

# St Albans CIVIC SOCIETY

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

**President: Geraint John**

**Chairman: Tim Boatswain** 07873 586074

## Newsletter | Winter 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

**T**his edition is packed full of news, for there is much going on. What is clear is that if the Society is to continue at such a pace, it needs more help from its members. Not just the support from your welcome subscriptions, but a few more people who are prepared to offer some assistance, either in any working group or being willing to be co-opted onto the Committee.

This is timely, as the advert for a Membership Secretary indicates. The role is vital to the Society's ongoing existence. Can you help, please?

The Society's annual **Awards Celebration Evening** (ACE) was held at the Abbey Theatre on Tuesday 30 October. It was a very successful occasion and the results of the Awards Group's findings appear in the special supplement. Thank you Jill Singer, Peter Denney, Brian Holmes, Alan Smith and Peter Trevelyan.

Members may be asking where their **2019 Programme of Events Card** is this time. There isn't one! The ongoing deliberations by the Review Group (Freda Chaloner, Jill Singer, Robert Osborne) and your responses to the questionnaire mean that a strategy and future programme are still being worked on. Things should be clarified later in 2019. Forthcoming events will still appear on the back page of the newsletter and be advised by monthly email. **Not on the email alert system? Contact [stalbaniscivicsociety@gmail.com](mailto:stalbaniscivicsociety@gmail.com)**



**The hugely popular Christmas Lights Switch-On in St Peter's Street – surely the ideal place for a Christmas Market and not out of the shopping centre on Green Belt land.**

**NATIONAL PLANNING** – Despite headline grabbing announcements from the Government, the building industry seems to lead a charmed life of big executive bonuses and questionable delivery on the type and quality of homes the country really needs.

Oliver Letwin MP produced a report that found no evidence of land-banking by major house builders. We remain unconvinced. Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE) has produced figures to show the nation's Green Belt has shrunk by 10,000 hectares in ten years, and is still under threat. This is intensified for it has been reported that the majority of the present Cabinet favour relaxation of Green Belt restrictions. Added to this is the recent announcement by the Secretary of State for Housing, James Brokenshire, of "Building Better – Building Beautiful". It is BIMBY (Beauty In My Backyard) all over again. Yet more words!

Young people are still finding it difficult to get on the property ladder. This, together with the inability to act decisively on the real threat to our High Streets and Pubs, is becoming very serious.

The preoccupation with backstops, transitions, and customs unions is clearly taking its toll.

**LOCAL PLANNING** – The Society has responded to the St Albans District Council Strategic Local Plan (SLP) consultation concerning the future development of the city from 2020 to 2036. Our response recognised the importance of a new SLP which is needed in order to update the previous one, drafted way back in 1994. This is not only to ensure that the Authority's

SLP is compatible with the latest edition of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), published in July 2018, but also that the District Council will not have to relinquish its control over local planning to Government because there has been a failure to produce an approved, up-to-date Local Plan. (See full response on Society's website.)

The Society also responded to the Council's Gambling Policy Review, the Licensing Review, and the Luton Airport expansion consultation. Again see website.

It is also in discussion with the Council over the implications of the Christmas Market, and future activities, on the front water meadow by Westminster Lodge. In seeking to relocate it from the Vintry Garden the Council has only very recently submitted a planning application - too late to be determined before the event takes place! Will it have to be treated as a retrospective one, we wonder? The Society has not objected but has been given assurances there will be further consultation on concerns raised by residents and local organisations over events on this sensitive site in the Green Belt.

We do want to see a successful Christmas Market but wonder if this is the right location.

**There is a vacancy arising for the important role of MEMBERSHIP SECRETARY.**

If you are interested, please contact John Thomson on 07711 696417 or email [johnsthomson47@gmail.com](mailto:johnsthomson47@gmail.com)

# Finally the penny drops!

The Council Plans Referrals meeting on Monday 15 October was a notable event. After an hour and fifty minutes of 'discussion' (some of us present likened it to witnessing tooth pulling!) Councillors finally came to a decision. One that they really should have made three months earlier but fudged. They agreed almost unanimously to GRANT Reef Estates permission to demolish the former BHS store in St. Peter's Street ('that most negative building') for a 130-bed hotel to be built with the option of a retail shop on the ground floor frontage.

As was said in the last newsletter, retail as we once knew it is changing and for our high street to survive will have to adapt further. The Society has been saying for years that those who seek a department store are living in the past. The recent news about House of Fraser, Debenhams and even John Lewis clearly illustrates this. Fresh news of retail woes comes almost daily and we need to look to our laurels to keep the M&S store in St. Peter's Street.

