



Red House Health Centre hopes revived

Renewed hopes that the long-promised NHS Health and Wellbeing Centre on the Harpenden Memorial Hospital 'Red House' site in Carlton Road might actually materialise were raised at a public meeting held by Herts Valleys Clinical Commissioning Group (HVCCG) in mid-September.

For most people in Harpenden it came 'out of the blue', after a year or more of mounting local frustration – even despair – especially for the Friends of the Red House and the Red House Forum pressure group, that the Centre would ever see the light of day.

Earlier this year the announcement that the responsibility for adult community services was to be handed over from Hertfordshire Community Trust (HCT) to a much larger, and seemingly more faceless, body, the Central London Community Healthcare Trust (CLCH) appeared only (to borrow a currently popular phrase) 'to kick the can further down the road'.



At the September meeting David Evans, (above) HVCCG's director of commissioning, acknowledged the frustration resulting from the evident lack of progress on the Red House project, but pledged that the programme would start to be delivered 'from October 1'. Kathy Walker, CLCH's director of operations, cautioned however that (in mid-September) approval from the Department of Health for the transfer of the Red House site to CLCH was still awaited.



Ms Walker (above) asserted that the transfer of responsibility to a body with 'Central London' in its title would not be detrimental to local Harpenden needs. The Trust was, she added, already working in other parts of

Hertfordshire – notably in providing sexual health services – as well as in eleven London boroughs, employing 3500 people on 500 sites.

Though the range of health and wellbeing services planned for the new Centre were included in the original proposals set out two years ago, a number of key changes relating to the use of the site emerged at the meeting. The most significant change is for the now dilapidated 120-year-old Red House itself to be retained and refurbished as part of the Health and Wellbeing Centre, rather than being sold for conversion into apartments to the developer of new housing on the site.

In addition to the main funding for the Centre, to be raised through the sale of 'surplus' land on the site for housing, the NHS is due to contribute £300,000 towards the refurbishment of the Red House for ongoing medical services and the new Centre's office accommodation.

Following the formal presentations, the meeting was opened to the floor in a wide-ranging Q&A session. Not surprisingly, in view of the long 'deafening silence' after the project's trumpeted unveiling in late 2017, the most pointed questions from the audience concerned the scheduled timetable, which will crucially involve the upgrade and extension of the existing Stewarts facility and the sale of a large part of the site for private housing.

Ian Daccus, (below) CLCH's director of estates, said that from the October 2019 project start date it was likely to take 12 to 18 months to get through the local authority planning approval process. That indicated final completion in three to three-and-a-half years time, by early 2023 but, in Mr Baccus's words, 'quicker if we can!'



But as one meeting attendee pointed out, given the transitory nature of administrative posts in the public sector, in three years time there could well have been further structural NHS upheavals and changes of responsibility in the Healthcare Trust and Commissioning Group areas of operation. Many people accordingly came away from the Red House meeting just hoping that the latest announcements were not another false dawn.

'Sally Army' raises its profile

With the official opening in mid-October of its splendid new Church & Community Centre in Leyton Green, Harpenden's Salvation Army Corps has necessarily raised its profile in the town; it is now equipped to expand its philanthropic and other activities. As Captain Kenneth Guest explains, there was an urgent need to upgrade the former headquarters, restricted as it was in terms of space and practicality.



Captain Kenneth Guest has overseen the building transformation.

new Salvation Army building, after being accommodated temporarily for two years at High Street Methodist Church.



Stained glass window: a competition-winning design

For anybody with financial, legal or consumer related problems, one or more counsellors are on hand every Monday and Thursday from 10am to 1pm, making use of the new centre's Community Café, though where there are particular confidentiality issues, smaller office rooms are available.

The Bradbury View room, named after one of the new building's benefactors, is intended mainly for youth club and daytime family activities and includes a toddlers' play area, where Lego is a particular attraction. On Saturday mornings it hosts a 'Who's let the Dads out?' session.

From time to time, most notably on Christmas Day, the Salvation Army provides hot meals for up to 80 elderly, disabled and other less fortunate members of the local population. The question of catering therefore figured prominently in the planning of the new building. Accordingly, the new kitchen is not only around three times the size of its predecessor. It is also much more commercially equipped, with a four-compartment hot-cupboard, six hotplate hobs and a large modern 'self cooking centre'.



