

Exciting plans to transform Harpenden's Sport, Leisure and Entertainment Facilities



As a priority project for 2016-17, St Albans City and District Council is looking at the best way of redeveloping and improving the Harpenden's leisure and cultural facilities to meet the needs of a growing population. The facilities being reviewed are Harpenden Swimming Pool, Harpenden Sports Centre and Harpenden Public Halls.

just completed a feasibility study and feel the project is viable.

A Public Consultation will soon be announced so residents will have the opportunity to view concept designs and have their say. The aim is to open a new Harpenden Leisure Centre by December 2018 and a new Harpenden Arts and Cultural Centre a year later.

Cllr Annie Brewster, the Council's Portfolio Holder for Sports, Leisure and Heritage, said: "The council is committed to providing affordable sports, arts and cultural facilities in modern environments for residents to enjoy. So far, we have delivered three new developments: Westminster Lodge Leisure Centre, Batchwood Sports Centre and Cotlandswick Leisure Centre and we are currently raising funds to create a new City and District Museum and Art Gallery in the Grade II* Listed St Albans Town Hall. As part of this strategy, we are now exploring an exciting opportunity to transform our facilities in Harpenden."



The Sports Centre and Swimming Pool complex in Rothamsted Park is acknowledged to be outdated and not large enough to cope with current demand whilst the Harpenden Public Halls are in a poor state of repair both internally and externally.

Sports, the arts and heritage are not Local Council statutory services, so austerity measures mean improvement funding has to be applied for via Lottery Grants. Alternatively projects require a good business case to generate income. The good news is SADC has

WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE TO HAPPEN?

Please email your ideas on the changes you would like to see on all or any of the venues. The Society will be making their views known at the end of September. This is a lifetime opportunity ; don't waste it.

Alan Bunting, Editor.
editor@harpendensociety.org

Glittering prizes for Carnival competition winners

On a day of mixed weather in June, visitors to the hugely well-attended Harpenden Carnival who called at – or passed by – the Harpenden Society’s display, were invited to test their local observation and knowledge in a brain-teasing competition. Many were undoubtedly encouraged by the prospect of winning one of the attractive prizes. The entry form showed photographs, including close-ups and others taken from unusual angles, of eleven different locations around the town, which entrants were challenged to identify.



Fifty-five of the 360 or so participants pinpointed the pictured sites correctly. Their names went into a lucky-dip box and later, at a garden party on a fine evening thrown by Society chairman Chris Marsden, the Town Mayor Nicola Linacre was invited (right) to pull out the names of the prize-winners, on the first 14 slips to be drawn.

Possibly through a fear of begging letters, most of the prize-winners opted for anonymity. The prizes, donated by the Harpenden Society and town retailers, and won by individuals, were:

£100 cash donated by the **Harpenden Society**, a Cherry Tree Hall dolls house worth £200, from **Jarvis Homes**, a private wine tasting worth £200 for eight people, from **Rollings Wine**, a £50 fashion voucher from **Oui**, a £50 voucher from bathroom supplier **Ripples**, a £25 voucher from **R&M Butchers**, a £20 takeaway meal voucher from **Godfrey’s Fish & Chips**, a book voucher from **Harpenden Books**, a part body, back, neck & shoulder massage from **Breathing Space**, a ‘luxury’ cushion from **Lister Interiors**, four Carnival ice cream sundaes from **Nice**, two prizes were won by retailer entrants. They were awarded: a free half-page advertisement in ‘**What’s On Herts**’ and a full-page feature on the **Harpendia** website.

Also invited to the chairman’s garden party, enabling them to be thanked for their services, were the group of volunteers, led by Liz Trounce, who enable the town’s public library to remain open for business on Wednesday afternoons, when it would otherwise be closed.



Down on the farm – at Hammonds End

A refreshing taste of England’s ‘green and pleasant land’ on Harpenden’s doorstep was enjoyed in early June by twenty or so Harpenden Society members and friends on a guided tour of Hammonds End Farm. An initial drizzle threatened literally to put a damper on the early-evening visit, as the group climbed aboard the farm trailer, seating ourselves surprisingly comfortably on the straw bales provided.

