

St Albans CIVIC SOCIETY

Looking to the future -
with an eye on the past

President: Geraint John

Chairman: Tim Boatswain 07873 586074

Newsletter | Spring 2019

This edition has been prepared by Eric Roberts (Committee member) and Peter Trevelyan (Awards Panel 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 We very much appreciate your views and information on topics.

NEWS & COMMENTS

Your 2019/20 subscription is now due and there is a special form for members in this newsletter.

We welcome a **new Membership Secretary**, Moragh Ormiston, and thank Bryan Hanlon for his years of service in this important role.

The membership list has been recently reviewed and checked by a small team (John Thomson, Robert Osborne and Eric Roberts) and we are pleased to say that the current number of paid-up members is nearly 500 and nudging upwards. 291 are on the email news and views list. If you would like to be added to this email stalbanscivicsociety@gmail.com

All this is very encouraging – please keep it up by renewing. Your support is very much appreciated.

Also included are details for the **Spring Visit to Faversham and Whitstable**.

Finally, now is your your last chance to nominate a **project finished in 2018 for an Award**. Contact Peter Trevelyan (above).

NATIONAL PLANNING – Yet again there are calls for developers to spend more money enhancing the exteriors of new buildings. Both the Prince's Foundation and the Government's Housing Minister, Kit Malthouse, are urging developers to "make room for beauty" and thus save Britain from a multitude of 'blank' buildings.

Surely we have been here before - remember BIMBY ('B' for Beauty)? Time will tell whether good design triumphs. Also, there has been an announcement that residents are to be given greater powers to

stop trees in their neighbourhood being all too easily chopped down. The Environment Secretary, Michael Gove, wants stronger protection for urban trees and has instructed Councils that they must consult and give greater consideration to the views of local people. It is estimated that 110,000 have been chopped down by Councils in the last three years. How could this happen?

On a plus note, Sir William Worsley, Government Tree Champion (did you know there was one?) has announced a £10m fund for urban tree planting. Local authorities and third parties can compete for funding. We are investigating how to ensure that

St Albans gets some of this cash.

Still on trees, and this time in St Albans itself, we recommend the recently re-printed and updated book *'The Remarkable Trees of St Albans Re-visited'* by Kate Bretherton (£14.95 and available in Waterstones and the Town Hall + Gallery).

LOCAL PLANNING – As the article in this newsletter illustrates, there still needs to be continuing liaison over the proposals for the Civic Centre Opportunity Site. This will be a very important feature in the heart of the city centre and conservation area. It needs to be of the highest quality and design.



City Centre 'Lost' Opportunity Site?

The Abbey, the Gatehouse, the Clock Tower, the Museum + Gallery, Samuel Ryder's Seed Hall, the Fighting Cocks, Verulamium Museum - St Albans is not short of impressive and attractive buildings that raise one's spirits. You will have your favourites.

Most areas of the city have varied, attractive building stock. But there's the area between the old police station on Victoria Street and the Alban Arena. Over an acre of depressed and depressing land is up for redevelopment and the Council brands it 'Civic Centre Opportunity Site South'.

An opportunity indeed! To replace that collection of soulless monuments to the decades of architectural bankruptcy with a landmark development that will revitalise the area and make a positive contribution to our streetscape.

There are concerns, however, that it might result in the 'City Centre Lost Opportunity Site South'.

The Council, having bought the bulk of the site, has initially adopted an existing planning consent granted to a private developer. That might well limit the scope to produce something of real quality. Instead we might get tinkering at the edges.

To be fair the Council has acknowledged that its plans need improvement. It is a pity that, rather than coming forward with a new vision, what it proposes at present are essentially cosmetic changes to make the scheme 'more St Albans'.

This was apparent at the Council-organised 10 January 'Community Design Review'. The 27 volunteer participants (out of a community of 145,000!) were asked how elements of the current scheme could be 'improved'. There was virtual unanimity about the 'monolithic' nature of the proposed blocks, so all that was up for discussion was design detail.

Certainly there were worthwhile contributions which, if adopted, would improve elements of the scheme.

Ideally, the Civic Society would have liked a competition for the design concept and far wider public involvement and debate, including engagement with local interest groups. A market stall would have been better than the poorly advertised and attended Civic Centre exhibition.

