



## Seeing green - not red

Back in the fifties, my parents took me by train from our home in Devon up to London for the first time for a week's holiday. I was about eight, and this was certainly a big adventure for me – and probably for them too. We stayed with a neighbour of relatives in Finchley.

Buses and trains already gripped me. How I loved the trolley buses, and I distinctly remember a trip on a Greenline single-decker out to Heathrow, where, of all places, I rode on a donkey – as you do!

Those Greenline coaches, with their iconic curves, really stood out from the red London buses. They took people to and from more faraway parts, through countryside, to places like Guildford, Windsor and, yes, St Albans – wherever that was - for my domestic geography was still somewhat patchy.

That lovely dark green livery was remarkably symbolic, indicating a service that, over the years, continued to pass through the very areas that were to acquire Green Belt status.

And now here in Hertfordshire there are government proposals for thousands of houses to be built over Green Belt land - proposals that would effectively end up merging St Albans with Hatfield and Hemel. And don't forget that the railfreight depot plan near Park Street would link us with Radlett, and bring ever closer the prospect of St Albans dwindling into a northern suburb of London.

An ongoing campaign to protect our Green Belt is essential. Once lost, it's gone forever.

What a legacy to leave to future generations.

So that introduction in June this year of the 712, a new Greenline service between London Victoria and St Albans has relevance and poignancy. It's a visual reminder of the link between the capital and our city that still passes through the countryside which keeps us safe from London's tentacles.

The Civic Society continues to help fight for the Green Belt. It will be a sad day if the 712 ever turns up red, for then we'll see and know that we've lost the battle – and something very special indeed.

Eric Roberts

### Email addresses

Although we do have email contact addresses for a number of our members, we feel sure that there are others of which we know nothing. If you have such an address, could we therefore please ask you to email it to [bryan@hanlon.me](mailto:bryan@hanlon.me) (membership secretary).

Although we do not intend yet to distribute copies of the newsletter by this electronic means, it would be helpful if we can update members on matters that we think may be of interest.

Needless to say, this information will not be divulged to any third party outside the Civic Society.

Bryan Hanlon

## Membership Matters

### Society Activities - Autumn 2009

Saturday 12 September

#### Heritage Open Days (see special brochure)

#### City Vision; the Clash of Old and New

A 90-minute walk lead by Peter Trevelyan and Marion Hammant.

Meet at main entrance Civic Centre, St Peter's Street at 2:30pm

Wednesday 23 September

#### The Thameslink Programme and the threat from the proposed Rail Freight Interchange.

Larry Heyman, Integration and Partnership Manager, First Capital Connect.

The Cross Street Centre, Dagnall Street at 8:00pm

Saturday 26 September

#### Autumn Visit - Lewes and Bexhill-on-Sea

Waiting list – Telephone Bryan Hanlon (01727 851734)

Wednesday 14 October

#### Awards and members evening

Maltings Arts Theatre 7:30pm for 8:00pm

Wine and canapés

Wednesday 18 November

#### The new Heartwood Forest, Sandridge

Pam Farley, Woodland Trust

The Cross Street Centre, Dagnall Street at 8:00pm

Wednesday 16 December

#### The local paper: News, Views and Debate

Matt Adams (Editor, Herts Advertiser)

The Cross Street Centre, Dagnall Street at 8:00pm

### To join or renew membership

Subscriptions are renewable on 1 April each year

Individual Members	£10
Family Membership	£15
Unwaged Members	£7
Residents' Associations	No charge
Corporate Membership	£50

To join or check payment details please contact the Membership Secretary, Bryan Hanlon, tel: 01727 851734.

### The Society acknowledges with gratitude the support from the following Corporate Members:

- T&B (St Albans) Ltd
- Debenhams Ottaway
- Rumball Sedgwick
- DLA Town Planning Ltd



## Newsletter | Autumn 2009

President: Geraint John

Chairman: Peter Trevelyan 01727 843656

## Chairman's notes

First, I have to report that Peter Newby has, for personal reasons, felt that he could no longer continue as Editor of the Newsletter. We are sorry that he has had to step down at short notice and are most grateful to him for his hard work in recent years editing the newsletter, and for his service to the Society over more than twenty years. In the meantime, the job has landed on my desk, so if you do wish to write to the Editor, the address is 3 Abbey Mill End, St Albans AL3 4HN or email [ptrevelyan@aol.com](mailto:ptrevelyan@aol.com)

### Consultation seems to be the theme

for us stay-at-homes this summer. The Council is seeking views on the Westminster Lodge proposals, and the third draft version of Local Development Framework (LDF) Core Strategy is on our desks at this very moment. Then, at the beginning of September, we start with the master plans for the City Vision. I do hope that members of the Society will make their own

contributions. We have debated the Westminster Lodge proposals in Committee, and a wide variety of views have been expressed. Overall, we are supportive, and look forward to a bright exciting new building in this important location, but still with regard for some of the mature trees. Which option is preferable? Well, one option seems to be rather an Aunt Sally, and in the absence of information on the costs of the two options, I wonder how meaningful is the choice?

