

# St Albans CIVIC SOCIETY

Looking to the future -  
*with an eye on the past*

**President: Geraint John**

**Chairman: Tim Boatswain** 07873 586074

## Newsletter | Summer 2018

*This edition has been prepared by Eric Roberts (Committee) and Peter Trevelyan (Awards). If you have any comments, please write to the Editors at 3 Abbey Mill End, St Albans AL3 4HN or email [ptrevelyan@aol.com](mailto:ptrevelyan@aol.com) We very much appreciate your views and information on topics.*

### NEWS & COMMENTS



we draw members' attention to the forthcoming **Annual General Meeting** on

Thursday 28 June at 8pm. We look forward to seeing you there to participate in proceedings and enjoy the refreshments and socialising afterwards. **Please remember to bring your copy of the Annual Report and Accounts**, included for members in this newsletter. To be able to attend the AGM you have to be a paid-up member – subscriptions were due on 1 April. Please renew if you have not yet done so. Why not set up a standing order? Contact John Thomson (Treasurer) on 07711-696417.

**Nominations for the Committee are invited.** Anyone interested, please contact Tim Boatswain (see above). Then, to proceed, you will need to send in your name and signature, together with

signatures of a proposer and seconder. All three people must be paid-up members of the Society. Send to Jill Singer (Secretary), 2 St Michael's Street AL3 4SE or [joxhey@gmail.com](mailto:joxhey@gmail.com) by 21 June 2018. Also send any agenda item to Jill.

Although a little later than originally planned the **proposed questionnaire** will soon be sent by email or post to all members. This will seek views on the Society's activities, both present and for the future. More about this at the AGM.

#### **Planning – both national and local –**

We include two topical articles about national and local planning covering the NPPF, and Green Belt - and the implications for the city. There are also observations matters involving the Town Hall + Gallery, plans for the City Station and Railfreight issue.

**Details of the Visit to Norwich on 29 September are included.**

## Town Hall Museum + Gallery – many steps forward but one or two (even three chops!) back?

**Y**ou should be getting this newsletter at the same time that the exciting £7.75m upgrade opens on 8 June.

The Civic Society has supported this initiative from the start and even helped raise some funds over the years for this project.

As we learned from the excellent presentation on 15 February to members by Catherine Newley (Audience Development Manager) here is something we can be proud of and look forward to viewing, along with the many visitors to our city.

There will be a Visitor Information Point. The much valued previous Tourist Information Service with travel and concert tickets, also holiday brochures, will not return. The Council remains adamant on this. The previous 'civic hub' facility will be lessened and thus disappoint some residents. A pity, but we must not let this spoil the overall achievement and boost to the image and reputation of the city.

There are other emerging concerns.



The Council has applied to fell the three TPO lime trees in front of the Town Hall. This is to create a bigger 'performance space'. (For the record, a much quieter 'performance space' has existed by the Arena for many years, but how often has that been used?). Outdoor seating, with

some large parasols is also proposed (why not use the shading provided by the trees?). This equipment will also be stored outside the new museum at night, presenting a potential visual problem and perhaps attracting vandalism.

*Continued on the next page*

## Notice of Annual General Meeting

**8pm Thursday 28 June 2018** The Octagon Centre, St Peter's Church, St Peter's Street. Followed by refreshments  
***Paid-up members only...***

### **FINAL REMINDER! ...have YOU renewed your subscription?**

If you have not yet paid, please do so **NOW**. If payment is not made by 28 June 2018 then, regrettably, **membership will lapse**. The Society values your support. *Rates are unchanged - see back page.*

...many steps forward but... *continued*

Any loss of trees in our already air-polluted city centre is a step backwards. Whilst other places, and even our Monarch, are actively planting trees (did you see the 'Queen's Green Planet' on ITV 14 April and her walk with Sir David Attenborough in the garden at Buckingham Palace admiring the trees that have been and are being planted?) someone at the Council wants to

do otherwise. Replacement trees are mentioned but location and type have yet to be agreed with the County Council.