Our informative host and guide was Stuart Roberts, representing the 3rd generation of the Roberts family, who have been farming at Hammonds End since the 1950s, where today Stuart’s father Howard occupies the farmhouse.

Stuart explained that in 1998 a decision was made, on commercial as well as ecological grounds, to ‘go organic’, eschewing the use of any chemicals, as fertiliser or for weed/pest control. Hammonds End is one of the few wholly organic farms in the area which, as Stuart observed, is ironically in stark contrast to some of the GM trials going on at Rothamsted Research, whose land is in places only 120 yards away. He stressed that the farm nevertheless enjoys an amicable relationship with Rothamsted. Today some 100 acres at Hammonds End are assigned to wheat production, 60 acres to oats and smaller areas to other crops such as rye, which is sold to distilleries producing a bourbon-like whisky. Stuart said that, thanks in large measure to Hammonds End’s organic regime, today’s farm has become

habitat for a wide variety of both fauna and flora. At the end of our 90-minute tour we repaired to one of the farm’s traditional barns, for welcome tea and cakes, where Stuart was glad to answer any outstanding questions. Everyone agreed it had been a highly enjoyable as well as an educational experience.



Green Belt development – Government Inspector to decide

At a Planning Policy Committee (PPC) meeting of St Albans District Council (SADC) on July 12, the council's draft Strategic Local Plan (SLP), which includes a significant sacrifice of Green Belt land in Harpenden, was approved, essentially without change, and has now been submitted to central government's Planning Inspectorate.

In coming to their decision, the ten District Councillors on the Committee had to consider whether they had all the 'factual evidence' they needed. Crucially, as Harpenden Green Belt Association (HGBA) chairman David Rankin points out, procedural practice requires that an SLP 'must not contain assertions of fact that are not supported by the evidence'. Furthermore, 'the evidence should not be collected retrospectively in an attempt to justify the plan'.

The meeting on July 12 had to consider the way in which the council, in July 2014, selected Green Belt sites for development, on a 'score out of ten' basis. But that scoring has, says HGBA, been one long exercise in deciding what result is politically required, regardless of the evidence; and where agreed methodologies have failed to reach the 'right' conclusion, they have been abandoned in favour of an alternative method.



This glorious field of wheat, designated 'S5' by SADC planners would, under SLP proposals, be transformed into a swathe of up to 500 houses.

Evidence which points towards a different answer has, says HGBA, been ignored or misrepresented; and assertions are made for which there is no evidential basis at all.



Site S5 from above

In specific relation to the District Council's plans to allow building on major Green Belt sites – under 'traffic and access' criteria – a score of 8/10 has been assigned to site S5, adjacent to the A1081 on the north side of Harpenden (where up to 500 houses could be built). This contrasts with the lowly 3/10 score – for a corresponding site north of St Albans. This stark difference in scoring, says HGBA, provides a vivid snapshot of the way in which SADC is prepared to achieve its desired ends. It adds that, if S5 development went ahead, traffic on the A1081 in morning rush hours 'would bring Harpenden to a grinding halt'.

Adding to the concerns of those wanting to keep Harpenden 'green' are Central Bedfordshire Council planners, who are known to have hungry eyes on land they control across the county boundary, on the east side of the A1081 beyond Thrales End Lane, where some 900 dwellings could be built.

The PPC's intention to submit SADC draft plan to the Inspectorate without major change can, in one sense be interpreted positively, says HGBA, inasmuch that the HM Inspector will be obliged to look in detail at the evidence provided by the Association and by the many hundred Harpenden residents who registered individual objections to those parts of the SLP involving Green Belt desecration.

Action Plan for the Nickey Line

In celebrating its tenth anniversary, the Friends of the Nickey Line (FONL) volunteer group has welcomed the publication this summer of the Greenspace Action Plan (GAP) for the 8 mile foot- and cycle-path between Harpenden and Hemel Hempstead. Details of the plan can be found at www.hertslink.org/cms/content/features/gapnickeyline.