At the opening ceremony the spacious new Worship Hall was packed to capacity

A big increase in total floor area has enabled more multi-purpose function rooms to be accommodated as well as a considerably larger Worship Hall for the Army's Sunday services. A light and airy space, it features a new stained glass window whose design – by 16-year-old Felicity White – came first among the entries to a competition for pupils at St George's School.

A totally-new feature at the front (ie Leyton Green end) of the building is an attractive and spacious glass-walled reception area with comfortable seating. Because of the sloping site, the awkward steps and ramp (for wheelchairs) in the old building have been eliminated with the installation of a lift. All-new toilets help complete the up-to-the-minute ambience of the facilities which, as Captain Guest points out, is likely to attract outside hirers of the function rooms, though he stresses the revenue-earning potential was by no means the prime motivation behind what has been, by any measure, a major project.



The Army's Chief Secretary Colonel Lee Graves cuts the celebratory ribbon across the main entrance.



Strike up the band! Salvation Army musicians herald the new Leyton Green centre.

In September, ahead of the official opening, the town's branch of Citizens Advice – popularly referred to as the 'CAB', under the slogan 'Harpenden Outreach' – was relocated to the

Local architecture: blending the new with the not-so-new

As with other kinds of beauty (or ugliness), a perception of what is good or bad in architecture has to be in the mind of the beholder. That was a key assertion of Professor Geraint John, president of St Albans Civic Society in his talk as guest speaker at the Harpenden Society's September public meeting.

A distinguished architect himself, Prof John is noted for his work in designing sports and leisure facilities, including those for the Olympic Games. In 2014 he was awarded the prestigious Pierre de Coubertin medal 'for his many years of outstanding service to the Olympic Movement'.

Prof John, who lives in Fishpool Street, St Albans, told his Harpenden audience he was 'open minded' about the excellence or otherwise of today's major building developments. On the matter of probably inevitable urban growth, he said he was primarily concerned with how it was approached and delivered. There was a need for local authority councillors, particularly those responsible for making planning decisions, to be 'educated' on architectural matters. Too often planners lacked local knowledge.

'We should look to the future with an eye on the past', he declared. 'We have to cope with the computer age while respecting the architecture of the past'. He spoke approvingly of the current focus on sustainability. That necessarily meant recognising the challenges of global warming, notably in the choice of materials used in new buildings and during their construction. An obvious example was the avoidance of pollutants and such materials as asbestos.

With an inference that variety is the spice of life, Prof John asserted that 'there can be no one universal style', adding that 'form follows function'. He maintained that the Greeks had the right approach to building design more than two millennia ago in recognising the importance of proportion in a structure. In doing so they picked up on the 'golden ratio' of 1 to 1.61, which had been identified even earlier in pre-history by the Egyptians in building the pyramids and which occurred in nature, in the spiral pattern of a sea shell for example.

Prof John cited a number of local developments which, in his view, deserved favourable mention. They included, in Harpenden, Waitrose supermarket, the 'sympathetic' conversion of the former Post Office in Station Road to house the Côte Brasserie, the extension of Harpenden Common Golf Clubhouse and, to quote the Sunday Times architecture critic Hugh Pearman, 'probably the best modern house in the world', designed back in 1962 by the Danish architect Povel Ahm.

In Prof John's judgment, there should be no automatic objection to mixing old with new architectural styles when, typically, an existing, possibly venerable, building is extended or a fresh development is proposed close by. He pointed out that St Albans Abbey was a long-standing, even traditional, example of multiple piecemeal additions and modifications in different styles using disparate materials, undertaken over some nine centuries.

The Abbey's 1980s Chapter House could be said to have continued that tradition. And, bringing its architectural history right up to date, the brand new entrance and visitor centre from architects Simpson & Brown, surely demonstrated how harmonised building styles from different eras could be successfully achieved. Prof John warned

however against 'historical falsehood' where attempts at a direct copy of existing design characteristics too often failed.

During a question and answer session Prof John reminded his audience that it sometimes needed time for people to come to love the kind of new building which initially stirred bitter controversy. Examples were Coventry Cathedral and Richard Rogers' creations for the London Stock Exchange and the Pompidou Centre in Paris with their 'exterior plumbing'.



Professor John is welcomed by Harpenden Society chairman Phil Waters.



