

Shopping in St Alban, continued

year, and what is as important for the impact on shopping centres is that just under 50% of internet spending was through businesses that do not have a store based presence. So it is not only our on-line purchases from Tesco, Sainsbury or John Lewis that are causing pain in the High Street.

Taken as a whole it is our individual circumstances that drive our purchase decisions and these coalesce to produce recognisable changes in our town centres. In St Albans, retail premises disappear to be replaced nowadays by coffee shops. In the past it was financial services, estate agents and opticians which expanded into vacant premises only to contract later as a result of market saturation. The growth of coffee shops interspersed with retail provision, however, is a new (and effective symbiosis) – coffee shops need shoppers as their customers and retailers need coffee shops to maintain a centre's vitality and to keep potential shoppers in the centre for longer.

On the periphery of the retail area there has been a different response, growth in food and beverage outlets – restaurants in the south and along Verulam Road; pubs revamping their offer (Mokoko, Brickyard), new provision (The Beech House), and pubs increasing their food offer (Dylans – the former Kings Arms, Blacksmith's Arms, Cock). All of this is a response for different markets: students, young professionals, families.

The growth of the leisure food sector is now what is sustaining many town centres. Without it premises would be unoccupied, centres would look run down and be less attractive to shoppers. If shoppers do not come, more shops will close and a cycle of decline will set in. We have to be thankful St Albans has avoided this downward spiral.

Peter Newby

Editors' Note: see website to read Peter's article in full. And of course, we still have our great Markets, although not sure about the Christmas one (£140,000 lost so far)!

Clean for the Queen

Litter-picking in Verulamium Park with Cllr Jessica Chivers includes the national 'Clean for the Queen' event on 5 March.

- Saturday 5 March, 10.30-11.30 - this pick is registered on the official CFTQ website
- Saturday 16 April, 10.30-11.30
- Saturday 21 May, 10.30-11.30

Meet at the top of the Causeway on King Harry Lane.



News from the Clock Tower

The Society opened the Clock Tower for the launch of Sustainability Week on Saturday 21 November, and for the Sunday afternoon of 'Enjoy St Albans' weekend 23-24 January. Both saw good attendances. The new season commences on Good Friday 25 March.

More volunteers are needed to help keep this important heritage attraction open. Please contact Jill Singer (oxhey@oxhey.demon.co.uk or 01727 838965) if you can spare 1½ hours on a couple of weekends between Easter and September. Go on - it's fun! You meet some great people.

Forthcoming events 2016

Thursday 17 March

Fleetville: A Game of Consequences

A talk by Michael Neighbour of Fleetville Diaries.

The Cross Street Centre*
Dagnall Street at 8.00pm - FREE

Thursday 21 April

Views of a local architect

A talk by Matt Briffa. (Joint meeting with Herts Association of Architects).

The Cross Street Centre*
Dagnall Street at 8.00pm - FREE

Saturday 7 May

Spring visit by rail to Rye (East Sussex)

Thursday 18 May

Planning Matters in St Albans

An illustrated talk with time for questions by Tracy Harvey, Head of Planning at St Albans Council.

The Cross Street Centre*
Dagnall Street at 8.00pm - FREE

Sunday 26 June (afternoon)

Larks in the Park

The Society will have its gazebo and stall at the event in Victoria Playing Field.

Thursday 30 June

Annual General Meeting

Octagon Centre, St Peter's Church, 8.00pm

Sunday 17 July (afternoon)

Annual Cricket match

The Society & FVPF v the Council.
Victoria Playing Field.

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

So as to avoid any possible confusion or misunderstanding, members are respectfully asked that if they attend 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 by any member. Also, the Society wishes to make it clear that when it is consulted about any plan or proposal this should not automatically be deemed as leading to consent.

The Society is looking for a new Secretary

If you are well organised, have some spare time, and would like to be involved, we should welcome your interest. Full details are on the website.

Please contact Tim Boatswain,
Chairman timboatswain@hotmail.com
07873 586074

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' Association	Free
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 | Spring 2016

This edition has been prepared by Eric Roberts (Committee member) and Peter Trevelyan (Awards Team). 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 2015. Prompt renewals will be much appreciated by our Membership Secretary so that he does not have to spend time chasing late payers. Rates remain unchanged yet again - see back page. 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.

