Verulamium Park

By way of a relief from the relentless and ever problematic lakes in Verulamium Park I would report that during the summer the general housekeeping standards have continued to be high in the park. Litter was being collected daily (sometimes twice daily) and disposed of early on days following weekends and other busy times. The park management and staff deserve considerable credit for employing and motivating staff to do this often unpleasant and unrewarding work.

The problem of litter left by vagrants (or worse) in the wooded area adjacent to King Harry continues to be dealt with by Cllr. Tony Mason

Jessica Chetver and her loyal band of litter pickers, whose monthly gatherings keep this often dangerous detritus under control. Rough sleeping and a Traveller incursion were dealt with promptly by the park management and the police.

‘Fields in Trust’ competition. Perhaps she hasn’t visited it recently to see the current state of the lake, and the mill leaf by the Fighting Cocks (see pictures).

Is she aware that we have now gone three years and the Council has still not come up with action to resolve the problem of eutrophication of the lakes and the adverse effect on the wildlife? The Council was lucky this year that the frightful smell experienced in 2015 and 2016 was less overpowering.

What indeed could be a magnificent park, well worthy of such a nomination, is still badly let down.

Our Council is, once again, delaying getting to grips with the situation by initiating yet more consultation as to what should be done. We despair!

I was good to see many members at the Annual Awards Celebration Evening on 5 October at the Maltings Arts Theatre. A supplement has been produced of the decisions by the Awards Panel. A special thank you to everyone involved in the evening’s proceedings, which has been deemed a very successful event.

The Mayor, Cllr. Zia said “St Albans Civic Society plays an invaluable role in helping to preserve our city’s history, heritage and character. Its coveted Awards help highlight development projects where design standards complement and enhance the architecture and heritage of St Albans.”

The 2018 Members Programme Card is now published. We do hope you will support these events.

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

- Austin Trowers Associates
- Christopher Place Shopping Centre
- Debenhams Ottaway
- National Pharmacy Association
- St Columba’s College
- TBI (St Albans) Ltd

As so to avoid any possible confusion or misundestanding, members are respectfully asked that if they attend any meeting or ceremony 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, it must not automatically be deemed as leading to consent.

Forthcoming events 2018

Thursday 15 February
The new St Albans Museum and Gallery Project
A talk by Catherine Newley, Audience Development Manager at the Museum. The Cross Street Centre*
Dugnall Street at 9pm – FREE

Thursday 15 March
Reflections on Architectural Quality
A talk by Bob Thompson, A joint Civic Society/Herts Association of Architects evening. The Cross Street Centre*
Dugnall Street at 9pm – FREE

*Disabled parking only at The Cross Street Centre

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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
Corporate £50

To join or check payment details please contact the Membership Secretary, Bryan Hanlon, tel: 01727 851754 hanlondryan@gmail.com or post to: 24 Monks Horton Way, St Albans AL3 4HA

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The State considers applications for exhibitions and events, and provides space and support with the following:

- Arts Council England
- Museum of London
- St Albans City Museum

Following his talk to a capacity audience on 21 November, Sir Terry Farrell, doyen of British architects and Vice-President of Civic Voice, posed with the President and Chairman of the Society.

AWARDS 2016

Full details in supplement

Looking to the future - with an eye on the past

President: Geraint John
Chairman: Tim Boustead

This edition has been prepared by Eric Roberts (Committee member) and Peter Prevelyan (Awards Panel).

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

We very much appreciate your views, and information on topics.

NEWS & COMMENTS

I was good to see many members at the Annual Awards Celebration Evening on 5 October at the Maltings Arts Theatre. A supplement has been produced of the decisions by the Awards Panel. A special thank you to everyone involved in the evening’s proceedings, which has been deemed a very successful event.

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Winners at the Annual Awards evening. Front row: Lissi Saunders and Andrea Whitting from Hertfordshire Architecture; the Mayor Councillor Mohammad Izahd Zia, Mrs Kellie Waterhouse from the client for Spencer House; our president Geraint John. Paul Lobatto from Nicholas King Homes. Back row: Ollie Worboys and John Worboys from Shortgrove Developments.

National Planning – Alarm bells are ringing! An Inspector has granted planning permission to build 549 houses on 13 hectares of the Green Belt by developers Taylor Wimpey on behalf of Oaklands College. The main access will be from Sandpit Lane. This is surely just a start of unplanned housing development around our city. It was reported that the lack of an up to date Strategic Local Plan was one of the reasons for approval. Given the previous warnings about this it was only to be expected.