Commended: Waitrose supermarket



Commended: Conversion of former Post Office



Commended: Harpenden Common Golf Clubhouse



Commended: early 1960s Povel Ahm house

Harpenden deserves more trains says SADC



More trains should stop at Harpenden at peak times to 'ensure a fairer distribution of services,' the operator has been told. Group leaders on St Albans District Council have written a joint letter to Govia Thameslink Railway (GTR) to demand an improved service for Harpenden commuters.

Their intervention is intended to contribute to a major public consultation that GTR is running on the issue, though the operator maintains that the only way to allow more stops at Harpenden is to reduce them elsewhere.

A reduction in the number of trains stopping at Luton (town centre) station is said to be the best option and GTR says it is consulting residents, commuters and other interested groups on the proposal. In their letter, the SADC group leaders – from all political parties represented on the council – say: 'Ideally, we would like to see improvements in the rail service for both Harpenden and Luton rail users.'

'When peak-time station usage figures are considered, there is no doubt that Harpenden station is underserved compared with Luton'. Data from 2018 show that Luton is served by 21 trains arriving at St Pancras between 7.02am and 9.49am during weekdays while Harpenden has 15.

However, Harpenden was found to have 7464 passengers a day during this peak period while Luton had only 7,065. That is to say Harpenden had 399 more passengers but was served by six fewer trains.

According to the cross-party delegation, 'in order to ensure a fairer distribution of services along the line, we believe the figures make a compelling and evidence-based case for increasing the number of services calling at Harpenden at peak times'.

The signatories to the letter are: Cllr Chris White, council leader and Liberal Democrat group leader, plus Cllrs Mary Maynard, Malachy Pakenham and Simon Grover, representing the Conservatives, Labour and the Greens/Independents respectively.

Retailers say No to a Christmas Promotion campaign supported by The Harpenden Society and Harpenden Town Council.

The Harpenden Christmas Carnival/Lights On event at the end of November attracts thousands of residents into the town centre, many of whom would start planning their Christmas shopping. With temptation from other shopping centres and the ease of buying off the internet local retailers face a tough task to keep shoppers returning in numbers till Christmas Eve. A local promotional campaign including some late night openings would have helped. But sadly only nine businesses expressed a positive interest.



New secondary school opens its doors

Though there were numerous obstacles on the way, not least those related to planning consent for building on the Green Belt site at Batford, the new Katherine Warington secondary school finally opened its doors to students and staff at the end of September.

The school opened in what will later become its Sports Hall, which has been temporarily re-purposed to house six classrooms accommodating an intake of up to 180 year-7 pupils. Specialist spaces are allocated for science, the arts and technology along with a canteen and assembly area as well as offices for staff. Comments from staff, parents and visitors have been complimentary, especially in regard to its spaciousness and quality of appointments, reports head teacher Tony Smith.

In addition to the existing regular bus services that pass along the Lower Luton Road two new bus services have been established to cater for the school's needs and an existing service (from Southdown) has an additional journey to fit in with school opening times. Most pupils are travelling to and from the school site by bus or are walking or cycling. Clearly it's in everyone's interest to keep it that way!

Road and pavement widening on the Lower Luton Road with traffic light control have caused major disruption to traffic, sometimes hampering those now travelling by road to and from the school.

The construction programme of the rest of the school site is well under way with completion due in summer 2020. This will mean that when the second year group joins the school in September 2020 the pupils will enjoy the benefit of the entire site designed to 'state of the art' standards for up to 1200 pupils including a 6th form.



Though the first school building in use proclaims its 'Sports Centre' status, it will not assume that role for another year.

AWARDS 2019

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 2019 that are worthy of recognition. The premier award is a Plaque for outstanding projects. Other entries may earn a Certificate of Merit or Letter of Commendation. In 2018 a Certificate of Merit was conferred on Park House, the Pegasus Life apartment block next to Rothamsted Park.



Please complete either or both these sections below by March 31st 2020:

I wish to nominate the following for the 2019 Harpenden Society Plaque:

.....

I wish to nominate the following for a 2019 Harpenden Society Certificate of Merit or Letter of Commendation

.....

Please use this space for any comments

.....

Please email to 'awards@harpendensociety.org' or post to: Penny Ayres, Kinsbourne House, Kinsbourne Green, Harpenden AL5 3PE.

OR Go to the Society web site: www.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.