National planning. We remain concerned that the Government is not really honouring its election manifesto pledge of "We will protect the Green Belt". The emasculating of local planning highlighted in the last newsletter remains a threat. It is said that housebuilders are sitting on land for over 615,000 plots awaiting development. Why don't they proceed instead of encroaching on more greenfield land? Moreover, there are over 200,000 houses in England that have been empty for more than six months. Why are these not pressed into use to help ease the housing shortage? Why doesn't the Government bring in legislation to address these issues? One wonders how many of these plots and empty houses are in our District – does anybody know? Answers and action, please.

The Local Plan process is not only of concern to us, but also to a group of fellow Hertfordshire amenity societies. A joint letter has been sent to the Minister for Housing and Planning protesting about the fragmented nature of the current planning system.

Two Committee members attended the



What's lurking in the lakes?
See inside.

forum organised by the Harpenden Green Belt Association and the Harpenden Society at Rothamsted on 4 February. As a result, the Society will be making a representation to the Council that its draft Strategic Local Plan is neither 'legally compliant', nor 'sound', and fails in its 'duty to cooperate'. This will go before the Inspector when the Inquiry is held later this year, along with what are likely to be many similar comments from others at the meeting.

If the Inspector rejects the SLP, the Council will have to go back to the drawing board and thus will fail to meet the 2017 deadline. We either get what we consider a defective SLP, or we get none at all and instead one will be imposed by Whitehall. Oh dear, we are between a rock and a hard place! Meanwhile, planning inspectors are already coming to decisions based on the fact that the Council is "unable to demonstrate five year supply of deliverable housing land", as recently illustrated by the James Marshall House decision in Harpenden.

This edition continues to highlight the implications of another Government wheeze of making permanent the easy conversion of offices to residential. It transpires that the number so far converted may not be fully accounted for in draft SLP figures!

Local planning looks in danger of becoming like some popularity song contests – with planning decisions seemingly made on the count of pro- and anti- letters. In planning, the presumption is to grant permission so, really, letters are only

required if there are valid objections on planning grounds.

However, in the Pemberton Building decision taken in January, the 312 letters supporting demolition swamped the ten objections, one of which was from the Society. In 2012 the Secretary of State upheld the Council's refusal to permit demolition. Not so this time, with the decision to grant going on the casting vote of Cllr Janet Churchard, Chair of Plans Central Committee, despite officers recommending refusal. As the Herts Advertiser's editorial (28 Jan) aptly stated: "So another bit of old St Albans has been declared surplus to requirements to provide a new games area, a scheme supported by parents whose interest in the school will only last as long as their children are there."

This sort of planning by votes is worrying. A strange kind of Localism!

From 1 February the Council introduced new procedures and charges for pre-application planning advice. A leaflet is available.

Spring visit. This is on 7 May to Rye. Details on how to book are included for members in this newsletter.

Nominations to the Society's Awards team for projects finished in 2015 are now sought. Please send to Peter Trevelyan ptrevelyan@aol.com 01727 843656. The Awards team is Peter Denney, Brian Holmes, Jill Singer, Alan Smith and Peter Trevelyan.

SUBSCRIPTION REMINDER

Subscriptions are due on 1 April 2016. Your membership is valued. Please renew promptly. See Membership Matters (back page).

Verulamium Lakes

At a recent Combined Residents' Associations meeting, the Society was informed that one of the reasons the Council was dragging its heels about the condition of the lakes was "there had not been any letters of complaint" – this despite all the publicity in the local press! It was resolved that each organisation would act accordingly. Here is the text of the Society's letter. Our picture shows the anoxic condition of the lake on a cold 11 February this year, just waiting to 'bloom in the Spring, tra la'!

To the Chief Executive: (cc: Cllr J Daly, Leader of the Council)

"The Civic Society wishes to make the following complaint. It concerns the ongoing unsatisfactory situation regarding the pollution in Verulamium Park's lakes.

Our complaint concerns the apparent procrastination and lack of action by the Council in addressing the pollution in the lakes. The problems experienced last year which resulted in dying ducks, sick dogs and distressed children, residents and visitors cannot be allowed to repeat itself this summer. It will if the Council fails to act.