It is hoped, says FONL membership secretary Geoff Bunce, that the GAP will help consolidate the group's efforts over the last decade to ensure the former Midland Railway line route (extensively covered in 'Branch Line to Hemel Hempstead', the book by erstwhile local authors Sue and Geoff Woodward, published in 2006 by Middleton Press in 2006) remains open and well maintained into the future.

Thanks to the work undertaken by FONL, it is widely enjoyed by pedestrians, cyclists, dog-walkers and bird watchers. The whole of the line between Harpenden and Redbourn Lane, as well as Knott Wood – noted for its springtime bluebells among the beech trees – are designated Local Wildlife Sites.

The GAP has been compiled, on behalf of St Albans District Council (SADC) by Hertfordshire's Countryside Management Service (CMS), a body sponsored by eight local authorities.

The plan covers only the section of the line within St Albans District, but SADC and Dacorum – whose boundary is approximately 100m to the south-west of Cherry Tree Lane bridge – have said they will collaborate to ensure their respective Nickey Line plans are complementary.

It is intended that 'stations' – simulating the flavour of the railway stations of yesteryear – will be sited, with appropriate signage along the route, including the junction with today's Thameslink and Midland Mainline at Hollybush Lane bridge, where the former line (eastbound) historically split to go north to Luton or south to London. At Roundwood Halt, the platform is due to be cleared of accumulated scrubby vegetation, helping it to be restored, as far as possible, to its previous appearance.

For that part of the line running through Harpenden it is suggested that some £18,200 needs to be sourced over a four-year period up to 2020. However, that figure does not include the heavy expenditure said to be required for hard surfacing along the route, which is estimated at £50,000.

Photos Top: Roundwood Halt semaphore signal and platform. Park Hill steps for strenuous access; Middle: Newly-surfaced Park Hill level access for the disabled or elderly; Right: More signage and interpretation boards are envisaged.



Greenway Spinney – restoration work continues

Restoration and maintenance work by local volunteers, notably through footpath edging and surfacing, continues at Greenway Spinney, a delightful wooded hollow, off Grove Avenue in south Harpenden. Last year the spinney was awarded the status of 'Local Nature Reserve' by St Albans District Council (SADC) and Natural England, followed by a CPRE 'Rural Living' award. The latter's citation referred to the restoration meeting three essential criteria: community engagement; ecological improvement; and involvement of young people.

Through goodwill and effort, Friends of Greenway Spinney (FOGS) volunteers have contributed an estimated 1600 hours of hard work, over a period of six years. That has involved removing most of the invasive species of plant, including cherry laurel and snowberry, which had previously been allowed to overrun the area, described by local residents as a 'gloomy tunnel', that was threatening and inaccessible to the public and to native wildlife.

Where brambles and nettles had earlier predominated, volunteers introduced wild strawberry plants and other non-invasive species. Information boards now list the flora and fauna to be found in and around the spinney, with advice on how creatures, especially hedgehogs, can best be protected.

On the notice board at the Grove Avenue entrance to the spinney the FOGS award certificate and plaque are now displayed, along with acknowledgement of the sponsors who have provided crucial financial and material support, including SADC, Herts CC, Harpenden Trust, Franks Forestry, Jaystone Extensions and Biffa Group.



KEEPING FAMILIES UP-TO-DATE

Before the days of social media and the internet, mothers of pre-school and school-age children would meet as neighbours, typically setting up informal baby-sitting groups. As the children grew older and became involved in multifarious, often school-related, sports and leisure activities, parents were inevitably brought together, not just formally via parent-teacher associations, but informally, outside school hours.

They faced common challenges in bringing up their families which, by getting together were often eased and overcome more readily than they could have managed alone.

But the 21st Century computer age has enabled such 'constructive friendships' to be established much more widely and fruitfully – something which was recognised some four years ago by four local mothers, which led to the formation of Mum's Guide to Harpenden (www.mumsguideto.co.uk/harpenden).

After meeting up at a 'Monkey Music' class – designed to introduce toddlers to the enjoyment of music – Katie Fenner, Alison Fox, Carol Rule and Angela Woodhead (left to right in photo) between them realised there was scope for a business to provide information for families about what was going on in the Harpenden area, covering everything from children's

activities, health and education, party-providers and other events.

