



## Autumn News 2020

Founded in 1930

### A message from our Chairman

As everyone in Harpenden strives to cope with the ongoing COVID crisis we must not let our attention be distracted from the many other issues bubbling away which have the potential to affect the quality of life and development of the town. Planning and environmental matters are still there and if not dealt with in the right way could threaten the character of the town.

The Harpenden Society is one of the town's many socially active groups. But in its role as a civic society and residents' association, it can exercise a vital influence in steering public policy, typically in liaison with the town council.

Unfortunately, in the current crisis we can't hold our normally well-attended public meetings where important local issues can be addressed in a stimulating 'open forum' atmosphere. Such meetings – necessarily open to all – help to raise the society's profile, and in so doing help us attract new members.

complete solution to our member contact challenges.

It also of course highlights the need for younger people in the town to join the society (and by that we mean, realistically, people under 50!) though we acknowledge that the commitments and pace of life for many of those in the up-to-50 age groups has not slackened under COVID.

Nevertheless, can we appeal again to encourage members to recruit newcomers to our ranks, especially perhaps those still of working age but now with fewer family ties. From among our membership we also specifically need several more committee members to monitor – in a 'watchdog' role – events and activities in Harpenden, notably on planning, building development and environmental issues and on transport (including parking). Committee members' efforts can be rewarding, as well as sometimes frustrating, as we seek to influence matters affecting the town's future.



*Hitchin & Harpenden MP Bim Afolami addressing the Society's last public meeting before the Covid lockdown*



*Harpenden Cricket Club president Geoff Newman (right) receives the club's 2019 Award for its new pavilion. See Page 7*

This is a problem for all groups at present, and we recognise that because our membership tends to comprise older members of our community, reliance on social media, Zoom and other forms of electronic communication is not a ready or

Though the society plays a political role it is with a small 'p'. Party politics, in the town, the district or nationally, is for politicians and not for a body like the Harpenden Society, though of course we strive to hold them to account and try and influence policy in favour of the local community.

**Phil Waters**

## Local Plan thrown out yet again

Many people in Harpenden have, quite understandably, lost count of how many times St Albans District Council has drafted and redrafted its (government demanded) Local Plan, only to have it rejected, on the grounds of its lacking, in legal jargon, 'soundness'. The latest rebuff, from government planning inspectors Louise Crosby and Elaine Worthington, which came in early September, was attributed to SADC's 'failure to cooperate with neighbouring authorities over strategic matters'. That related to whether adjacent councils – in practice mainly Dacorum – could accommodate some of the district's statutory housing requirement of 14,600 new homes over the next 16 years.



*The latest rejection of SADC's Local Plan necessarily throws new doubt on the plans for 580 homes to be built on this Green Belt land north of Bloomfield Road.*

In a long and detailed letter, the inspectors decreed that SADC had still not met the 'duty to cooperate' and that 'this failure could not be remedied through the examination process'. The issue hinges on the alleged strategic importance of the SRFI proposals, for which outline planning permission was given approval by central government back in 2014.

Cllr Jamie Day, SADC's (Liberal Democrat) portfolio holder for planning, commenting on the latest Local Plan rejection, said 'it is little wonder that the government's recent Planning White Paper has proposed abolishing the 'duty to cooperate' requirements, given the complexities involved'. He added that the Local Plan needs to be progressed, enabling the need for more local housing to be met 'in a sustainable and positive way'.

Council leader Chris White said a further revised Local Plan meeting the inspectors' latest objections also needed to 'be able to take into account sustainability, energy standards, green industries, energy generation and sustainable transport measures'.

Opposition councillors on the council were quick to apportion blame for the LP rejection to the majority party. Conservative group leader Mary

Maynard accused the LibDems, since they came to power at SADC, of cancelling most Local Plan focussed committee meetings and refusing to address the inspectors' earlier criticisms, while 'caving in to landowner and developer pressure'. Labour group leader Cllr Mal Packenham said the previous Tory administration was also blameworthy, for thinking the Strategic Rail Freight Interchange site could be allocated as a garden village.

## 'Green Belt issue helped scupper Local Plan'

Harpenden Green Belt Association points out that SADC must begin work on addressing the government inspectors' criticisms of the Local Plan as it stands, one of which was the questionable way in which Green Belt sites were selected.

HGBA chairman David Rankin says the council will have to commission a new Green Belt review, in order to re-examine the selection of sites which could be released for building development. It will be essential, he adds, in order to satisfy the inspectors, 'that the result is based on up-to-date, detailed, well-researched, factual evidence'.