The Society has been told that one of the reasons for the lack of action is that no official complaint has been received by the Council. In view of all the publicity in the press the Society finds this surprising. If this is the case, it is now rectified by this letter.

Verulamium Park is a major tourist and heritage asset. Surely its Green Flag status is now threatened by the state of the lakes. With all the publicity there has been for St Albans in the last twelve months, good and bad, efforts should be made to attract visitors who will inevitably be drawn to the Verulamium Park area. Indeed, with the departure of the Council's Tourism Officer in 2015, the Society would be interested to know who at the Council is now actively promoting St Albans so as to meet the Council's Visitors' Strategy and the expectations of those businesses engaged in tourism activities so vital to the city's economy."

Tim Boatswain, Chairman

Editors' note: since sending this letter it has been revealed the polluting silt is a build-up of dead leaves and bird poo. Hardly surprising. Now what action is the Council going to take – and soon?

The Society has sponsored (£100) a pair of Angels as part of the St Albans Cathedral's campaign to raise funds for new visitor and educational facilities. The message the two Angels are holding reads: "Looking to the Future, Watching over the Past". The Angels were taken down for Lent, and we hope to have ours on display later in the Clock Tower or in Kingsbury Barn.



The Society has pledged £500 for the Playground Appeal by the Friends of Victoria Playing Field. The group had to raise £19k by 20 February or lose a major grant. There was a small shortfall in early February so the Society also considered offering a loan. The target was reached on 11 February thus enabling this worthwhile project to proceed. Well done the Friends!



Synergy works

An economic growth report in 2015 for UK's towns and cities placed St Albans in seventh position. Cambridge was top, Brighton second, see below.

Surprise, surprise! Commenting on this, Nigel Palmer of Lambert Smith Hampton's Hertfordshire office expressed concern that St Albans' potential could be being hindered by the lack of available office space for firms to locate in the city. That Government policy allowing offices to convert automatically into flats by a 'prior approval' planning rule, is causing a shortage of offices, thus pushing up rents and probably discouraging new businesses.

We warned this could happen two years ago, and were initially accused of making up such a (then new) ruling, and scaremongering. As a result, job opportunities have now been lost with commuting even more inevitable if people want to find work.

At a recent business meeting, this limited office availability was raised with Officers from St Albans Council. What was the Council doing about this? The answer: apparently nothing.

In 2014 the Society informed the Council about Brighton, see above, and Richmond, where action had been taken to protect their stock of offices, and jobs. They created Article 4 Direction Zones meaning planning permission was still required. It's probably now too late to do this here. Such inaction could have cost us dear.

At the same meeting was Dorothy Thornhill, elected Mayor of Watford. She was asked by a Society committee member what Watford had done. They also had created an Article 4 around Clarendon Road, which has kept its offices. Bravo! That was positive town planning in action.

Dorothy Thornhill has been very effective in Watford. The refurbishment of the High Street has been impressive, especially when compared to St Peter's Street, which now looks tired and is not particularly well maintained by the Utilities and the County Council.

Oh that we had such enterprise and attention to detail! We would gladly support such an initiative and person(s). Something for the City Centre Manager and Partnership to help us get some results. A bit of synergy can go a long way.

Eric Roberts

Editors' Note: This was the Committee's February article in The Review newspaper.

A TALE OF TWO CITIES Vision for St Albans 2030

SCENARIO ONE

A serious world-wide recession has arrived, echoing the 100 years since the great depression of the thirties, starting with the Wall Street Collapse of 1929.

St Albans has become a commuter city, converting all its business and workshop buildings into flats. Now that the London economy and its jobs market has collapsed, many of these properties are empty, and in a state of negative equity. The industrial, workshop and business properties have all closed down, and so there is no local market for job opportunities.

The massive Railfreight Depot has shut, and is being proposed for a new prison, to cope with the rising crime rate. The Town Hall Museum and Art Gallery has been forced to close due to lack of income, and will revert to being a Magistrates Court.

