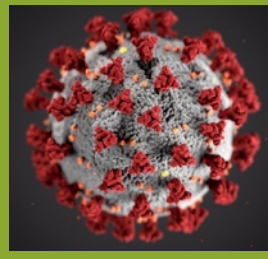


News Bulletin



Special Covid-19 lockdown edition

June 2020

Message from the Chairman

Among the many current pandemic-related disruptions to normal life, the temporarily-suspended publication and letterbox distribution of the Harpenden Society's quarterly newsletter might not rank highly in our members' concerns. But we would like to offer some reassurance that the society is very much alive and kicking, most notably in our role as a civic 'watchdog', maintaining a close eye on those many issues affecting the town, both now and into the future.

Accordingly, we have compiled this relatively brief Bulletin for dissemination by email, via the society's website, as a means of keeping our members abreast of developments in and around Harpenden. Work on the new Leisure Centre in Rothamsted Park is proceeding apace, though the projected completion dates, for the Eric Morecambe theatre and cultural centre in particular, have been put back by several months. Meanwhile the project to build housing on the present Public Halls site is moving forward.

However, the repercussions of Covid-19 throw doubts on the timing or, dare we say, even the basic justification, for other equally momentous



proposals affecting the town and its inhabitants. The plans for a huge expansion of Luton Airport are now surely – pardon the pun – up in the air, with uncertainty surrounding the whole future of aviation, compounded by its unquestionably significant role in climate change. Meanwhile the grandiose plans to build some 580 houses on Green Belt agricultural land alongside the A1081 north of

the town must be at least in abeyance, the pandemic-triggered fall in property prices eroding the likely profits of landowner and developer alike.

As to the Harpenden Society's activities in the coming months, uncertainty remains, regrettably. Clearly we can resume our programme of meetings only when it is safe to do so, presumably when social distancing rules are eased. In the meantime this is an opportunity to review our society organisation. Two members of our committee – overseeing transport and built-environment matters – are

standing down this year and we therefore need to recruit some newcomers, which ought to be eminently feasible, given our 900-plus membership. So, please step forward anyone who feels they would like to help in furthering the work of the society, as we continue to strive to maintain Harpenden's uniquely attractive character.

Phil Waters

High Street reopens for business on June 15

'Get out and shop' proclaimed Boris Johnston to bring the economy back to life. Well many independent shop owners have been working hard over recent weeks to make their shops safe for the return of customers.

With lovely sunny weather to come now's the time to go out and shop. Here are just some of the businesses waiting for you: Beat School Uniforms; Coppers Boots and Shoes; Good Sports; Loveweds; Oui; Perry Florist; Threads.



Public Halls site plans move forward

Local issues beyond the Covid-19 emergency continue to occupy the minds of those responsible for



Harpenden's future townscape. St Albans District Council planners convened a Zoom-based 'virtual' meeting in late May of interested parties including the Harpenden Society

to update its proposals for the Public Halls site when the new Eric Morecambe Centre (EMC) complex in Rothamsted Park is completed.

The initial tentative plans described in our Winter 2018/19 newsletter have been augmented and clarified, although Cllr Robert Donald, SADC portfolio holder for 'Property, Commercial and Development' emphasised that the essentials had been inherited by the council's Liberal Democrat administration from

its Conservative predecessor, and some £5 million had to be realised from the scheme to fund the EMC and Sports Centre project.

Of the proposed 35 apartments, up to 40% (ie 14 units) would be 'social housing', the lion's share earmarked for MENCAP. A 'commercial', presumably retail, unit – maybe in the form of a market – on the frontage with Southdown Road would, it is argued, avoid the appearance of a lifeless housing development. Underground parking for residents would be accessed from Arden Grove.

Concerns were expressed at the Zoom meeting about the appearance of the planned development. It had to provide a suitably attractive, perhaps even welcoming, 'gateway' to the town for those approaching from St Albans direction. Architectural quality in relation to the buildings' position must be paramount. Meanwhile questions were raised as to the scheme's viability for SADC in terms of rental income; as proposed, most of the apartments were only one-bedroom units.

There is an opportunity to post comments on the initial proposals on the SADC website. Harpenden Society members are encouraged to look at the scheme and comment.

Covid-19 to thwart Luton Airport expansion?