The Society has expressed its concern and said that if the felling has to go ahead, this should NOT take place until the proposed three replacements have been actually planted nearby in agreed sustainable locations. Otherwise this makes a mockery of the Society's Tree Sponsorship Partnership efforts with the Council.

**Hertford Forest finished**

After a decade of work by The Woodland Trust and many volunteers, including school children, the final trees have been planted. The total is around 600,000. Wildlife there has already increased

Elsewhere, more than 12,000 trees have been planted to create 20 hectares of new woodland at Dove Stone in the Peak District.

Well done to all concerned on both projects.

**On and off the rails**

St Albans relies very much on its railway services, especially on the main line through **the City Station**. The latter has been the subject of a recent planning application for a multimillion pound upgrade of its buildings and facilities.

The Society's Plans Advisory Group has scrutinised the plan and recommended no planning reasons to object. Indeed, the creation of a mini-supermarket (believed to be a Waitrose) in the main block might prove very handy and popular with the thousands of busy commuters and others who use the station. A Ticket Office is shown on the plan.

The enhancement of the building leading from platform 4 facing Ridgmont Road should provide a more welcoming environment to passengers arriving off the fast trains. Remember the station is not just for commuters but many other travellers too, both visitors to the city and local residents who travel outside the peak hours.

Provided existing local retail and, in particular, cycle users' interests can be protected, the overall enhancement could be positive on what is a very restricted site. That is why we floated the idea of decking

over the station in the Winter 2017 Newsletter, for a more spacious, all-purpose interchange, with a mix of office/retail/residential that would meet the inevitable increase in usage as more homes are built in the District. Something that both engineering firm WSP and the Government's planners have been advocating recently to help ease the country's housing problems, particularly around London. Have they been reading our newsletter?

**The Railfreight issue** has also raised its ugly head again (Herts Advertiser 26 April 2018) as the Council considers further planning applications associated with its development. Significantly, as a new railway timetable commences after years of preparatory work, following the £7 billion Thameslink Enhancement Project, there is still no clarification from Network Rail as to how and when the associated infrastructure works and extra freight trains will affect the services on our busy line.

Certain of the timetable changes have brought howls of protest from nearby commuters in Harpenden. **Oh that they, and their St Albans colleagues, would take a similar interest in the real threat that**



Ridgmont Road exit.

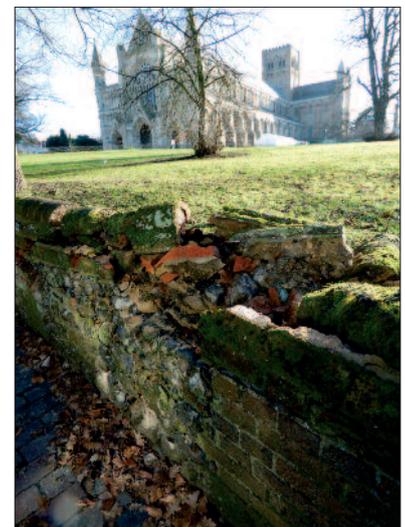
**the Railfreight development still presents to their daily travelling experience!**

For the umpteenth time of saying, we don't support the Railfreight plan. It is bad for the local environment, and we don't believe that it will really work. Clarification of the necessary engineering works and their impact on train services, plus how the additional freight trains will be scheduled, are still required. Our MP, Anne Main, continues to seek this information.

Meanwhile, the County Council, so as to protect the interests of the people it represents, should not sell the land for such a use. We go on campaigning on these lines! If this Green Belt land has to be lost, surely housing is a higher special circumstance, particularly as it will reduce loss elsewhere in the District. Politicians please note!



*Keeping Up Appearances: floors and walls. Who will repair? When and how? This has been the state for far too long. Our Public Realm is important. These sort of things are not what visitors and residents want to see.*



# The Green Belt – should we care?

The Herts Ad recently reported that: “The District will have to forfeit swathes of Green Belt land to accommodate an influx of new homes”. 16,000 houses in the next 18 years in fact.