The Civic Society's Design Advisory Group has met several times with the developer in order to improve the quality of the design. It hopes to continue this dialogue with the

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Your membership is valued. Please renew promptly.

City Centre 'Lost' Opportunity Site? *cont.*

Council and its consultants. It agrees with Councillor Daly that this is an exciting project.

The latest planning drafts show signs that people are listening to concerns and suggestions, particularly over the appearance of elevations.

On the 7 March a 'Design Review Panel', made up of experienced architects, examined the development plans and voiced some of the same criticisms that have been made by the Civic Society. Their report will be published shortly.

We do not want history to repeat itself with a new generation having to put up with a second-rate and anonymous development. That would just be more of the same. The Society will continue to work with the Council in striving to deliver a development that St Albans can be proud of. Let's make the most of this opportunity – not lose it!

Editors' note: the 27 volunteers could not represent any organisation. They were expected to sign up in support of the evening's outcome whether they agreed with it or not. Very odd! This has been raised with Civic Voice to comment on.

Aircraft noise over St Albans

On 9 December 2018, at the Memorial Hall in St. Michael's, over 50 local residents attended the first meeting of STAND, St. Albans Aircraft Noise Defence. This is a group formed to add the voice of historic St. Albans to the debate about Luton airport's increasing noise pollution. It aims to support the other campaign groups LADACAN and STAQS who also attended along with Civic Society President Geraint John and St. Albans City & District Councillors including Annie Brewster, Salih Gaygusuz and Roma Mills.

Hertfordshire County Councillor Annie Brewster, a former St. Albans Mayor, said, "Luton gets the gain, Herts gets the pain" explaining that Luton Borough Council own the airport yet the main flight paths do not actually fly across Bedfordshire. While John Hale of STAQS pointed out that the number of Luton planes flying low between Sandridge and St. Albans has massively increased in the past few years. Andrew Lambourne, Chairman of LADACAN made the point that Luton airport wanted to

quadruple from 9 million passengers a few years ago to 36 million a year by 2050.

Roma Mills, County Councillor for St. Albans North and District Councillor for Batchwood said, "We need to complain regularly, persistently, and to get on their radar." This view was supported by Paul Barnes, STAND committee member who summed it up with, "It's a numbers game and so everyone needs to participate."

STAND represents those residents that live South of the existing RNAV (Area Navigation) Luton departure route, and west of the St. Albans-Harpenden railway line. It's an informal group, membership is free, and the plan is to represent a significant number of residents, hence the 1,000 member target. People need to complain and know how to do so, and to whom – for numbers will count.

For more information contact STAND at <https://www.stand.city> or email info@stand.city.

Evan Todd
STAND Chairman

2019 is the 50th Anniversary of the Conservation Area in St. Albans.

CONSERVATION 50
CELEBRATING AND SAFEGUARDING 50 YEARS OF THE ST ALBANS CONSERVATION AREA

To mark this, the Civic Society, in conjunction with the Aboyne and Abbey Precincts Residents' Associations and other organisations

are putting on a range of events designed to involve everyone living in our city.

St Albans was among the first Local Authorities to establish a Conservation Area. The aim was, and ostensibly remains today, to both conserve and enhance the local architecture, character and environment. Every Local Authority has at least one Conservation Area: St. Albans District now has 19 and there are some 10,000 in England alone.

Three key events are being prepared for this 50th Anniversary:

- An Exhibition at St Albans Museum + Gallery (26 May to 21 July)
- A Conference (free and open to all) at Dagnall Street Baptist Church on Saturday 6 July (2 - 5 pm)
- A Reception at St Albans Museum + Gallery (free but by invitation) on 6 July (6–7.30 pm)

In addition, local primary schools are being invited to take part in a competition exploring and interacting with the built environment where they live.

The exhibition, held in connection with the St Albans and Hertfordshire Architectural and Archaeological Society, will illustrate the past and present of our Conservation Area. It will look at how imaginative design has been used, showing how conservation areas can also be innovative, adapting to modern demand, needs and materials.

The conference, with a range of lively guest speakers and culminating in a Question Time style panel, will explore the current state of our Conservation Areas and what they mean for residents. Are they more than just something added to Estate Agents' blurb (plus a few £1000s on the price!) for a property located in a designated area?