Did You Know? From Harpenden's history

'When you could lose your shirt on Harpenden Common'

Horse racing was already popular in the early 19th Century, and this part of Hertfordshire was well to the fore in its development. Occasional races were held on Harpenden Common during the 1830s and 40s. We know Sir Thomas Sebright, Master of the Hertfordshire Hounds, arranged one there in August 1834 and Mr Henry Oldaker organised a cross-country race meeting in 1839, from Friars Wash to Harpenden Common, via Rothamsted Park; the winner was one Captain Becher, who the same year rode in the Grand National at Aintree and fell at the sixth jump, which thereafter was dubbed Becher's Brook.

But regular racing on the Common did not become established until 1848 when local farmers organised a four-race meeting, followed by a dinner at the Bull Inn (now The Old House, 27 Leyton Road) for the committee and others. It was so successful, and said to have attracted about 10,000 people, that it became annual event.

The course was shaped like a long narrow horseshoe. The start was near what is now the Harpenden Common Golf Clubhouse. It then crossed Walkers Road, which was covered with straw for the occasion, then sweeping southwards beyond Cross Lane, over the fields of the Childwickbury estate, behind what was Horse and Jockey Farm (which had become a public house and is now the prominent white house on the A1081), and then turning near Ayres End Lane to come back along the Common.

However, not all the races were run over the same distance. They varied from half a mile to two miles. Eight races were run in 1863. The Wheathampstead Stakes, run over a course of four and a half furlongs, attracted six runners. Each owner staked five sovereigns to enter, and an extra thirty were added. The second horse kept its stake, the winner took the rest, but had to pay two sovereigns into the funds. One of the arcane rules was that the winning horse was to be sold by auction immediately after the race.

Before radio, television and the cinema any excuse for a gala day was gladly seized upon. The day of the races was such a day. Anyone who could take a holiday did so, partly but not entirely to see the races, while also enjoying the various sideshows that were set up, rather like those that attend the 'Statti' Fair on the Common today.

The Midland Railway ran special race-day trains at cheap excursion fares, especially from London. Reports indicate that among them were many roughs, card

sharps, pickpockets and other 'riff - raff' of humanity. Fights and uproars were very common both on the course and in the evening in many parts of the village. More respectable racegoers were met at Harpenden station by rows of horse drawn waggonettes.

The last race meeting on the Common was held in May 1914 on the eve of the First World War, and though the 1915 meeting was advertised, 'the necessity of keeping the railway system free for the rapid and unimpeded transit of troops and munitions' it had to be cancelled, though special dispensation was granted for racing at Newmarket that year.

During the war the Jockey Club decided it did not approve of 'open' courses like Harpenden's, partly because there was no way of making people pay to watch, but also because they did not like courses with temporary structures such as the grandstand erected on the Common. So in 1918 all the racecourse equipment was auctioned and the proceeds donated to the Red Cross. All that can now be seen of the course is a square of trees surrounding a car park on the edge of Limbrick Road, marking the site of the paddock.

There is though, a postscript to the story of the Harpenden Races. During the First World War the Admiralty ordered a fleet of 32 paddle minesweepers, and named them after racecourses. HMS Harpenden was commissioned in 1918, and served in Home Waters and the Baltic until December 1919, when she was paid off at Sheerness. She was then, in January 1920, berthed at Harwich for disposal, and eventually sold for scrap in 1928.

Acknowledgement: the website of Harpenden Local History Society



EDITOR'S VIEW

Alan Bunting

Former NatWest bank – an ongoing eyesore



Empty High Street premises in Harpenden, or for that matter in any other town, are an unwelcome sight. When they remain unoccupied for a year or more it's often an indication of extortionate rents that, in these tough retailing times, few potential businesses can afford. The proliferation in recent decades of charity shops in the High Street and Station Road, typically paying a low concessionary rent, might be welcome to bargain-hunting shoppers. But they hardly betoken a thriving retail environment.

Growth in on-line shopping can undoubtedly be blamed for much of the decline in footfall experienced by many Harpenden retail outlets. It is just one of the outcomes of our collective moves into the computer age which, as many would admit, is also responsible for everyone's declining requirement for traditional banking services.