St Albans Council’s Portfolio Holder for Planning was quoted as saying: “Green Belt objectives are not about having nice rolling hills. They are actually about maintaining a good distance between settlements and about maintaining farming land - that’s the sort of thing they are for.”

So what is the Green Belt for? And should we care?

Government guidance says that “the fundamental aim of Green Belt policy is to prevent urban sprawl”. Key objectives include:

- checking the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas
- preventing towns merging into one another
- safeguarding the countryside from encroachment
- preserving the setting and special character of historic towns.

This is of particular relevance to St Albans given the acute danger of coalescence with Hatfield, Park Street, Watford, London Colney and, in due course, Hemel Hempstead.

What other options are there? Prioritisation of existing urban sites and degraded Green Belt land. Increased density by building higher where that would not be out of scale. Using tax incentives and other levers to relieve pressure on more densely populated areas.

Another option is to build new settlements in the Green Belt. Promoted as ‘villages’, they are often just housing estates plonked down in the middle of prime countryside. A classic example is the 1,100 home housing estate proposed for Symondshyde Farm abutting the St Albans district. If new settlements are preferable to suburbs sprawling for miles from urban centres, their sites should be chosen with the purposes of the Green Belt firmly in mind. The Symondshyde development accelerates the coalescence of St Albans

with Hatfield and Welwyn - and means building over some of the few “nice rolling hills” around St Albans. (*Note: the Society donated £1000 to ‘Save Symondshyde’.*)

It’s not about ‘Nimbyism’ - it’s about selecting sites with the greatest care to minimise sprawl and urban agglomeration while conserving the best Green Belt land.

The Council has just concluded a consultation. Just 4% of households responded. Perhaps that reflected the banality of the questions. They weren’t about the eight Green Belt sites earmarked for development. Instead we were asked to rank in importance “Build homes in the right place” “build the right kind of homes” “provide local jobs” “protect the Green Belt” etc. It is like being asked to rank: “Eating” “Sleeping” and “Breathing”.

If the loss of Green Belt is unavoidable, there needs to be a proper debate, not a facile ‘consultation’. Unless of course we are happy to see southern Hertfordshire become a conurbation the size of Greater Manchester.

**Paul Brecknell**  
Committee member

## Government consultation on National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF)

At the beginning of March Theresa May revealed the first major overhaul in six years of the NPPF, aiming to support the “housing revolution” outlined in the Budget in November 2017. The revised draft sets out the Government’s planning policies for England and the way in which they are expected to be applied by local authorities.

It states the Government’s requirements for planning and establishes a framework within which communities and their local authorities can produce their own local and neighbourhood plans, reflecting their distinctive needs and priorities. Driven by the critical shortage of homes, the tone and substance of the draft text reinforces the political messages of recent months that the Government intends to take a more ‘muscular’ approach in trying to increase the delivery of housing. Some of the key points are: a presumption in favour of sustainable development; a new standardised methodology for calculating housing needs; a presumption of providing affordable housing; a ‘housing delivery test’ for authorities and greater clarity on the role of neighbourhood plans in delivering housing; a reiteration of the importance of

the Green Belt while permitting the use of brownfield land in the Green Belt for affordable housing; enhanced protection for the natural environment and the importance of the conservation of heritage assets.

While there is much to be welcomed in the revised NPPF, particularly on developer accountability, there are also blind spots and concerns. It doesn’t tackle the imbalance of power between developers and local communities and their authorities. There is an over reliance on increasing housing numbers according to the demands of the market, while not properly tackling the issue of lack of affordable housing. Despite reassurances

about preserving the Green Belt, we know in St Albans (according to the consultation on the Local Plan) that in order to meet the target for new housing, 913 homes need to be built per year up to 2036, which would mean 9-10,000 houses in the Green Belt. Has the Government set up local authorities, in areas of high demand, to fail by imposing unachievable targets? We all, surely, wish to see developments that are well designed and meet our local needs but St Albans is vulnerable to being overruled by the Government’s agenda, which is firmly focussed on numbers.