Some Local Authorities recently started to abolish their Conservation Areas - are ours safe here? The conference will probe the success or otherwise of what's happening here in St Albans and in places where Conservation Areas are thriving and now renowned. What can they teach us about how we approach our future, and what is realistic given the current climate at both government and local levels?

We hope this special anniversary event will raise awareness and appreciation of St

Albans Conservation Areas so that they are truly valued by everyone in the community and by our Councils, both local and County. There is no doubt that a thriving conservation culture will help ensure that our city remains an attractive place for residents and visitors.

Whether you live in a Conservation Area or not, you will be welcome at both the conference and the exhibition. Look out for more details about events in the coming months and how to get a reception ticket.

At present we are still fund-raising. Would you be willing to support and donate £5 towards the planned activities? If yes, please make a bank transfer to: Conservation 50, Metro Bank; A/c no. 30937597; Sort code: 23-05-80; or a cheque made payable to Conservation 50, and send it to: Conservation 50, 19 Brampton Road, St Albans AL1 4PP. Thank you.

Conservation 50 Steering Group

Additional Sponsors so far, with grateful thanks:

DLA Town Planning Ltd; St Albans Museums + Galleries Trust; Collinson Hall; Hertfordshire County Council Locality Budget Scheme (Cllrs Hale, Mills, Rowlands & Walkington); St Albans BID; Govia Thameslink Railways; Fishpool Street Residents' Association.



Water Meadow



Vinity Garden

Christmas Market – *does it have a future?*

As that ‘Strictly’ judge might say, the 2018 Christmas Market was a **DISASTER!**

It was badly planned, poorly advertised and confusingly located. The damage all this has done to St Albans’ image is considerable. The cost, on top of the near £300,000 accumulated losses, should be a matter of concern to Council taxpayers.

Let’s be clear, the Civic Society has always supported the concept of an exciting Christmas Market. It was accepted it might take a few years to develop into something as found in other historic cities like Bath, Lincoln and Winchester. Unfortunately, things have not turned out like that here.

The Vinity Garden location isn’t ideal. Being tucked away meant some would-be visitors struggled to find it. Yet again in the signage was awful – weak, amateurish A4 posters tied to lamp posts. Some even ended up pointing the wrong way. A few could still be found in early February! Who is responsible for such incompetence? Will any head(s) roll?

This attractive and peaceful Garden has again been left in a poor state. Waxhouse Gate Passage has suffered with many of its

fine York Stone slabs being cracked or crushed because of heavy vehicles coming and going. This is a precious amenity in a highly distinctive setting and should be better cared for. With the imminent opening of the Cathedral’s new Welcome Centre it is essential things are put right this Spring to be ready to make a really good impression on the extra visitors anticipated.

The actual content of the Market was somewhat underwhelming. Visitors often found chalets shut. Their look of disappointment, especially on non-Charter Market days, (why isn’t that advertised more?) was both understandable and embarrassing. Planning was poor. It took until as late as 6 December 2018 for the Council to grant permission for the Christmas Festival to use the front Water Meadow. Surely a location also too remote from the city centre. There remain for such events real environmental concerns that need to be addressed. It was wrong to blame just a few local residents for the delay in the planning stages or for highlighting these issues, as many other people raised them too. The Society was assured such concerns would be taken on board and thus raised no

objection on this occasion.

Surely any Christmas Market should indeed be in the city centre. Either positioned like the successful Christmas Lights Switch-on Event or around the Arena. Could it go in Market Place itself? Taking care not to block the front view of our famous Clock Tower with some fast food outfit. A city centre location would supplement the regular market and boost footfall for other retailers.

What will happen for Christmas 2019? Will there still be a Christmas Market and if so where? Will it delight people? If the answers are ‘no’ then the Council has many chalets on its hands, as it is understood they bought them in 2013. Hey ho! What a disaster and we all end up paying for it!

Editors’ note: What do you think?

Fun for all ages! That is why The Society has donated £300 to help sponsor this free event.

The Society’s Archives

An intriguing surprise came my way recently - an old notebook was left at my door. As I flicked casually through its yellowing pages and took in the hand-written notes, my attention was caught by items that seemed strangely familiar - “Signal Box”; “Golden Triangle”; “Trees in front of Town Hall”. The dates were some way in the past - from 1978 to early 1990s. What really struck me is both how little has changed and yet, how much. How little change in the sense that the Society was then grappling with issues that are still with us today. How much has changed since the Chequer Street redevelopment (late 1970s); the new Civic

Centre (1980s); the electrification of the rail line (1981) and much more.

