

Double standards over licensing?

The Society's complaint concerning the Council's procedure following an appeal into a recent licensing application has gone to the Ombudsman. Meanwhile, in the heart of the historic conservation area, another issue, also involving licensing, looms large.

The Society has been repeatedly told at licensing hearings that planning is a totally separate matter and does not influence licensing decisions. However, as recently

seen over matters relating to the former Spotted Bull (now The Brickyard) in Verulam Road, certain Councillors sat on both planning and licensing committees. This raises questions about possible pre-determination, lack of impartiality and, at the very least, transparency. One Councillor not only sat on the licensing hearing, but attended the planning appeal and spoke in favour of the application. Thus he spoke against his own Council which was arguing

that the application should be refused.

It seems there is one rule for Councillors and another for residents. Residents in this part of the historic conservation area are wondering if their interests and amenities are really being looked after by some Councillors.

Again, members may like to raise these issues when candidates come a-knocking, and seek their views and promises.

George Atkinson, RIBA, OBE has died. Dennis Owen has kindly written:

When the St Albans Civic Society was formed in 1961, George Atkinson was one of the first to join and put his name forward to serve on the Committee. He was a trained architect and his professional knowledge and experience became invaluable. Eventually he was to become Head of Design at the Building Research Station in Boreham Wood.

After retiring George and his wife Etaine lived in St Albans. There is no doubt that the city has been very substantially affected for the better in a number of ways over the years by his active contribution to the work of the Society. He always brought a mature judgment to discussions supported by endless research and investigation.

In his later years his fascination with local and world affairs never dimmed and he would spend hours reading and writing about matters that interested him. His love of travel continued well into his nineties when he embarked on round the world cruises, taking photographs and relishing the opportunity to experience other countries.

George was 99 years old – three months short of his 100th birthday.

Dennis Owen

The full text of Dennis' appreciation can be seen on the Society's website. The Society extends its sympathy to George's family, as it does to those of Clare Ellis (former Councillor, Deputy Mayor, and Society member) who has also recently died.

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 automatically 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.

Forthcoming events

Thursday 12 March

Alban, Britain's first saint: telling the whole story

An illustrated talk by Helen Gray from the Cathedral's Heritage Lottery Fund Project The Cross Street Centre* Dagnall Street at 8 pm - FREE

Thursday 16 April

The life, loves, hates and passions of a local architect living in St Albans

A talk by Alan Whittingham (Joint meeting with Herts Association of Architects). The Cross Street Centre* Dagnall Street at 8 pm - FREE

Saturday 9 May

Spring visit by rail to Rochester

See Rochester's cathedral, castle and many Dickens attractions.

Thursday 14 May

Transforming culture in the community

A talk by St Albans Museums and Galleries Trust on the aspirations for the Town Hall Heritage Lottery Project.

The Cross Street Centre* Dagnall Street at 8 pm - FREE

Monday 22 June

Retailer of the Year Gala Evening

8pm Club Batchwood. Tickets £6 (includes refreshments) from the Tourist Information Centre early June.

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.

News from the Clock Tower

The Clock Tower will be open from Good Friday 3 April and every weekend until the end of September. The two-hour opening for Residents First Saturday in January attracted 170 people, 42 being children. We are working hard to get the Council to come back on-board for Heritage Open Days this year, particularly as the Residents First opening was somehow left out of its programme!

Membership Matters

To join or renew membership

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

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

Membership: it is that time of year again when we remind members that subscriptions become payable on 1 April – unless you have recently joined after 30 September 2014. Prompt renewals will be much appreciated by our Membership Secretary so that he does not have to spend time chasing late payers.

Rates (see back page) remain unchanged yet again. So for around 2p a day, even less if you are a family subscriber, you can enjoy the benefits and support the work of the Society.

We welcome the many new members who have joined in the last few months. Do help continue this increase if you can. It would be good to get membership up towards the magic thousand!

Still on membership matters, the booking form for the 9 May visit to Rochester is now available. Cost £21 per person for members; £22 pp for non-members.

Congratulations to Geraint John, our President, as the first Briton to receive the IOC Pierre de Coubertin medal for design and provision of facilities in Sport.

AGM date clarification: the 2015 AGM will be held in the Octagon Room at St Peter's Church on **Thursday 25 June** followed by refreshments. Look forward to seeing you there. Start thinking about the election of a new Vice-Chairman and some committee members.

In this edition we feature a number of local issues affecting the city, such as licensing, the street scene and our train service.

We must also comment on the press



Society's efforts come good. (See inside.)

report that the recent Christmas Market lost £60k this year, coming on top of the £80k loss last year. It seems unlikely that this figure includes the cost of replacing the damaged York stone paving in Wax House Gate and Sumpter Yard. This was caused by the heavy vehicles used to bring in the chalets. The cost will be several thousand pounds to reinstate properly.