That 15 October decision did not come without a fight because the Council's planning officers were sticking to their previous recommendation to REFUSE. Their main reason was the loss of retail space along

with concern for height of the proposed building. The Society wrote in SUPPORT of the application pointing out the state of retail in general and that it did not regard the height issue a significant threat to the city centre's historic, and protected, skyline.

The opening address by the committee's chairman, Councillor Wright, was somewhat ominous. (Look on the Webcast). He was seemingly giving a steer that the officers' recommendation should be followed. This was immediately challenged by Councillor Bolton who stated she came to such a meeting to listen to the debate and consider all aspects and then make up her mind and not be told beforehand what to decide! And so the committee debated at length, and finally voted by nine votes to GRANT with Councillor Harrison (vice-chairman) abstaining. Even the chairman was now minded to approve.

What remains interesting is the ambivalence of the Council's planners to the future of retail in our city centre. Whilst they would not budge on their recommendation to refuse because of the loss of retail, thus ignoring the recent national announcements of major firms, it is understood that in the plans for the Civic Centre South Opportunity Site (CCSOS) retail has been reduced to be replaced by office accommodation!

Here the penny has dropped with the planners for the city centre has lost many purpose-built offices into flats in the last five years. Local jobs have disappeared and there has been a knock-on negative effect on the city's business and commercial appeal. The former Ziggurat building is a case in point. Gone the once impressive

glazed exterior reflecting the ever-changing sky for the lumpen brick block you, and the thousands who pass by on all those trains, see today. What an image of St. Albans!

**That loss of local jobs was estimated two years ago to be at least 1000** - remember that in-depth report in the Herts Advertiser by Debbie White.

Read the recent 25 October edition and you will see a developer quoting **the current estimate to be now 2000**. This was in connection with another planning application that was before the 15 October planning committee meeting. It concerned the plan to build a five storey office block on the south side of The Maltings, overlooking London Road. The Society had been invited to pre-application consultation on the plan and supported the development. Councillors granted permission recognising that this would help restore some of the loss of office accommodation and jobs in the city.

As the Society has said before, the Council was too slow to react to the relaxation in the planning system. In nearby Watford the Mayor quickly established an Article 4 Direction to protect the many offices around the Clarendon Road corridor from the Junction station up into the town. Despite being urged to take similar action here, it wasn't until 2017 that similar zones were set to be established in St Albans. Too late in many cases for the changes had taken place. At least the Maltings decision and what could happen at the CCSOS will help make some amends.

**Hopefully, the businesses and thus local jobs, for not everyone wants to commute, will come back to the city.**

## Report of meeting on 21 October at Kingsbury Barn

It was a beautiful Sunday afternoon so we didn't need our warm woollies and 27 of us met to have an update on the Society's activities and to discuss the results of the members' questionnaire. Following a short presentation summarising the findings (available to view on our website) there was a lively discussion which continued over refreshments. All those present were pleased to receive our regular emails and there was clear support for when we are seeking views or offers of help a single topic email is preferred. We will do this in future wherever practicable.

A number of areas of interest to be taken forward in working groups were identified including: blue plaques, environmental

issues such as traffic impacts, plus more liaison with other Civic Societies. We are delighted that some members immediately put their names forward to be involved in these activities – and if others of you are interested then please let us know.

Our next steps are to incorporate these ideas into a draft five-year plan. We will be holding another meeting in the Spring to discuss and finalise this. The date and venue will be advised.

We were disappointed by the small number attending. It is hoped that more members will spare the time in future to come along and help us with our plans and priorities.

**Freda Chaloner**



**We Remember Them**

*Verdun Tree, Sunday 11 November 2018.*

### 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.

# River Ver

## UPDATE



The tide of fortune appears to be swelling for the long-sought renaissance of the River Ver. The Council's recent consultation showed 74% public support for the project with just 10% opposed.

A feasibility report has just been presented to the Council which will be available to the public in the coming weeks. Once that has been considered, funding of £400,000 needs to be committed to the design stage which will last 12 months. If all proceeds according to plan, work would take place in 2020-2021.

It is of course all subject to funding. The overall costs will be around £7.5million. The Environment Agency (EA) would be likely to fund one third, and the balance of £5million would need to come from the Council, other grants and crowd-funding. This is currently a 'priority project' for the EA and so for the time being it has priority for funding, subject to periodic Defra reviews.

