



Verulamium Park Lakes

There is a big stink brewing – quite literally. Ducks are dying and peoples' dogs getting sick.

Tony Mason, who keeps a look out for the Society on Park matters, advises there are some misleading statements coming from the Council, particularly over the sluice gates needed to oxygenate the water.

Ornamental lakes such as in Verulamium Park are not common, and we need ours in good order, otherwise they are more of an embarrassment than an asset.

More next time.

The Abbey Parish Street Memorials of the 1914-18 Great War have recently been Grade II listed.

A revised edition of the book, originally written by Alice Goodman in 1987, has been published by John J E Cox and Ann Dean. Price £9 from the Tourist Information Centre.

Answer - High Street with Village Arcade.



In order to avoid any possible confusion or misunderstanding members are respectfully asked that, should they be involved in any meeting or activity where they declare they are a member of this Society, they make it clear that their attendance and any opinion expressed does not necessarily represent those of the Society's Committee. The Committee can always be contacted for advice, information and update on any matter by any member. Equally, the Society wishes to make it clear that when it is consulted about any item this should not be automatically deemed as leading to consent.

News from the Clock Tower

Visitor numbers this season continue to be healthy. We hope to be attracting even more, particularly through the numerous activities taking place over the Heritage Open Days 10-13 September. These include a balloon race from the top of the Tower, and an opportunity to visit at sunset and see various displays. See the Heritage Open Days programme. Note: for Clock Tower information, the correct number is 01727 864511.

Forthcoming events

Thursday 10 - Sunday 13 September

Heritage Open Days

Various attractions. See leaflet produced by the Society.

Saturday 26 September

Autumn coach visit to Salisbury

Chance to visit this historic cathedral city. For details and seat availability call Bryan Hanlon on 01727 851734

Tuesday 13 October

Annual Awards Evening

Members and invited guests only. Wine and canapés - FREE. The Maltings Arts Theatre, 7.30 for 8pm.

Tuesday 27 October

Local visit to

Hemel Hempstead's Old Town

See refurbished High Street, lunch at Alberto's and visit Norman church. Details in special leaflet.

Thursday 19 November

Sons of St Albans

An illustrated talk by Elizabeth Eastwood from the City Guides. The Cross Street Centre* Dagnall Street at 8 pm - FREE

Non-members are most welcome at our Cross Street evenings or to enquire about availability of seats on visits.

*Disabled parking only at The Cross Street Centre. There are public car parks nearby.



Another tower - another view

An addition to the Heritage programme: **St. Peter's Church**

Sunday 13 September

Church open 1400-1700.

Tower tours 1415 & 1515. No booking required. See Wembley Arch and Canary Wharf if visibility and weather permit. Under 9s not allowed on the roof.

Historic displays in the church. Large churchyard with orchard, wildflower meadow and Garden of Hope with Tree of Life memorial sculpture.

St. Peters Street, St. Albans AL1 3HG

Membership Matters

To join or renew membership

Subscriptions remain unchanged and are renewable on **1 April** each year.

| | |
|---------------------------|------------------|
| Individual | £10 |
| Family (2 or more) | £15 |
| Pensioner/Student/Unwaged | £7 |
| Residents' Associations | No charge |
| Corporate | £50 |

To join or check payment details please contact the Membership Secretary, Bryan Hanlon, tel: 01727 851734 hanlonbryan@gmail.com or post to - 24 Monks Horton Way, St Albans AL1 4HA

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

- T&B (St Albans) Ltd
- Debenhams Ottaway
- Rumball Sedgwick
- National Pharmaceutical Association
- Christopher Place Shopping Centre
- St Columba's College

St Albans CIVIC SOCIETY

Looking to the future - with an eye to the past

President: Geraint John
Chairman: Tim Boatswain 07873 586074

Newsletter | Autumn 2015

This edition has been prepared by Eric Roberts (Committee member) and Peter Trevelyan (Member).