One wonders if the merits of having a Christmas Market in this location are really worth the financial loss and long-term

Sumpter Yard - watch you step!



upheaval? Would an alternative be to enhance the promotion of our existing historic market and supplement it in the actual Market Place area with some really good additional Christmas-themed stalls. For certain, the latter would be in a more secure and less-damaging location. It is understood that the Council (therefore you and I) has bought all the chalets. Perhaps surplus chalets can be sold on eBay; they should appeal to people with large gardens, or seaside towns wishing to upgrade their beach huts!

As always, we touch on the subject of planning, both nationally and locally.

There have been reports that developers are 'gaming' the system to build on the countryside. This arises from the National Planning Policy Framework and the requirement for Councils to ensure a 5-year housing land supply. In St Albans and District, we are in a very vulnerable position. It also raises questions over the current progress being made on our Strategic Local Plan. **Members may like to take up this issue as the May elections come along.**

SUBSCRIPTION REMINDER

Subscriptions are due on 1 April 2015. Your membership is valued. Please renew promptly. See Membership Matters (back page).

Thameslink woes – and they could get worse!

The standard of service on our vital Thameslink line is much in the news, and rightly so given the vast sums of money being expended on it. Any poor service affects the daily life of thousands of commuters and other passengers, and even impacts on the commercial life not only of London but our own city.

There is much confusion over who is responsible for what. This was still being perpetuated as recently as 12 February in a letter to the Herts Advertiser. The writer was suggesting that the flooded Farringdon tunnel (Network Rail) was dried out by the hot air from Govia's (the train company/ franchise holder) directors and managers. Very droll!

Let's be clear: track, signals, tunnels and overhead electric lines belong to Network Rail. Some would-be critics even still refer to Railtrack, which disappeared years ago. The actual trains are leased by the franchise holder, usually referred to as one of the Train Operating Companies. In the case of our Thameslink route, this is now Govia, which replaced First Capital Connect in September 2014.

Who is to blame occupies much debate and one suspects attention is being diverted from the real issues. It is understood that around 600 people are employed in blame allocation within the rail industry. That might be around £12 million a year in costs, before a penny of compensation gets paid to passengers. Who do you blame and bill for floods or, for that matter, heavy seas like at Dawlish? Indeed, without wishing to be insensitive, any delay caused by suicides? The separation of management of track from the trains was a recipe for the current mess.

Govia has certainly dropped itself in it over its driver complement and someone in the train crew management and personnel department should be put on the naughty step. They probably worked for FCC before, so have no excuses. However, it's Network Rail's delivery and performance that now need to be closely scrutinized.

The route is said to be 23% behind target in delay management. Procurement of things like signal light bulbs and clearance of lineside vegetation (presumably affecting track circuits) are all Network Rail's responsibilities, not Govia's.

Network Rail is the organization that messed up big time at Kings Cross and Paddington over Christmas and at London Bridge over New Year.

Remember, this is the organization that is happy to accept the extra freight trains on our lines for the planned freight depot at Park Street.

Before this can happen, huge engineering works need to take place to track, tunnels and overhead lines. The potential for further line closures, delays and cock-ups is huge. On present evidence, do you really trust Network Rail enough to manage all this well?

Whoever runs the franchise will see their train service disrupted again and again. Passengers, especially commuters, should be alarmed and speak out now. There may still be time to stop the Railfreight plan literally in its tracks. At the very least there needs to be better and more careful forward planning on how the Thameslink route is operated and will integrate with the Midland and Great Northern Main Lines.

The Thameslink Enhancement Programme, to be finished in a few years time, will see 24 peak hour trains in each direction through the single up and down lines that cross London between St Pancras and Blackfriars – that is a train every two and a half minutes. The knock-on effect of any delay of even a minute or two will be enormous.

Passenger user groups and the usually vocal commuters have been eerily silent about the repercussions of the Railfreight proposal and the impact that all the works will have on the train service. It is not just St Albans people that will be affected, but all those along the Thameslink route. Harpenden please note too!

Those periodic appearances by Govia and Network Rail before our Council only seem to extract the usual platitudes and achieve little.

Can and should the Thameslink lines handle extra Railfreight trains and all the works needed? The Society believes that the answer is NO. There needs to be urgent discussion and liaison between Eric Pickles' planning department and Patrick McLoughlin in transport. Could our MP facilitate? The risk is that the depot will only be served by road, thus negating the purpose of the original planning application for a Strategic Rail Freight Interchange.

The whole subject needs to cease being a political football and media frenzy. Otherwise the £6½ billion investment in the Thameslink upgrade will be compromised. **This must not happen.**

Eric Roberts

CINEMA OF THE PEOPLE NOW SHOWING NEAR YOU

BEHOLD – REASONS TO BE JOYFUL! ST ALBANS HAS A CINEMA AGAIN. The former Odeon has been beautifully restored (almost – there are still a few things to finish) and reopened as The Odyssey. Many may have forgotten how close we came to losing it.

Civic Society members had attended and spoken for the building's retention at two Planning Inquiries where the then would-be developer continued to press for his plans for 14 flats to be granted. Some local residents even supported this to happen. The Society, initially slow to get going, continued advocating the building's retention. It often felt it was a lone voice, and got accused of being elitist for proposing something like The Rex at Berkhamsted, out of touch and simply mad.