Central government, he points out, is well aware that SADC has now failed on three occasions to make progress with drafting a Local Plan and it may well decide to take the job over from St Albans District politicians and planners who, in any case, are now on the back foot, facing the possibility of their decision-making power being usurped by a Hertfordshire County Council transmogrified into a faceless 'unitary authority'.

Of yet further concern to HGBA and many others, such as the CPRE (Council for the Protection of Rural England), is the government's recent controversial White Paper 'Planning for the Future' which, inter alia, proposes zoning land into two or three new planning categories, with local plans being assessed against a single statutory 'sustainable development test'...benefitting developers who envisage current planning practices and policies being swept away.

It should always be remembered, says the HGBA, an independent report (commissioned and subsequently ignored by SADC a decade or more ago) on the impact of massive housebuilding in our district concluded that 'we are already exceeding the capacity of the environment' to support us - an 'inconvenient truth' for central government as well as local politicians.



## 'We don't need so much new housing'

In the view of retired local planning officer Rick Sanderson, in a letter to the Herts Advertiser, St Albans District Council had no option but to withdraw its proposal to allocate the former Handley Page aerodrome site for housing development. He says that although the battle to stop the SRFI may have now been lost, it does not necessarily follow that the council must find an alternative location for the 2000-plus dwellings proposed for the 'Park Street Garden Village' development on the site.

Mr Sanderson has pointed out to the Harpenden Society in his critique that population and household projections carried out in 2018, and published earlier this year by the Office for National Statistics, show that the number of 'new households' expected to be created in St Albans District by 2036, the end of the Local Plan period, is at least 10,000 (14%) less than the quantity projected four years earlier.

This is a massive reduction that would nevertheless meet the district's housing need based on the most up-to-date demographic projections. If the change was recognised and acted upon, it would necessarily help in protecting the Green Belt around Harpenden and elsewhere in the district.

So why is this, regrettably, not likely to happen? The answer, says Mr Sanderson, is that the Government insists that LPs submitted for

examination after January 23 2019 (as in St Albans' case) must use the higher 2014-based projections as a baseline. This is to support its politically-motivated target of building 300,000 homes per annum nationally by the mid-2020s, based on the mistaken idea that building as many homes as possible will bring prices down.

But, as is becoming increasingly clear, the housing market doesn't work like that. Developers will only build the number of homes from which they expect to make a satisfactory profit which, ergo, has the effect of maintaining, not lowering, price levels. The over-provision of sites for development in Local Plans simply enables them to cherry pick those that are most attractive and easiest to build on, namely greenfield sites in (they hope) released Green Belt, like the 40 acres of Legal & General-owned farmland north of Harpenden.

More genuinely affordable housing for purchase or rent is undoubtedly needed, but it is clearly not being provided currently. The present government's misguided policy is to get private sector developers to build 'affordable' housing within large mixed-price housing developments. But 'affordable' (which always needs to be in inverted commas) is defined as up to 80% of market rates, so is in reality unaffordable in areas such as Harpenden. What is really needed is more 'social' housing – which used to be called 'council housing' – subsidised by central government. Alas, says Mr Sanderson, for ideological reasons, it is not likely to happen any time soon.

## 'TELL ME A STORY' Writing competition for senior school students



After an absence of 5 years since our very successful *School Arts* competitions for junior schools we are now launching a writing competition for **senior school students** in early November.

The Head Teachers have agreed this would be a great way to take minds off Covid.

The challenge is to write an original story up to 1,500 words long from 4 subjects. There will be 3 age categories and prizes in each for the winning students and the schools.

Entries have to be submitted by Feb 15 2021 for judging to take place with winners announced on March 15.

Updates in the Winter newsletter and [www.harpendensociety.org](http://www.harpendensociety.org)

# How Covid could influence Harpenden's future

**Society member *Alan Jackson* invites a debate – together with some early responses. Please let us have more.**

It seems inevitable that Harpenden will change in the medium and long term following the measures imposed by the Covid-19 so-called lockdown. Though the Harpenden Society's core objectives will remain, there are implications for how we go about planning to meet those aspirations.

Given that some 60% or more of the town's workforce has traditionally schlepped in and out of London each day in order to sustain relatively high living standards, Harpenden's prosperity has, for more than a century, been largely dependent on its vital commuter rail links. Most Thameslink passengers would nevertheless categorise each daily two-way journey is a 'necessary inconvenience'.

For 20 years or more there have been academic predictions that modern communications would enable more and more office workers to work from home. The effects of the pandemic have forced just such changes on to many erstwhile Harpenden commuters.