If you have any comments, please write to the Editors at 3 Abbey Mill End, St Albans AL3 4HN or email ptrevelyan@aol.com

NEWS & COMMENTS

The AGM in June was well attended and we now have, for the first time for many years, a full committee. The list is given on the members' programme card 2015/6.

We hope to see many of you at forthcoming meetings, particularly the new members who have joined during the summer as a result of events such as Larks in the Parks. The Annual Awards evening on Tuesday 13 October is a great opportunity to meet fellow members in a convivial atmosphere with what promises to be a stimulating presentation.

May we remind you that seats may still be available on the coach to Salisbury on Saturday 26 September. Contact Bryan Hanlon on 01727 851734. There is also a mini-visit, with lunch, to the Old Town in Hemel Hempstead on Tuesday 27 October – see leaflet.

Turning to planning, it was initially encouraging to hear from the Budget that the Government proposes to protect the Green Belt by allowing planning permission on all suitable designated brownfield sites. On the face of it, this sounded good, but potentially, like the relaxation that allowed our offices to disappear into flats, it raises the possibility of blotches of mediocre building appearing all over the place. However, we should bear in mind there has already been a fivefold increase in Green Belt housing development in five years (Daily Telegraph 10 June). The CPRE is predicting that in the next few years 226,000 new houses will be built on what should be protected land. We need to be vigilant.

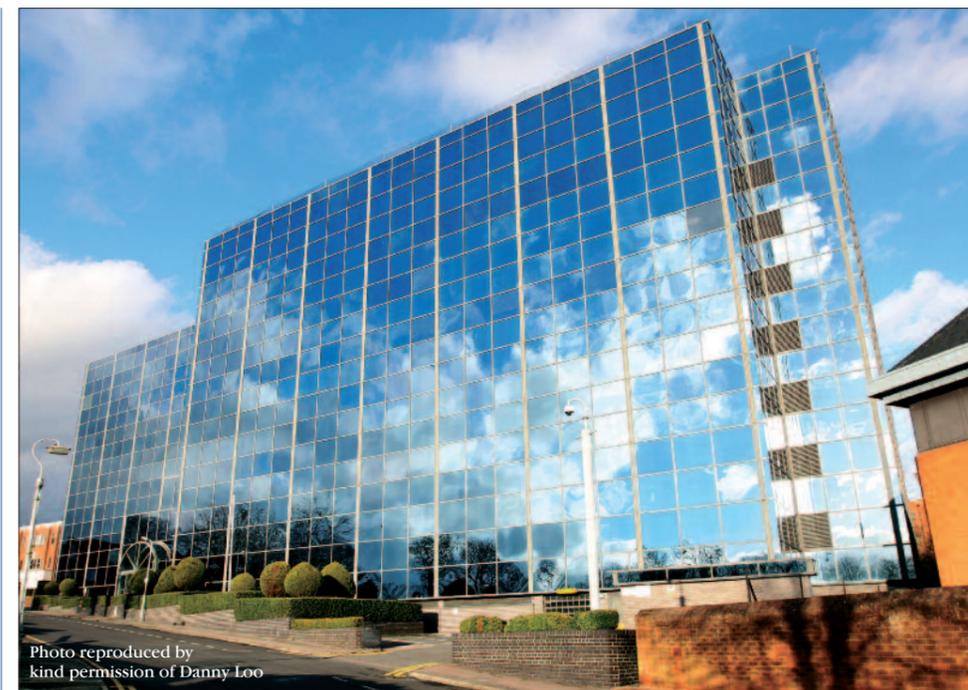


Photo reproduced by kind permission of Danny Loo

Nearer home, the recent Sewell Park decision is a step in the right direction. The threat of building on our Green Belt is likely to continue until our Strategic Local Plan is in place. The SLP is needed urgently as the Government's approach is development-led, with relaxed planning controls and fast-tracked decisions, particularly when the Council does not have an updated Plan in place.