It is a pity, too, that we cannot provide a 50 metre pool to Olympic and World Championship size. This is a lost opportunity as it could have put St Albans on the map for both competitions and training purposes.

The LDF Core Strategy is a rather more complex document. If you are wealthy, and



Hertfordshire House trees protected by a recent Tree Preservation Order

can afford \$50 for a 100+ page document stuffed with irrelevant colour pictures, then fine. If not, then the library has copies for one-week loans; or send an email to the Society, and we can forward you a free 60 page text-only file!

When you do get round to reading the document, note the proposal to site a large number of new houses in the Green Belt on the southern outskirts of the city. How's that for a sustainable solution!

**Regarding some unwanted development schemes in the city** (I have in mind both Tesco, and Hertfordshire House) is it too much to hope that developers will now realise that their efforts are unlikely to succeed?

The Rail Freight proposal in Park Street is another unwanted development. The Society's poster campaign at the Station was well received. The suggestion in the local press that the scheme may be premature in the light of forthcoming changes in Government policy is

encouraging. And do come to the meeting on Wednesday 23 September when we will be hearing from Larry Heyman of First Capital Connect about the threat from the proposed Rail Freight Interchange.

**At the national level**, following the demise of the Civic Trust, the Civic Society Initiative is making good progress in defining how the movement should be represented in future. I shall be attending a working group meeting in London later in September. I believe strongly that we do need a national voice, as many of the issues we face are replicated throughout the country and are symptomatic of legislative or financial imbalances that need to be corrected at UK government level. Fortunately, English Heritage has stepped in to rescue Heritage Open Days.

**Finally, on a cheerful note**, the Society is pleased to assist, with the Arch and the city-wide Monopoly game on 19-20 September by opening the Clock Tower.

Peter Trevelyan



## Is this the most tantalising picture of the year?

The sight of the apparent refurbishment of the Odeon Cinema in London Road had hearts lifting and fluttering all over St Albans. Was something positive happening to this sadly neglected Art Deco building at last? Had James Hannaway of the Rex, Berkhamsted actually ...?

No such luck. Wattsdown Developments, the current owners of the site, were simply responding, no doubt reluctantly, to the all too rarely-used Section 215 Repairs Order put on them by our Council. Hence the whitewash, or whatever.

What is so galling is that even a casual lick of paint shows just how splendid the Odeon could look if it were actually brought back to life. The Council wants a landmark edifice on this gateway route into the city? Here it is, staring it (and Tesco! Ed.) in the face. And think what a fillip such

a project would give to this grievously rundown area.

For the moment, there is only one word that sums up the feelings of residents with fond memories of this historic cinema, of the campaigners who have fought over the years to save it, and of the local school student who recently with great energy mounted another attempt. The word is 'frustration'.

If this were a fairy tale, with a wave of a wand, the Council, Wattsdown and James Hannaway would come together, bidding stalemates would be forgotten, and behold, a sparkling, restored cinema for all would come into being.

In the meantime, be tantalised, be very tantalised.

Marion Hammant

## Statement by James Hannaway about the Odeon

**“** I am being pressed more and more to say something about The Rex's intentions in St Albans. It has gone on for such a long time; four years for us and at least thirteen since the Odeon closed. Until planning permission was finally granted last year to demolish the historic building on London Road, I had been open about our wishes to either restore it as a viable cinema or find a new site.

Talks and negotiations over the past eight months have been slow but hopeful. While talks continue, albeit slower, the pressure to say something has prompted this statement.

Every day somebody at the Rex or in the street or by email or phone asks about St Albans. At least twenty people from St Albans, Harpenden and nearby come to The Rex every night. The latest excitement was caused when fifteen year old, Alexandra Heal wrote to the press with great passion. Singlehandedly she has refreshed the groundswell of support and demand for a cinema in St Albans.

The Civic Society, entrepreneurs, developers and concerned people ring me every week, and some weeks, every day, offering ideas and cash. Nothing can be accepted until there is real hope that a cinema will be returned to St Albans.

We have inspected the building a number of times. It is bigger than the Rex and because of its complicated conversion from one screen to four in the 1970s, is less straightforward, therefore more costly.

Based on our restoration in Berkhamsted, it would cost around £2 million to restore and refurbish the site as it stands today. It is a solid building. The walls are strong and though derelict and in a bad state, there is little evidence of weather damage or rot to the interior. Planning permission to demolish and build fourteen apartments with underground car parking was granted last year.

In January The Rex made a substantial offer to its owners, Wattsdown Developments Ltd and entered into talks. They are currently in talks with a higher bidder. Our aspirations in St Albans remain the same – by increasing local demand, we are being urged to build or restore a space in St Albans City Centre to provide a cinema, operating along the lines of the Rex in Berkhamsted.