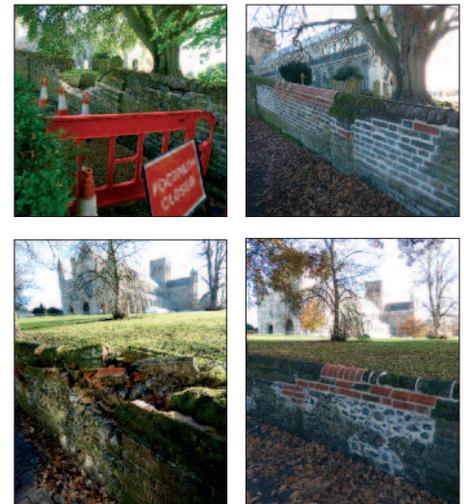
The only real controversy relates to 'Reach 4' and the displacement of the Sopwell allotments. Understandably, allotment-holders who have invested years of time, effort and money into their plots have raised serious questions as to the need for their displacement. However, the EA is adamant that the re-alignment of the river to the valley floor is overwhelmingly desirable and that the present allotments will become unsustainable as ground water levels rise when abstraction from the upper Ver is set to be halved by 2024.

Whatever the outcomes are in relation to Reach 4, the project as a whole appears to be vital for the future of this rare chalk stream and for Verulamium Park as a venue for pleasant recreation.

**Paul Brecknell**

**LOOKING BACK:** November saw the 20th Anniversary of the victory of Save The Gombards Yews Group. The Council wanted to fell the trees and demolish the wall at a cost of £54,000. The Group's scheme that saved both, still there today, cost £13,900. The Civic Society was not directly involved but several members were, three on the then committee: Pat Larner, Alan McCartney, Eric Roberts. Plus Diane Fear and Jack Pia. It also brought into action the late, and much missed, Marion Hammant.

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



*The Abbey walls - before in the Summer and now after repairs. Well done!*

## 'Save our trees along the rail embankment'



Residents of Lancaster Road, Gurney Court Road and Sandridge Road, St Albans contacted the Society about their concerns relating to Network Rail's plans to fence and 'vegetation manage' the rail embankment adjacent to their properties. The residents' major concern was that a range of mature trees, including oak, sycamore and ash would be felled by Network Rail's contractors, QTS, as there was already evidence that some trees had been cut down on the Gurney Court Road side of the embankment.

After a series of communications from the Society to Network Rail, a meeting was arranged on 22 October between the representatives of Network Rail (3) and the contractors QTS (4) and the residents. Despite it being a working day, over 30 residents attended, and 31 sent their apologies. Also in attendance were four local councillors and a community police officer. The meeting was chaired by the Society's Chairman, Tim Boatswain.

The purpose of the meeting was to clarify Network Rail's plans. The residents voiced their worries about the felling of mature trees and pointed out their importance to the wildlife they support, the pollution they are absorbing, the screen of privacy and noise prevention they provide, as well as the contribution they made to residents' mental well-being.

The meeting resulted in a set of requests

to Network Rail to be carried out before the safety work of vegetation management and erecting a fence should start:

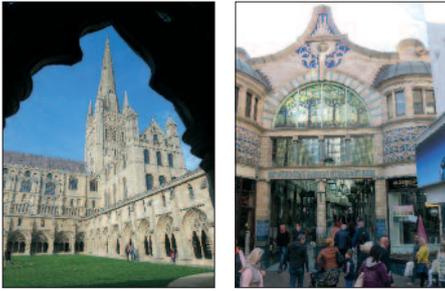
- It was agreed the boundary needs to be established and pegged before any fencing can be commenced.
- The ecological survey carried out by Whitcher Wildlife Ltd was incomplete; the full survey should be shared with the residents.
- Pipistrelle bats were identified here. They are protected by law. Network Rail must disclose their plans for protecting them.
- The 6.5m vegetation management distance from the nearest rail has to be marked out.
- The geo-technical survey on the embankment should be made available to the residents.
- The cost of the fencing and the vegetation management needs to be made public.

The residents were disappointed in the poor level of communication from Network Rail, but now hoped to be able to work with them and QTS in the future to preserve the trees and the natural habitat of the wildlife.

At the time of writing this Newsletter, a formal response from Network Rail to these requests is still awaited.

**Tim Boatswain**

**Editors' note:** this is an excellent example of the Society liaising with a Residents' Association following a request for help.



