

# St Albans CIVIC SOCIETY

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

**President: Geraint John**

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## Newsletter | Autumn 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.*



*We can see you - and very nice too!*

## NEWS & COMMENTS



**We welcome the new members** who have joined during the summer. We trust they will have an interesting and enjoyable time with the Society. Whilst on the subject of membership, sadly this could be the time to be saying **goodbye to those who have not renewed their subscription** which was due on 1 April. If you have any doubts as to your current status, please contact the Membership Secretary.

There is a lot going on at the moment. This edition covers numerous items, such as the draft Strategic Local Plan (SLP), the latest on the BHS building, the proposed works to the Ver and the Lakes, initial findings from the Questionnaire, and Awards, both nationally and our own.

### PLANNING – BOTH NATIONAL AND LOCAL

**The Green Belt** is apparently under attack again, despite assurances from Downing Street that it would not be. The Campaign to Protect Rural England announced at the beginning of August that 406,000 homes are proposed on previously protected sites, (think 5000 football pitches!) most of which will not help young families get on the property ladder. With our own SLP still to be determined, St Albans is very vulnerable from Whitehall taking control over where houses will be built.

Locally, **planning in the city centre** is being much influenced by the perilous state of retail on the High Street (see article on BHS application).

Coinciding with this newsletter are the two weekends of **Heritage Open Days**. The Society once again produced a special free booklet listing all the attractions – even more this year!

**The Norwich Coach Trip** is on Saturday 29 September: there may still be a few seats remaining. Contact Brian Holmes on 01727 843389.

**2019 sees the 50th Anniversary of the city's first conservation area** being established. The Abbey Precincts Residents' Association has teamed up with the Society to organise a special 'conference' and party to mark the occasion. A steering group has been formed, involving members from both organisations plus Aboyne Residents' Association. The provisional date is Saturday 6 July 2019. Other Residents' Associations, both in and outside the conservation area, are being invited to participate. More in future issues about Conservation 50.

**STOP PRESS** – Cllr Mary Maynard, Planning Portfolio holder, has agreed to give a presentation and answer questions as part of the consultation on the draft SLP. The special meeting for members will take place Tuesday 18 September, 8.00pm at the Cross Street Centre. This is important for the City and District so do come along. The consultation on the SLP runs from 4 Sept to 17 Oct (see Council website).

### IS THIS YOUR GOODBYE?

**Sadly it is if you have not yet renewed your 2018 membership due last April. Please see back page.**

## Trees saga

**T**he last newsletter featured the three trees in front of the Town Hall. It seems we nearly lost them, and still could, in order to create a 'performance space'. They might have been swept away along with the hoardings were it not for the fact that an application to fell had to be published on the planning list. The Society responded suggesting that no felling should take place until there was a proper landscape plan, with funding, and the promised replacement trees were in situ.

Since then a large number of people, not just members, have expressed dismay, some even outrage, at the idea of felling these trees at all. "Leave them alone" is the common cry. One man was overheard in Tesco quizzing a Councillor over the felling. The latter's reply that "they were only trees and therefore could be dispensed with" did not help the situation at all. The man's reply to that was colourful, to say the least! But it does highlight a worrying attitude that can exist about trees.

We have been asked what environmental good are the trees bringing to the city centre? We don't have the expertise to give details, but some figures in the 14 July Daily Telegraph might help. A survey in 2015 found that London's 8,142,000 trees sequestered 67,000 tons of CO<sup>2</sup> a year and removed 200,200 tons of 'pollution'. Total annual benefit was £132.7m. In their own little way, these trees and the others along St Peter's Street, in our highly air-polluted city centre, are making a similar contribution whilst giving us some welcome greening, shade and character. Long may this last.

# Responses to the Civic Society Questionnaire

**W**e sent emails to members with a known email address to invite them to fill in an online survey, and to the members whose email addresses we did not have we posted a paper survey with a stamped addressed return envelope.

Unsurprisingly the main reasons people joined the Civic Society were concern for the conservation of the city, its history and heritage and an interest in architecture and town planning.

There was strong support for what we currently do, but some emerging issues about things we could focus on more – such as increased co-operation with other local amenity groups, community groups and residents' associations.

There was a great deal of appreciation for the newsletter. Some people would support an electronic copy only but others much prefer a paper copy. We need to give some thought about how members could opt for their preference.

Quite a lot of members who had not previously given an email address said they would like to be added to the email list for the monthly email updates.

Generally there was interest in how the website could provide more information. For example providing details on how to take action as an individual on matters such as planning applications and street and pavement repairs.

One strong message was that the overwhelming majority is in favour of informal meetings to hear about what the Civic Society is currently doing and where members can discuss issues in more detail and exchange views.

We propose to have such an informal meeting with a chance to talk and socialise, with refreshments, on Sunday 21 October at 2pm to approx. 4.30/5pm in Kingsbury Barn, when we can talk about the results of the questionnaire and where we go from here. We also would like to hold a second

such meeting in the Spring where we can have open discussion about a possible Five Year Strategic Plan and get opinions from members about the priorities that should be included.