Four years on and Mum's Guide to Harpenden is thriving. Its success can be measured by the many thousand 'hits' enjoyed by its website and the equally impressive number of social media followers. In recent months they have added a variety of different pages to the site including trades, interests and hobbies for parents, as well as private dining and catering.



The Harpenden Society, says chairman Chris Marsden, is pleased that Mum's Guide to Harpenden is supporting the society by promoting its activities to families in the area via its newsletter, website and social media, in the hope that parents might be encouraged to take an interest in the work of the society and perhaps become members, helping to ensure its continuing work in keeping the town an attractive place to live, through to the next generation.

Did You Know?

From Harpenden's history

A refurbished landmark

Despite its recent overall – and controversial – refurbishment as a ‘gastro pub’, the **Harpenden Arms**, on the southern corner of the High Street and Station Road, remains one of the town's most recognisable and long-established landmarks.

Built in 1870, two years after the arrival of the Midland Railway, on a site formerly occupied by some dilapidated cottages, it opened as the **Railway Hotel**, under the ownership of one James Mardall. The following year he bought Harpenden's Peacock brewery, one of two breweries situated close to each other in the High Street, on sites occupied today by High Street Methodist Church and W H Smith.

In architectural terms the hotel – worthy of that description at the time in offering accommodation – is a ‘brick and stucco’ building with ‘classical pilasters and other ornamentation’, together with a ‘brick cornice and hipped slate roof’.

With its associated livery stables in Stakers Lane (renamed Station Road in 1892), the hotel, under a landlord with the unusual name Mavor, was described in the 1890 Kelly's Directory as ‘A family and commercial hotel and posting house. Balls, wedding breakfasts etc well catered for’. Horses from the livery stable were hired out for hunting and hacking, for weddings and even for hauling the village fire engine.

In the 1920s, local builder Jarvis built an extension. The **Railway Hotel** is not to be confused with the **Railway Inn** (most recently renamed ‘**Gautier Bistro at the Amble Inn**’) a mile and a half away, which served Harpenden East station on the Dunstable to Hatfield Great Northern (latterly LNER) line.

Acknowledgement: the website of Harpenden Local History Society



Top: Harpenden Arms at the turn of the 20th Century and Above: how it looked before the latest controversial ‘refurbishment’. Below: Newly refurbished.



Cottages 'on the waste', before James Mardall built the Railway Hotel in 1870/71. LHS archives.

‘SADC should read letter from Minister’ – CPRE

Local authorities, necessarily including St Albans District Council (SADC), who propose sacrificing Green Belt land for building, should, says the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE), read a letter from Brandon Lewis, the government's Minister of State for Housing and Planning.

It was written by the Minister in response to ‘the large number of letters’ received from UK residents by the Department for Communities and Local Government, about housing provision and the need to protect rural areas. Clarifying the government's stance, Mr Lewis reiterates that ‘planning rules stipulate that inappropriate development may be allowed only where very special circumstances exist’.

He adds that ‘Green Belt boundaries should be adjusted only...with the support of local people. That last point, as the Herts Advertiser reminded its readers on July 14, holds particular significance for St Albans District, where 74% of those responding to SADC's Strategic Local Plan consultation in 2014, averred that ‘special’ or ‘exceptional’ circumstances ‘do not exist’.

Supporting their view, the Minister says ‘we have been repeatedly clear that demand for housing alone will not change Green Belt boundaries’.

EDITOR'S VIEW

Alan Bunting

Opening a new chapter...

Many people in Harpenden were dismayed some five years ago when the town's only independent bookshop, Bookstack in Bowers Parade, closed its doors. Though relatively few of us would describe ourselves as bibliophiles – defined as those who collect or are fond of books – most of us enjoy a 'good read' and have shelves of favourite volumes.

Reasons given for Bookstack's demise included the seemingly unstoppable growth of on-line retailing, most obviously by that fearsome behemoth Amazon, which made it possible, without moving from your computer screen, to purchase a book and have it delivered to your door, often by the following day. Whereas in a traditional bookshop, it had to be ordered from a publisher or wholesaler, followed by an indeterminate wait for it to be ready for collection.