To remind you of those lines: The Rex is independent of chains, distributors, all other

major players and imposed programming. We are not in the hands of corporations, investors, boards of directors or banks. We have a firm financial and advisory partnership based on friendship and trust, much of which is unwritten.

The audience is not held to ransom. We refuse to overprice for the luxury of legroom. There is no noise, popcorn or hotdogs. Instead, there are flowers and your feet don't stick to the carpet. We run a repertory programme of the best films on release from across the world. Many return month after month by demand. This can work with more than one screen but no more than two. No cinema needs

more than two screens. Multiplexes were imported from the USA in the mid-seventies; primarily to show blockbusters and sell popcorn to 18 to 25 year olds on the first weekend of release.

Programmed properly, two huge screens will provide all you need - the big releases on one, the smaller gems on the other. The plexes now show the same big sell-outs simultaneously on two or three of their multi-screens, thus reducing choice and removing the purpose of 'multi'. (St Albans Councillors please note. Ed.)

From the outset and against advice from seasoned professionals, we removed screen-choice. Paradoxically, with one

screen and a different film most nights and matinees, there is more choice. The Rex has consistently sold out five nights out of seven, each week since it re-opened in December 2004.

Our intention in St Albans remains clear: to open a similar cinema in the City Centre, offering the same courtesy, experience and advantages of the Rex. We have not wavered from this but circumstances have stalled speedy progress. Hence the heightened frustration and renewed resolve within St Alban's to see something happen now. We are behind them and ready to join them when everything is in place and the time is right **”**

## Up where we belong

The Report back in June by English Heritage about how Conservation Areas across the country were at risk included St Albans in its findings.

Not exactly a surprise to the Civic Society. It illustrated what we really already knew – that, despite our efforts so far, the message isn't always getting across of the importance of following the rules and guidelines that apply in a Conservation Area.

Likewise, in respect of our Council. Its free 'Living in a Conservation Area' booklet informs us that there are no less than 18 such areas so designated in and around our City and District in order to recognise their 'special architectural or historic interest, the character or appearance of which it is desirable to preserve and enhance'.

Now all that sounds very good and, as estate agents are often quick to add an 'in the Conservation Area' to a property's details, there must be some implied added value to all this.

Unfortunately, as English Heritage has revealed, actual appearances speak for themselves.

The Society has lost count of the number of times it has warned that potentially delightful Victorian terraces and Edwardian houses are being defaced, and almost certainly devalued, by inappropriate alterations that simply should not have been allowed in a Conservation Area. Things like ghastly picture windows and uPVC replacements; badly positioned satellite dishes; front gardens paved over for cars, or to stand that latest scourge to hit the streetscene, courtesy of the Council no less, the array of wheelie bins and boxes dumped on residents. Worse, we've seen perfectly good houses bulldozed to make

room for flats or some bigger residence, or to cram a few more onto a site.

The result has been the creation of almost an urban mess and any Conservation Area status has become somewhat meaningless. Only the 'touristy' streets around the Cathedral remain relatively unscathed. Here many are listed buildings, which can give some protection, and with something called an Article 4 Direction. (Details available from the Council's Planning Department). Used effectively, the latter can, and does work. Perhaps here's a clue to any future policy to improve things.

A walk around the city centre, again highlighted by English Heritage as being at risk, reveals such eyesores and hazards like a proliferation of 'A' boards on pavements, brash hoardings and advertisements stuck on buildings and across shop fronts. As for some of the clutter and materials that pose



as street furniture, signage and surfaces – let's not go there. (See previous Newsletters).

It's no good having glossy booklets, heritage champions, city forums and talking shops if things are allowed to happen as they have. Policies simply appear toothless, even a bit of a joke and so somewhat insulting to the people who care.

That Cabinet decision to break-up the Council's Conservation and Design Department can't have helped things; and this in an Administration that claims to seek to promote its heritage and environment. But the rot had already set in before all this.

So what's to do? Declare enough is enough and draw a line under things and seek to reverse previous trends. Remind residents in Conservation Areas of the rules and their responsibilities. Offer some grants to encourage remedial works. Show that the Council can lead by example, and by its planning and enforcement decisions. And to those folk who proclaim people should be allowed to do what they like with their property – think again. Don't live in a Conservation Area if you're not prepared to respect the rules and guidelines – and your neighbours.

Other towns and cities seem to have done so much better. Such places as York, Chester, Chichester, Ely, Lewes and Rye all come to mind. Size doesn't matter. There, policies have been in place and followed through, and it shows. Conservation can actually pay. So do take note.

All is not yet lost in St Albans. We have much to offer and could be up there with the best of them. But like that proverbial school report: 'we could do better' - and must do, surely. The Society would be glad to help improve things.

And whilst English Heritage's criticism applies to us all, the Council has to take the lead. But will it?

Eric Roberts