This will be the last newsletter edited by Eric Roberts and Peter Trevelyan. 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

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This will be the last newsletter edited by Eric Roberts and Peter Trevelyan. In the previous edition we invited people to volunteer to help with some of the Society’s current activities. Jane Fookes has offered to become editor and, after a decade or more producing the quarterly newsletter, Eric and Peter are stepping down. Jane will edit from the summer edition. We wish her well.

Eric is also handing over the Society’s Tree Sponsorship Partnership with the Council which he helped instigate back in 1998 (see article). Mary Conneely has offered to become coordinator and will write more on this in the next newsletter.

Eric is retiring too from arranging some of the Society’s Visits which he has done since 1996. These have enabled members to socialise and sometimes meet fellow Civic Societies. Valerie Shrimplin has come forward and is organising an Autumn Visit on Saturday 10 October to Royal Tunbridge Wells and Hever Castle. Details on the back page.

NATIONAL PLANNING

The big news is the publication of Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission’s ‘Living with Beauty’ report. Tim Boatswain, chairman, refers to this in his CCOSS article.

LOCAL PLANNING

Again, our news is mainly about CCOSS but there is also the worrying situation of the hiatus over the Inquiry into the Local Plan – see article. There is news of the recent £300,000 pledge to restore the dried-up River Ver and the implications for the state of Verulamium lakes. Things continue to move slowly and we have been asked, in the words of Councillor Rowlands, “to be patient as this is a complex project …”.

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Nice place – shame about the cost!

In the coming year many of us might visit some city or town and admire its old buildings and special character as we stroll around. You can even do the same right here in St Albans. But keeping up those heritage appearances does not come without some cost.

Much of what you see will be buildings located in a designated Conservation Area. Many will be Grade II listed and maybe a few Grade II*. This is aimed to give them some protection from unauthorised, possibly spoiling, alterations. There is, however, unlikely to be any offer of financial support towards their upkeep.

Therein lies the rub. The cost of maintaining these old buildings falls to their owners.

This forms the basis of how the majority of our domestic architectural heritage survives for future generations to enjoy.

It’s a delicate relationship and, fortunately, one that generally works. But most places will have had cases where listed buildings, big and small, have become vulnerable because of lack of funds. The recent announcement that Government wants to give more powers to Councils to be able to list more buildings, thus hopefully protecting them for the future, is basically good news. It does raise the question: where is the money coming from?

Repairs and restoration works to listed buildings are liable for VAT. Yet new builds

Continued on the next page
Nice place – shame about the cost! Cont.

are not. For several years now this anomaly has been raised in an attempt to get the VAT dropped for listed building conservation works which has sometimes hindered and even prevented them taking place. So far without success. If the Government wants to encourage more listing of buildings then surely now is the time to change the rules and drop that VAT liability. This would show a real commitment and support for the people and organisations relied upon to protect the Nation’s heritage.

This might even help boost the building industry particularly in the skills and apprenticeships needed for such conservation works. Something then to renew lobbying our MPs in 2020.

Update on City Centre Opportunity Site South (CCOSS)

The Spring Newsletter 2019 highlighted the importance of the redevelopment of the area between the old police station and the Arena. Member Helen Bishop responded with her views on the charrette process and the general situation. Helen’s letter is given in full on the website. She also suggested that the names of the members who are on the Society’s Design Advisory Group and Planning Advisory Group are published. These are: DAG – Peter Newby (chair), Roy Darby, Peter Denney, Geraint John and John Milligan. PAG – Michael Fookes (chair), Katherine Booth, David Lloyd and Eric Roberts.

In the previous article the Society argued that, for such a significant development in a critical location, there should have been an open architectural competition, which would have provided options that were likely to produce a scheme of true quality.

At the time the Council did not go down that path but commissioned a single architectural firm to develop a design based on an existing permitted planning application. Although the Civic Society’s Design Advisory Group were invited to comment and try to refine the scheme, it was clear when a planning application was submitted that not enough had changed and that the monolithic design fell far short of expectations.

When the Council made a presentation of the plans to the Society’s members on 23 September 2019 much disquiet was expressed. At the next committee meeting of the Society’s Trustees a unanimous vote was taken to oppose the application. This antipathy to the scheme was also reflected in over 100 objections from the public. The Society urged the plans be withdrawn.

The Council, to its credit, listened and withdrew the planning application. The Society then proposed that, if there could not be an open architectural competition at this stage, there should at least be options drawn up by first-class architects. The Council followed this advice and commissioned three world-class architectural firms to draw up schemes.

The Civic Society also drafted a design brief for the architects, identifying that any scheme for CCOSS should:

- enhance St Albans through excellent quality of design and detail – a ‘wow’ factor;
- have high levels of sustainability and greening;
- avoid being entirely driven by cost;
- not be designed by committee;
- reflect the character and uniqueness of St Albans (respecting the Conservation Area).

This March the Council presented these three options to the citizens of St Albans and sought their preferences. The Society also planned a further members’ meeting on 23 March to discuss the merits of each option (also open to the public/community) details on our website (http://www.stalbanscivicsociety.net/). This was a chance for people to have their say on probably the most significant architectural development in the city for a generation.

The recent Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission demands higher quality architectural design for the country. Here is an opportunity indeed for this great city of ours to create a development that responds with architectural quality of the highest calibre and builds a heritage we can be proud of!

Tim Boatswain
‘A’ boards galore!

Are advertising boards (‘A’ boards) on the pavement unsightly or do they enhance the appearance of the city centre? Do they impact on our enjoyment of St Albans city centre? Are they essential for traders? Is it acceptable that those with buggies and walking sticks and those in wheelchairs have to manoeuvre around them and how easy is it to do this? Are they legal?