## Autumn Visit to Norwich

- Saturday 29 September 2018

**W**e travelled to Norwich on a bright September morning. Our first stop was at The George Hotel for coffee and a stimulating talk by the formidable Vanessa Trevelyan, Chair of The Norwich Society. She illustrated the ups and downs of battles for the heart of the city over the 95 years of their existence. It was clear that Norwich would have been a very much poorer place without their intervention. However, even bigger challenges loom: a massive development proposed just several hundred metres north of the cathedral with, unbelievably, a 20 storey tower at its centre. Justifiably the Norwich Society is in full battle cry!

While Norwich is said to be the most complete medieval city in the UK it is in fact a thriving fusion of modern and historic buildings. This is clearly demonstrated in the surroundings of the splendidly spired Romanesque (Norman) cathedral (*photo*) with, alongside it the Hostry, a completely modern Visitor and Education Centre and adjoining Refectory. It prominently flanks two sides of the magnificent 14th century cloisters in this extensive cathedral close, the largest in the country.

Our guided tour started at the Hostry. On entering the west end of the nave one was struck by the extent and totality of the Romanesque, Caen stone construction with its massive spiral carved columns and round arches throughout, all surmounted by a later, magnificent fan vault. What a host of treasures were within: wonderful stained glass windows, numerous memorials and ambulatory chapels, a unique 14th century, five panel, painted reredos, the wonderful choir with carved misericords and above it all the 1000 carved and coloured bosses to the vault depicting Bible stories.

Proceeding out into the city through the Erpingham Gate (1420), the happy mixture of buildings from all ages was evident. This included the imposing 12th century Norwich

Castle (now a museum), a proliferation of gothic churches, numerous fine medieval and Georgian houses, small shops, restaurants and galleries, an imposing Victorian RC Cathedral, the exuberant, Art Nouveau Royal Arcade of 1899 (*photo*) and the City Hall in fine Swedish neo-classical style (1938). Also there was the extensive market with multi-coloured awnings and, beside it, The Forum (2001) housing the central library, BBC East, shops and restaurants and a large atrium for exhibitions and public events.

So much to see, so little time to see it, but thank you Brian and Eileen Holmes for arranging an enthralling visit.

**Peter Denney**

**Editors' note:** More photos on website.

### Forthcoming events 2019

#### Heritage Buildings and the Future – a series of four talks:

*Thursday 24 January*  
**A Sense of Place** – by Jill Singer  
 The Cross Street Centre\*  
 Dagnall Street at 8pm – FREE

*Thursday 21 February*  
**An Architect's View of Modern Building in an Historic City**  
 – by Geraint John  
 Cross Street Centre\*  
 Dagnall Street at 8pm – FREE

*Thursday 21 March*  
**Contemporary and Contextual**  
 – by Simon Knight of Milligan Knight Architects. A joint Civic Society/Herts Association of Architects meeting. The Cross Street Centre\*  
 Dagnall Street at 8pm – FREE

*Thursday 11 April*  
**Conservation 50 – an Anniversary for St Albans** – by Tim Boatswain  
 The Cross Street Centre\*  
 Dagnall Street at 8pm – FREE

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

*Saturday 11 May*  
**Spring Visit by High Speed Train to Faversham and Whitstable**  
 Booking details in the Spring Newsletter.

*Thursday 27 June (provisional date)*  
**Annual General Meeting**

## 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 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
- Milligan Knight Architects
- National Pharmacy Association
- St Columba's College
- T&B (St Albans) Ltd

## Officers and Committee

<b>President</b>	Geraint John	01727 844585
<b>Elected Members/Trustees*</b>		
<b>Chairman</b>	Tim Boatswain*	07873 586074
<b>Hon. Secretary</b>	Jill Singer*	01727 838965
<b>Hon. Treasurer</b>	John Thomson*	07711 696417
<b>Membership Secretary</b>	Bryan Hanlon	01727 851734
<b>Committee Members</b>	Paul Brecknell*	
	Freda Chaloner*	
	Michael Fookes (Co-opted)	
	David Lloyd*	
	Peter Newby*	
	Robert Osborne*	
	Eric Roberts*	
<b>Members assisting</b>	Tony Mason - Verulamium Park	
	Rita Waldron - Licensing	
	Dawn Wheeler - Clock Tower	
<b>Awards Group</b>	Peter Denney	
	Brian Holmes	
	Jill Singer*	
	Alan Smith	
	Peter Trevelyan	

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.