There is still time to sponsor a tree. This is especially important in view of the advance of ash dieback (*Chalara fraxinea*) and the parasitic moth attacking horse chestnuts. Contact the Council on 819363 or email treesandwoodlands@stalban.gov.uk.

The Council is bringing back its loss-making (so far £140,000 in two years) Christmas Market in November. What damage will it do this year? Vintry Garden has not yet recovered (the Council did nothing to repair the upheaval after the last market) and Wax House Gate passage is continuing to crack up following damage by market contractors' heavy vehicles. Promises of proper restoration made last year have not been kept. This is unacceptable. Why is the Council so neglectful in its upkeep of this important area?



Ziggurat decision raises questions of design quality

The cladding of the Ziggurat building was given the go-ahead Plans Central committee on 2 August, much to the dismay of the Society and the many residents present at the meeting. We had objected to the substantial design change to what has become a distinctive landmark building stating: "its glass panelling successfully blends the building into the background sky, thus belittling its bulk. The proposed cladding will do nothing to disguise the towering elevations and the repetitive expanse of brickwork would give a heavy appearance. The result will be a bland and anonymous utilitarian high-rise block."

Alas, the Plans Central Committee approved the plans. It was reported (Herts Ad 6 Aug) that Cllr Janet Churchard recommended approval from the chair. She said she often admired the Ziggurat building from the train. *Exactly, that is the strength of the present glass façade and is no doubt seen by the thousands of travellers that pass by daily – an image of St Albans!*

Unfortunately, she went on to say that close-up, she felt it wasn't so impressive and that the alterations would be an improvement. We disagree, as did the many angry residents who shouted "Shame on you" when Councillors approved the plan. Nearly 80 objections, including one from our MP, were simply brushed aside. The

Continued over page

Ziggurat decision... continued

Chairman, then later remarked that: "it's a shame when the public are here in number and don't understand why we had to vote the way we did. This is what we are elected for and sometimes we have to take some decisions which are unpopular." This was not particularly helpful in the circumstances. So much for localism! As a resident exclaimed: "Bring on May's elections!"

This is just one example of the Council accepting mundane designs which dumb-down the city's image. The Society has been spurred to write the following letter to Tracy Harvey, Head of Planning:

"I am writing to you to express the concerns of the Society about the quality of recent proposed housing developments. The Society has a Planning Group, who meet regularly to review SADC planning applications. They have inspected a number of recently proposed schemes and have concluded that the quality of the designs often leaves something to be desired, are bland and do not enhance

the built environment. Furthermore, there is a lack of bespoke designs to create local distinctiveness and a sense of place.

For a number of reasons St Albans is becoming a popular place to live. We have the heritage of a cathedral city, good schools and excellent transport links. These are just a few of the reasons to aim for high quality design in our new buildings. Without the need for any radical change to proposals, the character of the schemes should be to a higher standard of architecture, so as to provide a more interesting appearance.

Given the relaxation to the planning rules in respect of the conversions of offices to residential, plus the recent Budget announcement of zoned brownfield sites for prior approved developments, the Society asks if something can be done by the Council to raise the bar for St Albans' architecture.

*With kind regards,
Professor Tim Boatswain, Chairman"*

Editors note: Some example drawings were included in the letter.

Going Green with envy. Seeing Red with rage!

Those who watched the BBC's series "Mapp and Lucia" last December would surely agree with the TV critic who said that the real star was Rye (in East Sussex) appearing as E F Benson's fictional town of Tilling. Just like the series thirty years ago, Rye's cobbled streets, paved pathways and street furniture alongside its glorious houses, looked immaculate. All very envious!

We must assume Rye is managing to do something that St Albans isn't. That is, to look after its streetscape, often grandiosely referred to by officialdom as the public realm.

There's a real problem in St Albans and it's all too easy to see. Those who wax lyrical about St Albans' heritage, its 'story' and how it's out to attract thousands more tourists, really ought to take time, do a reality check, and set about tackling the problems.