Many have come to prefer the new way of working, albeit with reservations centred around social interaction issues. Progress based on technical advances tends not to be reversed; and it's likely that the era of daily commuting in and out of London will have ended for many working people living in Harpenden. Some companies have already made clear their intentions to scale back or even close their London offices, motivating what might be called a push-pull effect.



Many more homes are now doubling as offices

Given the wonderful 20:20 hindsight – with which we are all blessed (eponymously appropriate in 2020) – it seems amazing that less than 12 months ago the pressure was on Thameslink to commission 50% higher-capacity

12-coach rather than 8-coach trains, for which station platforms all down the line had been expensively lengthened. But, post Covid, there is now rail service over-capacity and therefore less fare revenue to recoup the investment that has been made.



That over-capacity is also evident of course when it comes to Harpenden Station car parking; no one currently has difficulty finding a space. Meanwhile the Covid-inflicted brake on further growth of Luton Airport takes a further strain off envisaged future Thameslink capacity requirements.

Fewer passengers on all forms of public transport, buses as well as trains, is regrettably being translated into a significant growth in car use with an accompanying increase in traffic congestion – already noticeable in the town centre on weekdays – with its inevitable air quality and climate change penalty.



For Harpenden as a town there are other negative implications, specifically for those of us keen to protect our precious Green Belt. Houses for sale on the proposed 580-home development on over 40 acres of farmland between Bloomfield Road and the Bedfordshire border could become more attractive to erstwhile commuters whose ability to work from home has been confirmed, who would have no need to fight their way through two miles of congested rush hour traffic to get to the station. That could accordingly mean less of a premium on the price of houses close to the station.



The question then arises: will people working from home need to live in Harpenden at all? It's undoubtedly one of the most desirable towns within comfortable commuting distance from London, surrounded by countryside. But for would-be home buyers, where the town's rural attractions predominate, the new computer-driven – as opposed to commuter-driven – 'normal' could well exert a pull towards more bucolic home surroundings, in neighbouring villages or in countryside 'proper', away from south-east England.

However, it's clear that our four secondary schools, including the new 'showpiece' KWS featured in our Summer newsletter, will provide a key 'draw' to the town for the foreseeable future, though that will be dependent on all four schools maintaining the highest standards.



Other factors potentially influencing the town's future include our proximity to Rothamsted Research, although its national and international importance barely impinges on the lives of most people in Harpenden. The number of Rothamsted staff who live here is not great. Nevertheless we

should be encouraging more research initiatives locally.

On a more down-to-earth, and visible, level, the effects on our High Street (and Station Road and Southdown) of on-line rather than 'physical' shopping are potentially dire, and the question needs to be asked as to whether some retail premises could be converted to meet the need for small-unit housing.



Our now more stringent economic times raise the possibility of local authorities – whether at town, district or county level – having to cut back on the quality and quantity of services available to us today. One conclusion is that more might need to be done on a voluntary basis, with implications for Harpenden's many volunteer organisations.

Clearly this is a debate that has only just begun and one in which the Harpenden Society intends to be at the forefront of the discussion.

## 'Unitary' plans - a Harpenden perspective

The government's plans to establish new 'unitary authorities', to which all eleven district and borough councils in Hertfordshire have objected, have been delayed until some time next year, though Herts CC leader Cllr David Williams has appealed directly to the Prime Minister that there should be no such delay.

Efficiencies saving billions of pounds a year would allegedly be achieved, enabling funds to be released for improving services or – sceptical economists say – for simply reducing the national debt (now over £2 trillion).

What are the implications for Harpenden, bearing in mind one of the core principles of a democratic society is that decisions should be taken as close as possible to those affected – something proclaimed in the 2011 Localism Act? Many people will remember that until 1974 Harpenden had its own Urban District Council which, crucially, ruled on planning decisions. But such small 'self sufficient'

authorities were back then deemed to be inefficient, lacking cost effectiveness.

Now, under the latest central government proposals, abolition of those 'middle tier' authorities would, they all unanimously maintain, erode local democracy through greater remoteness. To underline the point Harpenden currently elects twelve St Albans District councillors to represent four wards, but only two Herts CC councillors.

A central aspiration for the **Harpenden Society** is to maintain and where possible enhance the character of the town. Locally, the most rational safeguard against democratic deficit and remoteness would be to strengthen the legislative powers of town and parish councils, such as Harpenden TC, whose decision making is currently trumped by SADC. The question of capability however of course needs to be considered.