The real crunch was in June 2008. At the 9 June Planning meeting, the Society representative (Peter Trevelyan) asked for a reprieve but Councillors ignored this plea and voted 7-3 for demolition. One Councillor even declared "nobody wanted it back as a cinema" and dismissed the Society's claims about its history (Arthur Melbourne-Cooper, pioneer of film; Percival Blow, local architect) as "cod history".

A few of us still didn't give in. Eric Roberts spoke with the developer, Mike Mould from Wattsdown, after the meeting. Eric suggested that a certain James Hannaway from the Rex might still be a saviour. Mr Mould's reply was: "tell him to come and make me an offer I can't refuse". Perhaps he was anticipating a dip in the property market - sometimes Lady Luck plays a hand! The rest, as they say, is history.

Urged on, even nagged (James' word) by the Society's determined and intrepid Marion

Hammant, Mr Hannaway did indeed make an offer. He turned to the people of St Albans to raise the necessary £1 million over a very tight timescale.

The cinema, at least as a building, was saved. Others joined in and supported the campaign. The young, like Alexandra Heal, and not so young, and from all walks of life, took up the cause for it to reopen again.

The building satisfied four key factors.

1. It was architecturally important, especially locally, in its Art Deco style.
2. It had history, both nationally and locally.
3. It could be put to an actual use with a viable revenue potential.
4. Above all, THE PEOPLE SUPPORTED THE PROJECT.

The Odyssey has all these in spades.

People at the opening night interviewed by BBC News, shown on 1 December, said how much they now liked the building, and how it was "bringing up the area". The very things the Society said could happen.

So, never give up. Ignore critics and pundits. Practical conservation is invariably better than demolition. We now have a glorious cinema and one that surely merits being registered as a Community Asset.

We must make sure St Albans does not let this and other potential gems slip through our fingers and disappear for ever.

Editors' Note: a shorter version of this article appeared in the St Albans Review as our January monthly column. The account is based on facts and should correct the false impression given by a letter in the 26 Feb Herts Ad claiming the Society somehow delayed cinema back in St Albans. Quite extraordinary!

ODYSSEY



Keeping up appearances

Jill Singer and Eric Roberts had another of those periodic meetings with representatives of the County and City and District Councils on 10 February, under the auspices of public realm matters.

It is sad to report that little or no progress has been made on several aspects, particularly those coming under the purview of the County Council as highway authority. The promise made at least three times since 2013 to replant the missing sponsored tree in St Peter's Street (by No. 40) has not been honoured. Neither has the removal of the tarmac around the base of two trees outside BHS taken place. The unsatisfactory repairs to the drainage crossovers in George Street remain an ongoing debate over responsibility. The County is trying to pin it on the local shop owners which is quite unreasonable – they did not ask for them to be replaced in such a shoddy and inadequate way.

The recent repaving works in Hill Street have highlighted the issue of the re-use of existing materials and the installation of 'conservation area approved' surfaces. The blue brick pavements of St Albans are an integral part of the character of the city and should be respected and looked after. The existing materials that have been removed (bricks of imperial size - the new bricks are metric) are, one trusts, being safely stored so as to be recycled where appropriate.

Why does all this matter? A well-presented streetscape can increase quality footfall and spending. It is hoped the newly appointed city centre manager, Richard Marrett, takes this onboard.



Market Place surface mess.

Members can help by reporting eyesores and uneven surfaces. **Log on to:** <http://www.hertsdirect.org/services/transtreets/highways/hhonlineervices/hfr/> or phone 0300 1234047 and press 1. Make sure you get a reference.

It would be helpful if you let the Society know how you get on. Contact Jill on oxhey@oxhey.demon.co.uk or Eric on 01727 830521.

Still on trees, the Tree Sponsorship Scheme raised £1,926 this year through partnership with the Council. This shows that partnerships can work in these cash-strapped times and achieve community goals (eg better Christmas lights in the city centre). Unfortunately, the Society's sponsored atlas cedar in Verulamium Park, commemorating the (2011) 50th anniversary of its formation, has died. It will be replaced next winter by SADC's tree department. Here the partnership agreement is working, unlike in St Peter's Street with the County Council.



Scurrer Blocks

On the subject of the character of the conservation area, Society member Brian Holmes writes:

I was a Building Contractor on the local scene for some 40 plus years and rather specialised in work on listed buildings. I therefore had cause to visit reclaimed materials sales yards on a frequent basis.

When looking for reclaimed granite setts I was often shown scurrer blocks, this being the name used by the merchant involved. They were described as being a by-product of the process of extracting gas from coal which produced coke and a run-off molten slag material. This slag was used to mould the scurrer block sized at about 9" long x 4" wide and 6" deep.

As you will see from the enclosed photograph, the colours were variegated ranging from pale grey to blue. The durability has been proven to be just about as good as granite setts. They were of course produced by the Gas Board of yesteryear.

I wonder, are they unique to the St Albans area, or, are they seen in other localities? They are certainly widespread in the St Albans locality, principally used as a gutter liner on the streets.