Look around the city centre. Note the uneven surfaces, cracked paving stones, broken bollards, dollops of tarmac in inappropriate places and you see these eyesores only too well.

The responsibility lies with Local and County Councils, particularly the latter which should have more control over the biggest culprits – the utilities. The Society has been liaising with the local Council for nearly two years, thanks to the Chief Executive who set up six-monthly meetings. Some progress is being made, but it is an uphill

struggle, especially over matters relating to the County Council's works.

Why is this monitoring worthwhile? Places with well-presented streetscapes are known to attract more quality footfall. That translates into more spending, so that's good for business. Thus even more incentive to make our city centre look better. Those who manage it please note.

The Society has Rye in the frame as a destination for a visit next Spring. It would be nice to think that we won't return too green with envy, because back here things have at last been attended to. We'll see!

Alas, things in St Albans just get worse. Following last summer's terrible work in College Street when tarmac was spread all over the cobble setts, similar unsatisfactory work has been repeated in Abbey View, Ladysmith and Kimberley Roads, and Tavistock Avenue. Where does the County find the contractors to do this work? What specification is set for conservation areas and how do they monitor what is taking place?

Where will they strike next? It is time an officer was held to account and even given the sack. Our County Councillors need to get a grip. This is not only a visual insult, but is costing us a fortune to clear up the mess. This could, and should, become an election issue.

Railfreight fight goes on

Following a ruling by Lord Justice Sullivan, the District Council has decided to end its legal challenge against the Strategic Rail Freight Interchange (SRFI) at Park Street. It has done its best and we must be grateful.

Two other options exist for residents to stop any SRFI.

One is to ensure the County Council does not sell the greenbelt land (our land!) required for Helioslough's depot.

The Society urges people to sign the petition. Go to: <http://bit.ly/1P1XnqX> or Google "Herts petitions. Don't sell the green belt". This will help reach the 10,000 signatures required to debate the issue at County Hall.

The other is the Civic Society's long standing belief that Network Rail will be unable to fund or schedule the necessary infrastructure works needed to accommodate Helioslough's freightliners: such as gauge upgrades by lowering tracks in tunnels like Elstree and Belsize (one mile 107 yards long) near Kentish Town. Apart from the costs, the disruption to commuter services will be enormous. Given Network Rail's poor record for managing such projects (remember the Kings Cross fiasco last Christmas/New Year) and the financial state recently announced by the Transport Minister, the Society has again asked our MP, Anne Main, to establish who pays for these works and when they take place.

Fortunately, we now have an ally in her newly elected colleague for Hertsmere, MP Oliver Dowden, who just happens to live in St Albans. He has latched on to these questions too. Not surprisingly he has found that getting answers is difficult with the inevitable buck passing. Presumably the Minister is hoping he/she will have moved on by the time commuters start shouting about delays and cancellations because of the works – and that's before the freight trains start running!

Network Rail is funded by taxpayers. Commuters pay tax. How ironic that they could end up helping fund something they don't want which is causing them mighty inconvenience to boot!

Costs and travel chaos could yet thwart any SRFI and stop it ending up as a road based interchange.

Since the above appeared as the Society's monthly column for August in the Review it has been revealed that MP Oliver Dowden has established that no feasibility studies have been undertaken by Network Rail on the works required. This comes as no

surprise to the Society!

So how can any costings or work schedules and the scale of disruption to services be known? Until they are clarified, we repeat, no work on the SRFI should commence.

We have been advised that MPs Anne Main and Oliver Dowden are now working together on challenging Network Rail. Good luck to them!

On 10 August, Network Rail was fined £2m for the mess they made in the planning of the current London Bridge works. This will be paid for from its funds which have come from us as taxpayers. What a system!