As our Winter 2019/20 newsletter made clear, the Harpenden Society is unequivocally opposed to any further expansion of Luton Airport – which, in the light of a June 12 announcement – has now been shelved for the foreseeable future and must be welcomed. As reported in the Herts Advertiser in May, the airport is asking central government for a £50 million 'emergency revenue' fund. But few tears are likely to be shed by our members at its pandemic-induced financial plight?

Such are the huge additional virus-related demands on the country's finances, relating most of all to nationwide job losses, that Luton Airport's begging bowl must be well down the Chancellor of the Exchequer's list of priorities. We must

sympathise with those Luton-based airline and airport workers whose jobs have been 'furloughed' or otherwise jeopardised. Those sentiments are inevitably mollified however by what has become a welcome respite from airport-generated noise and pollution in and around Harpenden.

Those grotesque plans to increase the airport's capacity by nearly 80%, from 18 million to 32 million passengers per annum, have been replaced by a fundamental toning down of its aspirations. In what many will see as a face-saving climbdown, it says it wants to become 'one of the most sustainable as well as socially conscious airports in the UK'.

The statement will be widely perceived as an abandonment of any expansion plans, the likelihood of which was in any case mooted in recent reports that British Airways could pull out of Gatwick, consolidating its



operations at Heathrow. If that happened, say aviation industry analysts, EasyJet might well transfer its headquarters and the bulk of its flights from Luton to Gatwick. Such a move by currently Luton Airport's largest carrier would surely make any expansion plans at the very least highly questionable.

Doubts surround North-West Harpenden housing scheme

Developers' plans, long discussed for a decade or more, for covering a large area of Green Belt alongside the A1081 north of Harpenden with houses have moved forward in recent months – but only to come up against likely legislative and economic obstacles. Legal & General insurance group, landowner of the 40-plus acres of farmland, extending from Bloomfield Road to the Bedfordshire county boundary, wants to sell the land – inevitably at huge profit, resulting from the necessary change of use from agricultural to residential – allowing some 580 homes to be built, with accompanying community infrastructure.

Under the heading 'North-West Harpenden Master Plan', St Albans District Council made two presentations to local interested parties, including the Harpenden Society, spelling out detailed proposals. However, only a few weeks earlier, SADC's Local

Plan, the legislative conditions of which necessarily include such major housing developments, was thrown back in the melting pot, not for the first time, by central government inspectors.

Further uncertainty surrounding the North-West Harpenden housing proposals now looks certain to arise through the Covid-19 emergency. At a time of rising unemployment, movements in property prices over the next few years could well impair housing demand.



Many Harpenden residents, while remaining ever vigilant, must hope that the latest hiccup in the Local Plan approval process, will give SADC a chance to be reminded of the still-relevant central government dictum that Green Belt land must be sacrificed only in 'exceptional cases'.

'Eric Morecambe Centre' faces months of delay

An unforeseen roofing problem encountered during the conversion of Harpenden's existing Sports Centre in Rothamsted Park into the town's new Arts and Cultural Hub has put the project back by at least three and possibly five months. Now to be definitely named The Eric Morecambe Centre, housing a 511-seat theatre and accompanying museum and meeting rooms, it had been due to open in Jan.2021.

It means that entertainment and other events expected to be held in the new venue during the first months of next year, will instead remain in the familiar (84-year-old) Harpenden Public Halls. The opening of the Local History Society's long-awaited Museum will necessarily have also to be delayed.

Councillor Anthony Rowlands, SADC portfolio holder for leisure activity, has made light of the roof repair costs, though it transpires that they could well be offset by the decision to scrap earlier plans for a temporary gymnasium building on the western edge of the new Sports Centre site.

Detailed layout plans of the ground and upper floors of the Eric Morecambe Centre, when compared with the equivalent Public Hall spaces, show a more than doubling of floor area, from a total of 6500 to 13,200sq ft. The main theatre auditorium will be 10% larger at 4400sq ft.

A safe High Street for everyone

The Town Council have been working in conjunction with Herts County Council and several local businesses to implement safety measures to make the High Street a vibrant and safe place whilst maintaining social distancing. Social distancing markers have been sprayed throughout the town in areas of potential crowds

Business owners have introduced in store safety measures to protect staff and customers.



Free Parking for 2 hours in Lydekker Car Park



Hand Sanitising Stations in areas of high footfall