No solution is straightforward, but should these unitary authority proposals move forward we would support reform to enhance the role of the Town Council. The views of **Harpenden Society** members would of course be welcomed. So please let's have them; send to [chairman@harpendensociety.org](mailto:chairman@harpendensociety.org)

# Did you know?

## - From Harpenden's history 'Open day' shows off Rothamsted heritage

Nowhere in Harpenden is more steeped in local history than Rothamsted Manor and its surrounding estate. During what was publicised as the manor's late-September 'Heritage Weekend', over 750 members of the public – comprising mainly residents of the town – had the comparatively rare opportunity to explore the house and garden and learn more about their historical associations.



*Rothamsted Manor bathed in sunlight*

John Bennet Lawes, founder of Rothamsted Experimental Station (now Rothamsted Research) was born in the manor house in 1814. His ancestors built most of the house in the 1600s. There is however a record of settlement on the site dating as far back as the year 1212, when one Richard de Merston held a 'knight's fee' at what was variously referred to as 'Rochamstede' and 'Rokemstude'.

John Wittewronge became owner of Rothamsted at the age of only five, his mother Ann providing the wherewithal, following the early death of her husband Jacob. When John reached the age of majority, 21, in 1639, he assumed the title of the Lord of the Manor of Rothamsted, though he continued to reside in London. Then, two years after being widowed he was knighted by Charles I, remarried and moved into the Manor permanently.



*Rothamsted Manor won the Harpenden Society's Plaque Award for restoration of the house in 1978.*



*The Spanish Leather Room, whose leather wall coverings, originally dating from the 17th Century, were brought to Rothamsted in 1900.*

He immediately embarked on major rebuilding works, creating the house as it stands today. The Rothamsted estate passed in 1721 to his great grandson Jacob who lost no time in planting a vista of elm trees in front of the house and then an orchard.



*The Wittewronge coat-of-arms above the main entrance*

Then in 1785 the estate passed to John Bennet Lawes, a nephew of John Bennet, a cousin of the last of the Wittewronges. A second John Bennet Lawes, inherited the estate as a child. But aged 20 in 1834, he moved into Rothamsted Manor, converting one of its rooms into a laboratory and becoming 'hands on' manager of the estate's farm.

As to the house itself, it is architecturally Jacobean in style, whose origins date from the reign of James I of England (1603-1625).

The tall chimneys are typical of the period, bearing the date 1654. The number of chimneys on a country house was taken as a sign of wealth, indicating how many fires the owners could afford.



*The bell (and clock) tower surmounting the main entrance dates from around 1650.*



About 1650, extensions were added on both sides of the house, as were the 'arches' or 'open loggia' on the west side (now the orangery). Thankfully, the interior of Rothamsted Manor house remains largely as it was in the later Wittewronge years. The entrance hall, one of the oldest parts of the building, has some of the original timbers visible in the ceiling. The floor of the hall is oak boarding from 1862, but underneath there are flagstones dating from 1679.

Moving into the lounge the 17th Century fireplace is Bedfordshire clunch (soft limestone) and inlaid with black marble. The lounge windows incorporate the coats-of-arms of the owners of Rothamsted before the Wittewronges acquired the estate. The ceiling, of moulded plaster, is ornamented with an arabesque and vine pattern.

One of the highlights of the manor is the Spanish Leather Room, so called because of its 17th Century wall coverings acquired by Charles Bennet Lawes in 1900. Meanwhile the ornate fireplace overmantel, of similar vintage, features three niches, each displaying a small oil painting, one showing the Wittewronge family arms.

The Great Drawing Room was added to the house in 1864 to provide for the coming-of-age ball of his son Charles who, some 35 years later, remodelled the room, raising the ceiling, replacing the Victorian windows and wall panelling. The room's chandeliers and wall lights, bearing the Wittewronge and Bennet Lawes coats-of-arms, were acquired as recently as 1936. Sir Charles Lawes added 'Wittewronge' to his name in later years. More information about Rothamsted can be found at [www.rothamstedenterprises.com](http://www.rothamstedenterprises.com)

## Society Award for new cricket pavilion

Harpenden Cricket Club's new pavilion, visible across the Common for all to see when driving towards St Albans, has been awarded a Harpenden Society Certificate of Merit. The accolade is one of those bestowed on projects completed during 2019. Society chairman Phil Waters made the presentation to Cricket Club president Geoff Newman.

Tribute was paid to architect Graham Reid and to long-established Harpenden company Claridge & Hall, which undertook the construction. Though it retains some of the structure of its 45-year-old predecessor, the new pavilion is about 20% larger in floor area and features a new raised viewing

balcony and, importantly, new showers, toilets and kitchen facilities. The building's smart new exterior timber cladding meanwhile blends unobtrusively into its sylvan setting on Harpenden Common.