Things are compounded by the latest pronouncements from Sajid Javid, the Government’s Community Secretary. First, he announces that the previous annual target of 250,000 is to be increased to 266,000 with additional quotas for those Councils that have failed to produce a Strategic Local Plan (that’s ours!). Just weeks later, after blaming the homes shortage on NHSHYS, with no mention of all the thousands of houses with planning permissions that developers are sitting on, nor certain land banking practices (see last Newsletter) he next reveals a revised target of 300,000, with special budget money to achieve this.

The Chancellor appeared to be unaware of this, but is subsequently reported to be investigating ways to further relax the planning process, and a possible fresh assault on the Green Belt, so prized by developers.

In contrast, the Prime Minister still declares that building on Green Belt is not to be considered. Who can be believed?

Local Planning – Plans for the Civic Centre South site are moving forward.

The planning application by Angle Property, which the Society supports in principle (see Summer Newsletter), was approved by Plans Referral Committee on Monday 30 October. Angle Property, however, owns only the car park and Hertfordshire House – which is to be refurbished for residential flats. At the end of October the Council acquired the former Police Station, and expect to secure the NHS clinic. Presumably there has to be an agreement between the various landowners which will allow the development to proceed. The Council is still working with Building Design Partnership (BDP) to produce a blueprint for the northern part of the Civic Centre area.

The Strategic Local Plan process staggers on! It is a Sisyphean task and we have lost count of the number of ‘consultations’ that have taken place since the 1996 First Review. Which is a prelude to warning that the Council will distribute yet another public consultation in January 2018. There are 22 ‘Motherhood and apple pie’ questions, replete with unexplained emotions. The consultation may be a statutory requirement for a Local Plan, but is so hard to believe that this exercise will add much to the sum of human knowledge.

Both at the national and local level, planning seems to be in a state of flux.
Are we sleepwalking into a Railfreight Nightmare?

The threat of a Railfreight depot on Green Belt land on the former airfield near Park Street has been around for a decade. People have probably become somewhat indifferent about the subject. They have forgotten the huge impact it would have on the local environment, the noisy trains, and the pollution. Railfreight, with massive warehouses and hundreds of additional cars and distribution lorries adding to the daily congestion and pollution on the road network around St Albans.

There is also the question of the proposed (up to) 12 daily freightliners in and out of the depot and how they are incorporated into the timetable’s reliable operation. Despite repeated questions about this from the Civic Society and MPs Anne Main (St Albans) and Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere), Network Rail has failed to produce details of how and when the necessary infrastructure works would take place to the tracks and tunnels and moreover, which pathways these trains would occupy and how they might affect theoften beleaguered Thameslink services. In recent weeks the Herts Advertiser has published letters from readers on the subject. Some maintain that more freight is good and, with various infrastructure works (who pays?), everything will work in the end. Others raise concerns over the use of the fast lines and even safety.

Let’s try and clarify things. The southern part of the Midland Main Line (MML) is already busy. It will become even busier. Intercity (East Midlands Trains) expects to pass 25 trains per hour (2019) towards London. At the north entrance on the MML, Luton Airport is a dedicated fast link; several freight operators already use the slow lines.

Pathing and timing a freight train moving continuously along is one thing. It’s quite another, and a potential problem, when they have to slow in order to cross over into and out of any depot. The Railfreight operation has never proposed using the fast lines. Freightliners would approach from the south on the down slow line, crossing over the up slow track so as to access the depot. Therein lies a possible delay for Thameslink services. Once across they proceed down and tunnel under all four lines into the depot on the former airfield. Most freightliners will come from ports like Felixstowe, Southampton or Tilbury but any from the north would go by to Cricklewood, run-round and approach from the south as above.

The aggregate trains currently using a siding near Radlett generally operate well. However, they can cause delay particularly when exiting the depot. St Albans is now very much a commuter city, as are neighbouring towns along the line. A reliable service is vital for thousands of residents. That is why the Society objects to the Railfreight threat. It needs detailed proof it can work. Sleepwalking into its nightmare is unthinkable. We urge people, rail users or not, to continue to oppose the depot and lobby Councillors at County Hall not to sell the land for such a use.

Editors’ note: The recent crowdfunding scheme by the Abbey Flyer Users’ Group to improve the frequency of service on the line is to be commended. The question of a passing loop at Bricket Wood has been talked about for too long, and the County Council has procrastinated enough. For more, visit www.spacehive.com/abbeyflyerlink

Still on railway matters, there has been a report suggesting tracks are decked over around London with offices/flat built above. This could be a long-term solution at the city station to create a proper transport interchange off Victoria Street with associated facilities and much needed housing, thus taking pressure off sites in the Green Belt remote from transport links. Pie in the Sky? What do you think?