The notebook had been written by the late Dennis Owen. It was obviously started as a response to the then proposals for the redevelopment of the area behind Chequers Street, now the Maltings. He then maintained it for some twenty years recording agendas and meetings plus providing a snapshot of the activities of the Society and the names of people involved.

This reminds me that the Society has done much since its founding in 1961, but that a lot of its past is now lost. I myself had some problem in establishing what Awards the Society has given since the scheme started in 1986 and have been unable to trace what happened in 1993 and 1995!

This is a plea to anyone who might have material from the past that could be of interest to the Society to please make sure it is passed on to Jill Singer or myself.

Peter Trevelyan

SUSTAINABILITY FESTIVAL

11 May – 1 June 2019



The Society’s contribution to this is a talk entitled **‘Sustainable Buildings’**

Wednesday 22 May 6pm – 8pm
AECOM House, Victoria Street, St Albans
Speakers: Ant Wilson MBE, FREng and Peter Denney, Architect.

Civic movement speaks out to stop inappropriate upward extensions without permission



Civic Voice – the national charity for the civic movement, with 75,000 members, has submitted a consultation response urging the Government to think harder about the plans it has to allow developers to change buildings on our high streets without requiring full planning permission.

The proposals introduced in the consultation 'Planning Reform – Supporting the high street and increasing the delivery of new homes' proposes to allow additional storeys to be built above certain commercial or residential buildings, up to a maximum of five storeys.

Ian Harvey, Executive Director of Civic Voice, said, "We support the principle of encouraging a greater mix of uses on the high street. However, we consider the proposals, as they stand, will impact on the quality of design on our high street. Civic Voice supports making the most efficient use of land and understands the rationale for exploring the possibility of using the air-space above properties to provide new homes. Given the high visibility and

prominence of upward extensions and potential impact on the street scene, local character and amenity, very careful consideration of such proposals must be required."

Civic Voice, therefore, objects to the option to allow premises to extend to the roofline of the highest building in a terrace. Unless full consideration of the design, siting and external appearance of the upward extension and its impact on amenity and character of the area can be fully considered by the local authority and is included in the final legislation.

Joan Humble, Chair of Civic Voice, said, "The future of the nation's high streets is differentiation. To achieve that requires collaborative planning and long-term visioning with the community at its heart and the historic environment as its USP. Investing in the high street requires long-term planning and whilst the government believes the plans would help revive high streets and increase housing delivery, we think it may do the opposite. We may end up with poor quality designed housing without consideration for the wider built environment, something we know is key to successful high streets. We will be communicating our feelings to the Minister for High Streets, Jake Berry MP and will discuss this issue further."

Civic Voice's full consultation response can be accessed via <http://www.civicvoice.org.uk/news/civic-voice-responds-to-the-governments-high-streets-pdr-consultation/>



Trashing the Clock Tower. We have asked for this sort of thing to be moved. Watch!

Clock Tower News

The annual Clockateers 'thank you' party took place on 22 March in preparation for the new season opening which commences on Good Friday 19 April. As always, if you would like to volunteer for a few 1½ hour sittings then please contact Jill Singer on 838965 / joxhey@gmail.com

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, Moragh Ormiston, tel: 01727 865421 or moraghormiston@waitrose.com or post to Thatched House, Abbey Mill End, St Albans AL3 4HN

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

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

Forthcoming events

Thursday 11 April

Conservation 50 – an Anniversary for St Albans – by Tim Boatswain
The Cross Street Centre*
Dagnall Street at 8pm – FREE.

Saturday 11 May

Spring Visit by High Speed Train to Faversham and Whitstable

Wednesday 22 May

Sustainability talk
See special panel.

Saturday 15 June

Visit to Bishop's Garden

Abbey Gate House, Abbey Mill Lane.
5.00 – 6.30pm – FREE.

To book, contact Katherine Booth
kemb1@hotmail.com tel: 07711 946829

Thursday 27 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.

Saturday 6 July

Conservation 50 conference, reception and exhibition – ALL FREE
See report in this newsletter.

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

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.