Adding insult to injury for those small book retailers was the advent of the e-book, exemplified by Amazon's Kindle, enabling a book to be read on the screen of an easily portable electronic device. It is estimated that over 600 independent bookshops across the UK closed in the last decade.

But the e-book revolution seems now to have run out of steam, and traditional bookshops are fighting back. The battle has been, and continues to be, led by the Waterstones chain, notwithstanding the fact that its branch in George Street, Luton, closed three or four years ago.

Waterstones' established bookstores, like those in St Peter's Street, St Albans and the Galleria at Hatfield, are large outlets holding many thousands of titles, giving customers an extensive browsing choice. As a large company it is able to negotiate sufficiently attractive supply agreements with book publishers to match, in many instances, the likes of Amazon on

price competitiveness and availability.

All of which has allowed Waterstones to embark on a new marketing venture, opening three smaller shops in selected town sites – including Harpenden Books, which opened in April at 48 High Street, prominently located opposite Sainsbury's on the edge of Church Green.

Its manager Ines Freitas says the venture is proving an unqualified success. 'Footfall' – the retailer term for numbers coming through the door – is well up to expectations. She further explains that Waterstones' decision to sublimate its corporate brand name, in favour of what is a local business title, was part of a conscious effort to integrate the bookshop more closely with the Harpenden community.

As part of that process, some 15 book-reading groups in and around the town have registered with Harpenden Books, to receive regular information about newly-published titles – as many as 150 a week on fiction alone. Members of those book groups also enjoy a 10% discount on purchases.

Walking into the shop, one is immediately aware of the imaginative way the books are displayed, mainly 'front cover outwards', conducive to hassle-free browsing, helped by strategic lighting. Parents, whether accompanied by their offspring or not, are drawn to the bright and colourful childrens book section occupying the rear half of the ground floor.

Aficionados of science fiction, poetry, natural history and other specialist subjects are catered for by an extensive selection of books on the first floor.

Harpenden Books' arrival is a refreshing rebuttal of the often-heard observation that every premises in the High Street and Station Road is becoming a women's fashion outlet, an estate agent's or a place to eat or drink coffee.



Above: Harpenden Books manager Ines Freitas Below: Books are displayed in an imaginative and eye-catching way.



Harpenden House Hotel



Some two years after Harpenden's last remaining large hotel regrettably closed its doors, the purchaser of the property, Fairview New Homes Ltd, put in a planning application in October 2014 to demolish Harpenden House Hotel's existing outbuildings and create 35 new 'dwellings' on the site. The proposal included converting Welcombe House, the original Georgian Grade II* listed building, into five apartments.

Unsurprisingly, it attracted much criticism, not least from the Harpenden Society, largely due to the scale and height of some of the proposed blocks of flats and the inclusion of yet more large detached houses for the town. Fairview subsequently withdrew the application in February 2015.

But the company submitted a revised 37-dwelling scheme in December 2015, comprising smaller two- and three-bedroom terraced houses, together with a new block of six flats at the rear of the site, though with the proposal for Welcombe House unchanged. However this second application was also withdrawn last February, though resubmitted in March, with some changes to the position of the boundaries. The consultation period has now ended and, as the application has been 'called in' (local authority planning jargon) by one SADC councillor, it will go before the full planning committee for consideration, at a date – at the time of writing – yet to be announced.

It is the view of the Harpenden Society that the revised scheme is still not of sufficient merit or architectural detailing for such an important and prominent position fronting Harpenden Common. The society has accordingly called for the application to be withdrawn or refused, so that a fresh application can be prepared that clearly illustrates the detailing of the elevations and window configuration. A further concern is that, as proposed, the development would restrict the visibility of historic Welcombe House from across the Common.

The Society is hoping that its comments, and those made by other concerned parties, will help to ensure that the eventual development will be

worthy of its importance within the landscape of the town for many years to come.



It is proposed that Welcombe House, a Georgian Grade II listed building, be converted into five apartments.*



Please send comments on this article or any other issues raised in this edition to the editor: Alan Bunting
editor@harpendensociety.org.
Sub-editor Harry Downie
Visit the Society's website –
www.harpendensociety.org

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