We would be pleased if as many members as possible could come as we are keen to involve many of you and have a wide range of views.

**Thank you to everyone who replied to the questionnaire – and you are welcome to come on 21 October whether you filled in the questionnaire or not!**

Refreshments will follow the discussion with a chance for us all to meet informally.

Parking is ONLY available at Verulamium Museum car park.

**Jill Singer**

**Editors' note:** We urge members to come along to this special event as it will help the Society in its future activities review.

## Decisions, decisions!

**T**he Civic Society's committee often has to make decisions where timescales can be tight. It does ask membership for opinions on topics during the year, but there are times when the planning process deadlines preclude this. If a member disagrees with the Society they are free to speak either by letter or email or raise the matter at the AGM.

One such decision involves the old BHS store that has stood empty on St Peter's Street for nearly three years. Reef Estates applied to demolish the building and build a 130-bedroom hotel, with the option of A1/A3/A4 mixed use on the ground floor. That's for retail at the front, with restaurant/eating towards the rear.

The Society was approached for confidential pre-consultation discussion in 2017. After scrutinising the plan, the decision was a general thumbs up in principle, subject to a few suggestions on design and keeping some retail option on the ground floor.

This decision was not taken lightly. We know some people still hanker for a kind of department store, and may not understand why another hotel is necessary. Yet even a



few years ago the Society recognised that the retail business is changing and it is unlikely there would be a taker to occupy the premises. Meanwhile, demand for more tourist beds in St Albans is increasing and the then imminent opening of the new Museum + Art Gallery would stimulate this.

Consequently, when Reef Estates lodged their plan earlier this year the Society supported it. Since then there have been numerous announcements of closures and cut backs made by firms like M&S, House of Fraser, Debenhams, Carluccios restaurants (closing here in December) and Poundworld. The latter now stands empty along with the nearby former Thomas Cook shop in St Peter's Street.

The 4 July Grimsey report highlighted the changes coming to the High Street.

Which brings us to that inauspicious Planning meeting on 16 July when

Councillors fudged things and deferred a decision for 'more information'. There were, after all, only 38 pages of information already! Council Officers were recommending refusal giving, in our opinion, outdated and unrealistic loss of retail as a reason. They also cited issues over height. The latter argument the Society also questions. The proposed building does not impose itself unduly on the city skyline – we would be one of the first to raise objection if it did.

The report before Councillors recognised a need for more hotel accommodation here. The empty BHS has had no retail interest shown in it and over 100 of the closed BHS stores are still empty. It was described as one of the 'most negative' buildings in the street. The proposed new design, although a storey higher, is potentially impressive and an improvement to the Conservation Area's street scene.

Here is an opportunity to do something positive and enable a £20 million investment and create 60 new jobs. This is no short-term fix and surely something Councillors should be encouraging. Here's hoping they get this next time round, stop prevaricating and have the nous, even wisdom, to grant approval.

**If not, the prospect of this 'most negative' building standing empty for years in our city centre becomes a nightmare and who would be to blame for that? Decisions, decisions indeed!**

## 'The Remarkable Trees of St Albans'

Kate Bretherton is updating her book. She intends to add an index, together with changes and new information.

Please would members let her know if they have: notes they would like to see added to the original text; changes they have noticed since 2010; trees or tree issues they think ought to be shared; or improvements to the book they would suggest in the update.

Send to [kate@hellotrees.co.uk](mailto:kate@hellotrees.co.uk) or Flint Barn, Norrington End, Redding Lane, Redbourn AL3 7QN

## News from the Clocktower



*Goodbye to an old friend.*

The Robinia tree was sadly dying but a new one is promised - watch this space!

The tree was chosen to recall Jean Robin the famous French gardener to the Court of Louis XIII. This connection, along with the old Fleur de Lys building, brought about the naming of French Row.

The Civic Society was originally involved in the tree's planting. Kate Bretherton (member) is now on the case and is liaising with County Councillors Chris White and Sandy Walkington.

The St Albans Civic Society is now on Twitter. Follow us at [@stalbancivicsoc](https://twitter.com/stalbancivicsoc)



*Still a shameful mess! What must people think?*

## Ver Renaissance

Verulamium Park derives much of its character from its water-features. The view to the Abbey over the lakes affords one of the finest vistas in St Albans. And the Ver, which feeds the lakes, is valued as one of the World's rarest and most endangered habitats: the chalk stream, a precious wonder of which we are custodian for future generations.

Unfortunately, closer inspection of this bucolic scene reveals that all is not well. Low volumes of water-flow have exacerbated inherent silting problems which are now manifest: residents and visitors may encounter unsightly mud, unpleasant smells and dead wildfowl.

The good news is that, after decades of dithering by Councils of various political hues, the Environment Agency, in conjunction with other authorities concerned, including our City Council, are developing a master plan which addresses the underlying hydrological and other issues. The first stage which involved analysis of options and public consultation concluded in May.

Broadly, the plan is to:

- increase water-flow volumes through less abstraction and modest corrections to the course of the river;
- 'soften' the lake edges through planting;
- somewhat increase the size of the island; and
- have nature trail-style boardwalks over the resulting wetland margins.