Shops are closing. A lack of maintenance of our urban facilities is giving an air of depression throughout the city. The River Ver has dried up, because the increases in housing created the need for more water, but there was no investment in new infrastructure. Thoughts about sustainability have been abandoned.

Editors' Note: this amusing but thought-provoking article by **Geraint John**, the Society's President, appeared in the booklet produced for the successful Sustainability Week held last November, which the Society helped sponsor.

SCENARIO TWO

The Economy is healthy and booming. A new Government has been elected with a mandate for the protection of the Green Belt, positive policies on heritage, and the development and protection of historic cities. St Albans has been targeted as a model example, bringing new resources to conservation and investment in the urban structure enjoyed by other cathedral cities. An act is being implemented to ensure that all new and up-keep work has to be carried out by eminent architects from an approved list.

Sustainable standards are made mandatory, with solar gain and other environmentally friendly conditions. Electric cars and buses are required, resulting in an improvement in air quality. New buildings will have to operate zero energy criteria.

The Town Hall Museum and Art Gallery opened with an internationally important Picasso exhibition, followed by the works of Rembrandt.

The greening and new high standards in the urban fabric, make the city a delight to live in.

The housing targets of the past regimes have been dropped, recognising the heritage qualities of the city, and the Green Belt given absolute protection.

Shopping in St Albans

What has happened to shopping in St Albans? Are the changes we have and are experiencing peculiar to our city or are they part of a more general trend? If we take a long view, shopping provision has changed significantly. 50 years ago there was a continuous strand of shops along much of Catherine Street, the length of St Peter's Street from north of the roundabout, through Market Place and Chequer Street to the top end of Holywell Hill with an east/west axis along London Road from the junction with car park, along High Street and down George Street.

The expansion of multiples, especially supermarkets and clothes stores, took trade away from independent retailers but the premises they vacated were usually too small for those that were replacing them. This led to the shrinkage of the old shopping area but, as a result of the need for larger shops, development of suitable premises took place on new locations.

The changes that we see today are also the product of economic forces but this time they are not associated with the economics of retail provision but the economics of consumer preference, in particular how much money we have to spend and how we choose to buy things. In 2015 the average expenditure for an internet shopper was £1,174, almost 10% higher than the previous

Continued over page

Strategic Rail Freight Interchange and rail service update

Things appear to be moving on that could help ensure that Helioslough's plan for a SRFI can still be avoided on the Green Belt land near Park Street.

Firstly, the County Council is looking at options as to how it will sell the land. The Society considers that if this land can be developed for 'Very Special Circumstances', then surely our housing needs are even more special and should trump the SRFI and so reduce loss elsewhere of Green Belt land. The County should bear this in mind, as well as responding to the wishes of the local people (i.e. some Localism in action).

Secondly, the penny seems to have dropped over Network Rail's inability to schedule the works and the extra freightliners into the future Thameslink passenger service that will be enhanced from 2018. Anne Main MP and Hertsmere MP Oliver Dowden have

joined forces and are asking pertinent questions that Network Rail have previously been reluctant to answer. Getting assurances from Govia, the current Thameslink operator, that its trains will have priority isn't really worth anything – franchises come and go. It is Network Rail which holds the keys and its promises, like that the London Bridge works wouldn't adversely affect services, have been proved false.

So, we can perhaps still see off the SRFI on both these counts.

Meanwhile, a much more serious and in-depth analysis of the fragility of and risks to the Thameslink service needs to be held for it affects hundreds of thousands of citizens daily. In 2018, in the morning and evening peak hours, there will be a train every 2½ minutes (24 each hour) approaching the single line track between St Pancras

International and Blackfriars, with services dovetailing in from the St Albans line and from the Cambridge/Stevenage route, and vice versa. One train only has to be seconds late and the whole service starts to fall apart.

So, let's raise the level of debate and analysis higher than the periodic photocall of some disgruntled local councillor standing in front of the City station. Likewise, those meetings between council and rail officials. What good do either really do?

Proper, robust service planning needs to take account of 'leaves on the line' (a layer of greasy slime which is a continuing problem for modern disc-braked trains), the type of powdery snow (which can clog traction motors and cause them to cut-out), equipment failures, and other random incidents. Introduce heavy freight trains into the service, and the potential for delay is greatly magnified.