Every year the number of ‘A’ boards in the city centre increases. On a quiet day in St Albans recently 101 ‘A’ boards were on the pavement between the High Street and Catherine Street, excluding Christopher Place and The Maltings. On Wednesdays and Saturdays when the Charter Market takes place and the town is much busier, there are areas where the width of the pavement is reduced to less than one metre. This proliferation appears almost competitive. If my neighbour has one then I shall have one or even two!

The business should actually seek permission from the owner of the pavement to use the pavement for the purpose of advertising. This includes the placement of tables and chairs and the sale and display of goods. In addition, permission should be sought from the council planning department to advertise by the use of free-standing signage which includes ‘A’ boards. Particular care should be taken when signs are displayed close to listed buildings so that they do not detract from their character and appearance.

Does cluttering up the pavement matter? Granted this is not as important as many other issues facing our Council’s planning department. Furthermore, enforcement is expensive and the same practice must apply to all. Yet things have clearly got out of hand and need to be addressed. Otherwise where will it end?

And so, if this affects you take it up with the Council and your councillors. Let us know too. Or you could contact the website, Fix My Street. Fix My Street notify the local council and provide free statistics for councils. (https://www.fixmystreet.com).

Moragh Ormiston

The Local Plan

As part of the legal procedure, the draft Local Plan for St Albans City and District Council, which sets out the scale and growth for the district over the next 15 years, went to Examination by inspectors at the end of February. The Government has set a target of 15,000 new homes and to fulfil such a demanding ambition the Local Plan controversially has proposed building 11 new developments on the Green Belt. The Examination had to consider whether the Plan met the relevant legal and procedural requirements, and whether it was sound.

The Civic Society was granted representation at the Examination – the only local charity to be represented – and the Society’s Chairman was able to raise concerns about the loss of Green Belt and the need to reconsider building on brownfield and previously developed Green Belt sites.

One of the most contentious issues raised during the three days of the examination was the proposed housing development upon the disused, but also part of the Green Belt, Radlett airfield, which had already been granted permission for a Strategic Rail Freight Interchange (SRFI) by the Government. The QC representing the developers of the SRFI, Helioslough, vigorously challenged the legality of the Plan, so it was perhaps unsurprising that the next two planned Examination sessions have been cancelled, since the inspectors “have some serious concerns in relation to legal compliance and soundness” of the Plan. The Council now have to wait for a “detailed letter” from the inspectors, which is likely to seek major modifications to the Plan.

Tim Boatswain

Editors’ note: on the subject of the Railfreight situation, the Society recently briefed MP Daisy Cooper on the implications for our rail service in respect of the necessary infrastructure works and timetabling difficulties.
**Tree Sponsorship**

The Society’s partnership with the Council and the Tree Book of Remembrance stemmed from the concept Eric Roberts brought from Folkestone in 1998 (see Kate Bretherton’s book ‘The Remarkable Trees of St Albans’). The then leader of the Council, Cllr. Sheila Burton, supported the idea and the results can be seen around us.

Over the last twenty years some 150 trees have been planted thanks to sponsorship of circa £25,000. This includes the thirty London Planes in St Peter’s Street. Apart from Eric’s involvement, the artist for the Tree Book of Remembrance has been Linda Williams (see photograph). Both Linda and Eric are stepping back. Thank you to both of them for their achievements. Their places are taken by Lyn Hirschowitz artist, and Mary Conneely coordinator. The Tree Book can be seen on the first floor of the Council Offices opposite the lifts (see illustration).

In 1999? The Group’s solution was the platypus anchors that can still be seen in the wall that also saved the trees for £14,000. The Council’s initial plan was for an alleged £54,000 scheme which would have resulted in demolishing the wall and felling the trees – including the lovely copper beech. The then caption for a green St Albans is even more pertinent today!

2001 the year tree was planted

**Editors’ note:** remember the fight for the Gombards Yews in 1999? The Group’s solution was the platypus anchors that can still be seen in the wall that also saved the trees for £14,000. The Council’s initial plan was for an alleged £54,000 scheme which would have resulted in demolishing the wall and felling the trees – including the lovely copper beech. The then caption for a green St Albans is even more pertinent today!

**Forthcoming events**

Because of the coronavirus situation all events are subject to cancellation. See the Society’s website and email news updates.

**Thursday 9 April**

The Landscape of the City  
Johanna Gibbons (J & L Gibbons LLP).  
The Cross Street Centre*  
Dagnall Street at 8pm – FREE.

**Thursday 21 May**

Trees and the Architect  
John Milligan (Milligan Knight Architects) – joint talk with Hertfordshire Architectural Association.  
The Cross Street Centre*  
Dagnall Street at 8pm – FREE.

**Wednesday 3 June**

What are your plans for climate change?  
In collaboration with Sustainable St Albans. Speaker: Prof Geraint John with Panel and time for Q&A. FREE, AECOM House, Victoria Street, 5.30pm for 6.00pm until 7.45pm.

**Thursday 2 July**

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.

**Thursday 16 July**

Hever Castle and Anne Boleyn  
A talk by Valerie Shrimplin.  
8pm The Cross Street Centre* – FREE

**Saturday 10 October**

Autumn visit to Royal Tunbridge Wells and Hever Castle  
£38pp which includes coach travel, short tour of RTW by member of its Civic Society, discounted entrance to Hever Castle and a special ‘Tudor Tea’. Details on how to book in Summer (June) 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.

**Membership Matters**

To join or renew membership  
Subscriptions remain unchanged and are renewable on 1 April each year.

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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 Ottawa
- Milligan Knight Architects
- National Pharmacy Association

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