Banks in Harpenden quite often still look busy. But all too often the long queues can be blamed on unmanned (or unwomanned!) counter positions, in turn attributable to staff cutbacks. The 'unkindest cut' of all was surely the closure in May 2018 of NatWest's High Street branch, next door to Boots. It left many of its long-standing older customers especially, 'high and dry'.

As I write, in early October, its premises remain empty, though a board outside indicates they are "TO LET", through Avison Young, a London-based but Canadian-owned property company. Whether a new tenant will be found in the near future must be doubtful, in the light of some investigation work carried out by Harpenden Society member Derek French, who was director of the Campaign for Community Banking Services from 1998 to 2016.

He maintains that NatWest's decision to summarily close its Harpenden branch was ill-advised, questioning the criteria used. The challenge of declining traditional bank use has, he says, been addressed successfully elsewhere in the world through multi-user shared banking centres – which UK banks have consistently opposed. Derek's research into the circumstances behind the bank's unceremonious departure reveals that NatWest is locked into a lease of the ground floor and basement for another seven years, at an annual rental of £90,500 plus responsibility for business rates of £44,000.

It transpires that nevertheless ownership of the site's freehold changed hands in October 2018, after the bank had closed. For any retail business to willingly inherit the bank's financial commitment would, says Derek, be extremely challenging and is therefore unlikely, especially in view of other considerations relating to the premises. The building is in a listed High Street Conservation Area and has housed a bank since before the turn of the 20th Century. In an 1899 photograph

from Harpenden Local History Society archives it bears the name 'London County and Westminster Bank'.

Its distinctive and historic frontage, albeit visually marred in recent years by the installation of two ATM outlets, now removed but without restoring the affected windows to their original size, would seem to rule out its conversion to any kind of retail shop. It could perhaps become an outwardly attractive restaurant or wine bar, of which the town is however surely over-supplied already.

Meanwhile, as Derek French points out, surely echoing the sentiments of most Harpenden Society members, the town has to suffer an empty frontage – an ongoing eyesore – in a most prominent High Street position.



Former NatWest bank premises looking forlorn

There are, sadly, too many other empty town-centre sites (below), where sky-high rents imposed by arguably greedy property landlords have driven out established retailers. However, in the case of the two-shop-units-wide Barbarello wine bar, which stayed open for only a month or two last year, closure was more the result of over-optimistic market demand.



Public Halls' pantomime swan song?

If Harpenden's new culture hub in Rothamsted Park is completed on schedule, in January 2021, the first major event to be hosted in its purpose-designed Eric Morecambe theatre might well be a seasonal pantomime. Meanwhile the town's youngsters and no doubt a good sprinkling of Mums and Dads are looking forward to this season's offering from Polka Dot Pantomimes, and possibly the last to be staged in the traditional venue: Harpenden Public Halls.

Beauty and the Beast opens – oh yes it does! – on Saturday December 7, continuing until Monday December 30, with weekday morning, weekend afternoon and Friday/Saturday early evening performances. The show is said to be 'suitable for children aged 3 to 103!

Heading the cast is Ricky Rayment from TV's 'The Only Way is Essex', backed by St Albans-based singer/actress Lauren Osborn and Richard Marquiss, making his return to the Harpenden pantomime stage.

Tickets cost £14 for adults and £12 for kids, though just £48 for a family of four and a £7.50 per head entry for school groups.



Parking issues in Harpenden to be resolved soon?

Harpenden residents and businesses were active in giving their views to Harpenden Town Council via the official Parking Survey which closed at the end September following an earlier delay. 840 responses were received which will now be analysed alongside the business survey that will be carried out in Oct/Nov to help inform the draft parking strategy.

The Harpenden Society and Harpark had already surveyed residents in late 2018, presenting their findings to an audience of over 120 on January 17 (below) at which many other comments were recorded. A full report was documented and presented to Herts County Council and Harpenden Town Council. This can be read via The Harpenden Society web site.



This new and attractive plaque on the Leyton Road wall of Park Hall, with its colourful relief image of the building, offers a brief summary of its history. Funded by Rothamsted's Sir John Lawes, it provided free education for poorer village children. In 1898 it became the first Public Hall and also housed offices for the new Harpenden Urban District Council. Redubbed 'Park Hall' in 1938 it became ARP headquarters during the war.

SOCIETY PUBLIC MEETING DATES

Autumn/Winter details to be announced

Future dates and speakers are yet to be confirmed, check our web site for details
www.harpendensociety.org

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