Waxhouse Gate - still more work to be done

Those of you who have recently walked down from the Clock Tower to the Abbey Cathedral may have noticed how pristine the passageway, known as Waxhouse Gate, is now looking. Providing pedestrian access from the town to the Abbey, the Waxhouse Gate is an open passage through the ground floor of 15 High Street. Originally there was a Gothic arch but round stone archways and brickwork were inserted in C18. It may once have beenSacrist’s Gate which existed in C14 and was rebuilt 1420-40 by Abbot Wheathampstead. It is a Grade II listed building. At the north entrance on the east of the arch there is one of St Albans First World War street memorials, which is also listed. The passageway has been in a pretty poor state and the Civic Society, with the proprietor of 15 High Street, and the support of the Council, have initiated some renovation and redecoration of this important piece of St Albans’ heritage.

There is still more work to be done around the passageway: the redecoration of the flanking wall and Thai restaurant, as well the cleaning and repainting to the landmark that runs down to Sampyer Yard. With the likelihood of an increased foottfall of visitors, it would be great if this important walkway can be spick and span by the time the new Museum and Gallery at the Town Hall and the Visitor Centre at the Abbey Cathedral open.

Tim Routtswain

Editors’ note: the York stone paving was last restored by the County Council about four years ago. Since then, heavy vehicles associated with the Christmas Market, promoted by the City and District Council, have caused several stones to disintegrate like a crushed digestive biscuit, as well as leaving extensive cracking elsewhere. Who, and when, will sort this out in this sensitive location?

The improvements to Waxhouse Gate, likewise the painting of street furniture around the city centre, should be seen as a priority attention to the look of our public realm. This is welcome action arising from the city centre BID scheme. Well done.

A cause for concern

The number of pubs closing nationwide each week is reported as 21. In the last fifty years they have shrunk from 75,000 to 50,000.

If you care about our city’s amenities, social life and heritage, there’s cause for concern with what’s going on right here.

St Albans has not escaped this loss. The decline in its pubs has been going on for years. Once closed, they have usually been converted for residential or retail use, and even demolished. In many cases it’s been all too easy for this to happen and the adverse effect on the local community has not always been appreciated, especially by the brewery firms, planners and councillors, who get to approve such changes.

Then there is the recent eye-watering business rate increase said to be in some cases over 500%. It’s this latest whammy that’s brought an already ominous situation to a potential crisis. Our pubs are a national treasure with a character and heritage unique to this country. Foreign visitors adore them – you can see this when they are in St Albans. Do we appreciate what we’ve got?

The price of a drink is certainly not cheap. It is far less expensive to visit the supermarket and drink at home. Think about what you’re missing and could lose.

You don’t go to the pub to save money! It’s for the people you meet - friends, neighbours, perfect strangers - and to enjoy the talk, sometimes serious, often frivolous, plus the simple joys of feeling relaxed and enjoyed with your fellow human beings. There’s also the great beers, ciders and food to be had. You can, of course, just sit and soak up the atmosphere perhaps helped by a roaring log fire and some in-house Doggy or meggy friend to welcome you.

There are some brilliant pubs around St Albans that offer this. Seek them out; experience them whilst you can.

Apart from the amenity and social value of pubs there’s another reason the Civic Society is alert to it. It is for the buildings themselves and how they fit in the St Albans streetscape. Imagine the place minus its pub and converted into some ubiquitous house or mini-supermarket.

The 28 September Herts Advertiser headline encouraged us with the ‘Pubs call on rates hike’. (www.facebook.com/ savestapubs). Start visiting those pubs. Enjoy! We’ll drink to that.

News from the Clock Tower

The Clock Tower will host one of the Nutcracker Soldiers who will be forming a trail around the city as part of the Christmas celebrations. Prettily, the Clock Tower’s Nutcracker Soldier will be named Thomas Wolvey after the former Royal Mason who was engaged to build the Clock Tower in 1405. Also look out for Christmas decorations which the Society has helped fund with the Arc & Arc.

The annual ‘Thank you’ party for Clockeaters will be held on Friday 16 March before opening on Good Friday for the 2018 season.

If you would like to volunteer, please contact Jill Singer on 01727 838965 or joxhey@gmail.com