None of this would be entirely free of controversy for the proposed changes to the river's course and margins will mean:

- 'softened' edges to the lakes;
- boardwalk expanses by the river; and
- the displacement and relocation of some

allotments in the reach by Sopwell.

Some of the changes, for example those to the allotments, are said to be necessary on account of significant anticipated rises in ground water levels in the next few years. Others are more discretionary, for example how the lake margins are treated. The reasoning behind the major changes is underpinned by complex scientific analysis, so 'knee-jerk' responses are not appropriate.

To see the plans, search [www.stalbans.gov.uk](http://www.stalbans.gov.uk) and go to 'River Ver and Verulamium Park Lakes Improvement Project' where you can have your say in the next consultation.

At last, there seems every reason to be optimistic. The project has a real momentum behind it and the relevant authorities appear committed to bringing it to fruition. Once the final design is selected and costed, the ultimate challenge will be (as ever) funding. There are various sources of funds and the project is surely too important to be abandoned or even deferred. But the collecting tin will need to be rattled loudly. Giving Verulamium Park the riverside landscape it deserves for the next hundred years is important for residents, visitors and, of course, the wildlife of the Ver. **Now the old Town Hall has been revitalised as a showcase of excellence, let's do the same with Verulamium Park! It is an overdue renaissance but one now within our grasp.**

**Paul Brecknell**

**Special Note:** there will be a presentation of the proposals for members and friends (FREE) at which you will be able to ask questions, at 8pm on Thursday 15 November at the Cross Street Centre.

**CIVIC VOICE**  
talking civic sense

## Design Awards July 2018

**F**our members of the Society attended this year's Civic Voice awards held at the Leadenhall Building in the City, the offices of Rogers Stirk Harbour and Partners. This was a very up-market location in a beautifully designed building, popularly known as 'The Cheesegrater'.

The range and high standard of most of the finalists made this a fascinating event whilst the presentations of pictures and videos was smooth and flawless. It was noticeable that the majority of people presenting and involved with the Awards were women. Several of the projects had supporting videos which took you through the building and showed people using and talking about their building. The judges liked evidence of collaboration and input from local people which the winners in every category seemed to have.

The entries included many upgrades of existing buildings which had badly needed an uplift. The overall winner was the Storyhouse in Chester: this was the considerable upgrading of a Thirties Cinema, turning it



PHOTO: BRICCY LANE

*Overall winner: the Storyhouse, Chester.*

into a library and community facility. This project also won the Historic Buildings category, which was strongly contested, whereas the Housing category had fewer entries, perhaps a reflection of the lack of good design in new build in housing projects currently.

The winner was a high budget, high profile project with a heavy emphasis on community involvement. Indeed, many of the schemes had considerable cooperation between the local authorities (many times with very significant financial contribution from them) community organisations and the general public, resulting in the current trend of downgrading local services being firmly turned back.

Other winners were a derelict area turned into a children's adventure playground; an innovative, community-led housing project

established to bring genuinely affordable housing into a deprived area of East London and a congestion ridden, Conservation Area town centre carefully re-designed to reduce through traffic and create a modern market place. None of which could have been achieved without the highest level of co-operation and support between all of the many different parties involved. All of which has great relevance to our own situation here in St Albans.

The Peoples Award was given to the renewal of Turners House in Twickenham. This award was based on 2600 votes submitted online.

For further details go to [www.civicvoicedesignawards.com](http://www.civicvoicedesignawards.com)

**DON'T FORGET: The Society's own Annual Awards Evening** - details below in Forthcoming Events. Do come along and celebrate good things that have happened.

### 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.

## Forthcoming events 2018

*Tuesday 18 September*

### Strategic Local Plan

Cllr Mary Maynard, Planning Portfolio holder, will give a presentation and answer questions as part of the consultation on the draft SLP.

The Cross Street Centre\*

Dagnall Street at 8pm – FREE

*Saturday 29 September*

### Autumn coach visit to Norwich

There may still be a few seats remaining. Contact Brian Holmes on 01727 843389 for the latest position.

*Sunday 21 October*

### Responses to the Civic Society Questionnaire

A meeting and discussion, for members only. Refreshments will follow with a

chance for us all to meet informally.

Kingsbury Barn, Branch Road at 2 pm.

Parking is ONLY available at Verulamium Museum car park.

*Thursday 30 October*

### Annual Awards Celebration Evening

Celebration for members and invited guests. Drinks and canapés. FREE.

Abbey Theatre 7.30 for 8pm

*Thursday 15 November*

### The River Ver and Lakes

A presentation of the proposals at which you will be able to ask questions.

The Cross Street Centre\*

Dagnall Street at 8pm – FREE

\*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.

Individual	£10
Family (2 or more)	£15
Pensioner/Student/Unwaged	£7
Residents' Association	<b>Free*</b>
Corporate	£50

\*Free affiliation. Individual members of a RA can join the Society at the above rates.

To join or check payment details please contact the Membership Secretary, Bryan Hanlon, tel: 01727 851734 [hanlonbryan@gmail.com](mailto: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