandably look to park as near as possible. An earlier (pre Covid) HCC proposal to pedestrianise permanently the length of Lower High Street between Station Road and Vaughan Road caused outrage among the adjacent shopkeepers and bars, and

was duly abandoned though now, under tightened lockdown conditions, is effectively reinstated.

Reimposition of the Covid lockdown in early January has, of course, in temporarily closing restaurants, bars and many shops, done far more than any parking restrictions in damaging trade for smaller Harpenden retailers, for whom mere survival is the prime concern. There are alas precious few would-be shoppers needing those blocked-off parking spaces.

Recent weeks have seen the positioning of numerous black so-called 'planters' with intermittent matching black posts at strategic points along the Lower High Street. The large rectangular tubs are ready to be planted with shrubs and/or flowers. Admittedly, from an aesthetic point of view, they are less of an eyesore than the orange plastic barriers.



They give the appearance of permanency. However, in response to Harpenden Society enquiries, the county council has said, in words echoed by both SADC and the town council, that a decision on whether they will be removed to restore pre-Covid parking arrangements will be made when the time comes. Town clerk Carl Cheevers says 'we will be watching carefully as to whether there are changes in people's behaviour around transport and movement'.

If, as postulated in our Autumn newsletter, working-from-home decimates London commuter numbers permanently, then mid-week social activity in the town, including shopping, is set to increase, accompanied by a growing demand for parking.

It has been suggested that, as a contribution to combatting air pollution and climate change, town centre parking should be prioritised for low- or zero-emission cars. A measure of that kind could chime conveniently with the phasing out of Covid parking restrictions.

Please send comments on articles or any other issues raised in this edition to the editor: Alan Bunting
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