The revised NPPF was put out for consultation. St Albans Civic Society has drafted a response, airing our concerns. The final version of the NPPF, which will become official planning is due for publication “before the summer”. Watch this space!

**Tim Boatswain**  
Chairman

## News from the Clock Tower

A very successful Clockateers ‘Thank you’ party was held in March and another season of openings has begun. As always, new volunteers are welcome. Contact Jill Singer (Secretary) on 838965 or joxhey@gmail.com.

## Protecting your personal data (with an eye on GDPR)

The Society collects and holds members’ contact details purely in order to keep in touch. Our data protection policy can be found on our website. It includes a summary of your rights.

## Marion Hammant tribute

Marion Hammant, long time committee member, died on 4 April aged 80. She was a very active campaigner on a variety of civic issues. Many people will associate her with the fight to save the Odeon building and bring about its restoration as The Odyssey cinema. It is therefore appropriate that we reproduce an (amended) article from the Spring 2015 newsletter. This followed the opening of the cinema, which Marion was able to attend and where she received deserving recognition from James Hannaway.

### 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 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 (Marion spoke at one) 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 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 on 9 June 2008. At the Planning meeting, the Society's representative (Peter Trevelyan) asked for a reprieve but Councillors ignored this plea and voted 7-3 for demolition. One Councillor (turning to look at Marion and colleagues) 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".

Marion had previously led two Town Walks on these very subjects!

A few of us still didn't give in. Eric Roberts spoke with the developer, Mike Moulton from Wattsdown, after the meeting. Eric suggested that a certain James Hannaway from the Rex might still be a saviour. Mr Moulton's reply was: "tell him to come and make me an offer I can't refuse". This was relayed to Marion and the very next morning she contacted James Hannaway and was organising a campaign and leaflet. The rest, as they say, is history.

Urged on, even 'nagged' (James' word) by a then determined and intrepid Marion, Mr Hannaway did indeed make an offer by turning 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 going to be saved. Others joined in and supported the campaign. The young, like Alexandra Heal, and not so young.

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, said how much they now liked the building, and how it was "bringing up the area". The very things the Society said could happen.

Like Marion, never give up. Ignore critics and pundits. Practical conservation is invariably better than demolition. We now have a glorious cinema.

RIP Marion – we will miss you!

## Last chance to nominate

The Awards Advisory Group are putting together a shortlist of new buildings and projects that contribute to the conservation and enhancement of the character of St Albans and were completed between 1 January and 31 December 2017. Nominations are still open until the AGM on 28 June. Contact joxhey@gmail.com or write to Awards, 2 St Michael's Street AL3 4SE.



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 2018

Thursday 28 June

### Annual General Meeting

The Octagon Centre, St Peter's Church at 8pm, followed by refreshments and an opportunity to meet fellow members. Paid-up members only.

Sunday 1 July

### Larks in the Park

From midday in Victoria Playing Field. The Society's stall will feature the Awards.

Sunday 15 July

### Annual Cricket Match

The Society and Friends of Victoria Playing Field versus the Council. Victoria Playing Field 3-5pm. Tea and cake served!

Thursday 6 to Sunday 9 September and Thursday 13 to Sunday 16 September

### Heritage Open Days

See special programme out late August.

Saturday 29 September

### Autumn coach visit to Norwich

A thriving fusion of historic and modern, Norwich is in fact the most complete medieval city in the UK.

Thursday 11 October (provisional)

### Awards Evening

Celebration for members and invited guests. Drinks and canapés. FREE. Venue to be advised.

## 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	<b>Free</b>
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:

- Austin Trueman Associates
- Christopher Place Shopping Centre
- Debenhams Ottaway
- National Pharmacy Association
- St Columba's College
- T&B (St Albans) Ltd