Editors' note: the Society has spent a lot of time and effort in opposing the SRFI, including donations to STRIFE, and £2,500 on posters at the station to try and alert commuters of the threat to their services. Alas, they have remained unmoved. Poor lambs – they have yet to smell the mint sauce that could be poured over them!

Hertfordshire Rail Strategy 2015: response (extract) from St Albans Civic Society in respect of the proposals for St Albans Abbey – Watford Junction line.

The Civic Society does not support the concept of turning the line into a Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) route.

Main reasons for objection:

- Cost/value for money.
- Adverse impact on environment – in particular the buses are likely to be diesel powered.
- Suspect usage – similar BRTs elsewhere have not met anticipated patronage.
- Upheaval to existing service and local neighbourhood during construction of the concrete guideways etc.

Questions need to be asked if the line would be better provided for outside the London Midland franchise.

Would the route sit more comfortably in one of the following?

- 1 part of the successful London Overground Network.
- 2 part of the (current) Southern franchise which operates a service from Milton Keynes to Clapham Junction via Harrow and

Wealdstone and Kensington Olympia. The Abbey Line service need not necessarily proceed beyond Watford Junction on a regular interval basis (thus avoiding any delay in the London area and the risk of late presentation at the passing loop) but only for maintenance or some peak hour operation.

Access/egress also via Everard Close should be examined using selected operation on one or two doors of any electric unit.

Summary:

- No to any Bus Rapid Transit.
- Use the existing electrified line's infrastructure installing a passing loop at Bricket Wood.
- Reconsider light rail electric operation – why was it abandoned? The amount of periodic procrastination is unacceptable.
- Use normal electric units examining the best option for the route's future franchise operator.

The full response is on the website.

Giving Heritage a helping hand

National, indeed European, Heritage Open Days started in 1994. In St Albans nothing happened.

Not good enough, said The Civic Trust. So, a few years later, four members of the Civic Society attended an afternoon seminar at the Trust's London HQ on how to get started with HODs.

They were told people liked climbing up, going underground, and into places they normally couldn't. Free. On the train back, those members resolved to get St Albans included for 1997.

The opening of Kingsbury Barn started things. Built in 1374, it was being used as a storeroom for Express Dairies, complete with Christmas float, all covered in the resident pigeons' droppings! The owners were great. The Dairy handed over the key and let the Society get on with it. Two tours were offered that HOD weekend and about two dozen people showed up. By 2009, after the barn's restoration, nearly 1,100 visited on the equivalent weekend. The Heritage chrysalis had turned into a butterfly.

HODs became established, attracting visitors to St Albans. The Council had come on board and co-ordinated all the attractions and produced a mini guide.

Then in March 2014, without warning, the Cabinet took a swipe at that Heritage butterfly. It decided to withdraw support and cease production of any local brochure.

Did someone think that, in order to save money, the event could be combined with Residents First Weekend, which is held in January? It cannot. HODs are national and cannot simply be moved to suit St Albans.

The Society was dismayed and still thinks the Council made a bad decision. The Residents First event, by its very name, is for people already sleeping, eating, drinking and shopping here. The Heritage Open Days attracts visitors from outside the district who will do all these things, thus bringing extra business into the local economy.

To add insult to injury, when the 2015 Residents First programme was produced, the person who put the brochure together omitted the Council's very own Clock Tower, which the Society had volunteered to open for the last 13 years for the event. Ye Gods!

Last year's HODs were therefore a bit of a disappointment, especially as many of the attractions only found out quite late about the Council's decision. The smaller venues were particularly hard hit. **It is no good having fancy logos and 'strap lines' which**

talk up the city's heritage, and then doing little or nothing to support it locally.

For 2015 the Society has decided to step in and co-ordinate events, fund and produce a local leaflet. The intention is to try and pick up things as they were in 2013 and promote St Albans as a really worthwhile heritage city destination - which it surely is.



Larks in the Park stall with Melvyn Teare's picture quiz. Below, one of the 'Where is it?' pictures. Answer - back page.