With its adjacent practice nets and other facilities it proclaims the club's thriving 600-plus membership, supporting Colt and All-Stars young people's teams. Harpenden Cricket Club claims to be the largest in Hertfordshire as well as the longest established; its origins can be traced back to 1863.

Inevitably, raising the money to cover the £250,000 or so cost of the project was challenging. The president accordingly paid tribute to the Harpenden Trust Community Fund for its support, as well as to Harpenden Building Society and Sport England, both of which provided valuable grants.

## Springtime Special for Society members

What better way to get through the dark days of winter than a beautiful flower display in your garden to look forward to.

**AND a chance to win Garden Vouchers from Notcutts in Smallford.**

Start planning now, buy some bulbs and plant up some spring flowers to make a display large or small, in your garden bed or in some pots.

### HOW TO ENTER

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](mailto:publicity@harpendensociety.org)

The judges will be looking for a balanced display of colour and beauty. Only 1 entry per member. Winners announced May 10th

### PRIZES

A £20 voucher will be awarded to the **ten** best entries as merited by the judges. No cash alternatives



## Society Awards 2020 Appeal

Nominations are invited, from Harpenden Society members, or from others in the town, for our 2020 Awards. Eligibility extends to imaginative townscape enhancements as well as new or extended/refurbished buildings. Suggestions should be forwarded to Awards Secretary Penny Ayres on [jandpalcock@tiscali.co.uk](mailto:jandpalcock@tiscali.co.uk) or 01582 460777

## EDITOR'S VIEW

Alan Bunting

### Support your friendly supermarket.

'Use it or lose it' is an oft-heard dictum with a particular resonance for the challenging Covid-afflicted times we are all living through, nowhere more so than in Harpenden town centre where all retailers – and banks – are experiencing a serious reduction in footfall. Fewer customers are coming through the door.

Among the businesses suffering are our three supermarkets, Sainsbury's, Waitrose and, at Southdown, the Co-op. It could be argued that they are too big to fail, which is undoubtedly true of their total operations, both locally and nationwide, nowadays including their burgeoning home-delivery operations.

Those queues of face-masked shoppers outside the supermarkets back in April and May have largely evaporated. It is likely that many of those erstwhile queuers have since opted for home delivery of their groceries – a presumption borne out by the stores' much less crowded aisles and shortened checkout queues.



One can be sure however that supermarket head office bean counters will be closely monitoring the reduction in footfall, and therefore in takings, of every individual store, set against its multiple overheads – inevitably related to the store size and personnel headcount.

Harpenden's supermarkets are small compared with those in typical out-of-town locations. But they are large enough for their commercial viability to be coming under critical scrutiny. Questions likely to be asked at a financial review would include whether their catchment areas could not now be adequately served by smaller so-called convenience stores like the Tesco Express in Luton Road.

Any decisions on the future of Sainsbury's, Waitrose and the Co-op in Harpenden are unlikely to be made as long as Covid-19 uncertainty lingers. In any case they are probably to some extent hamstrung by long lease terms. But the message must be to 'use them or we could lose them'.



## Moving mountains

Anyone visiting Rothamsted Park in recent weeks might have seen the earth move – specifically the bulldozed removal of a layer of topsoil over a 3.2 acre area near to the new Harpenden Leisure Centre and its aggregation into a small mountain. It was in preparation for the spreading of some 10,000 cubic metres (13,000 cubic yards) of subsoil excavated from the foundation work on the Centre. The subsoil, which for the past two years has created a separate and unsightly fenced-off 'mountainous ridge', is being dispersed across a shallow 'dished valley' – location of one of the park's football pitches.

Once dispersed, the subsoil which Leisure Centre contractor Willmott Dixon has confirmed as being free from asbestos or other contaminants, can be covered with the previously removed topsoil, before being re-seeded with grass for eventual reinstatement as a usable park area.

Willmott Dixon manager Jon Allworth says the strategy of storing the subsoil in the park, for subsequent on-site dispersal, was a more economic and environmental alternative to transporting the excavated spoil away to a landfill site elsewhere, which would have involved a calculated 1300 lorry movements.



Above. Bulldozer at work on the topsoil 'mountain', with the separate subsoil 'mountain ridge', as well as the new Leisure Centre, in the background. Below: The area of the park having its topsoil removed – for later reinstatement – extends to 3.2 acres.



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