



SHOULD WE TAKE TO THE HUSTINGS?

Perhaps it was the fact that 2015 celebrates the 900th anniversary of Magna Carta that stirred the democratic impulse. A very serious discussion took place at the January committee meeting which arose out of the frustration felt that local district politicians and planning officers refuse to acknowledge the flaws and errors, both practical and legal, in the Strategic District Plan that imperils the sustainability of Harpenden. The disregard of the rationally measured advice of The Society, the Harpenden Green Belt Association and other citizens and the refusal to consider any amendment to the plan has led The Society's committee to believe that the whole business is driven by political rather than civic motivation



Several voices urged that Chris Marsden, as Chairman of The Society, should actually stand as a candidate for the Hitchin and Harpenden Constituency at the coming general election on a 'Responsible Housing Development' ticket. There were even offers of financial help. The argument was pressed that the town's civic society, charged by its legal purpose to defend and enhance the social and environmental life of the town, could not lightly sit by when, in its view, the town was being subjected to maladministration fuelled by political expediency.

The debate was composed and pragmatic. The taking of such an action, it was felt might be regarded as close to an infringement of a charity's duty to evade engagement with party politics and the logistics and expense were also considerations, as was the difficulty for a single issue fringe candidate of judging what might be viewed as a success by measure of votes cast. **In the end, and with some reluctance, the committee agreed not to make so unprecedented a move** but instead assented to a major campaign within the ambit of the election to raise this significant issue with all candidates, inclusive of an invitation to a public meeting that would scrutinise their attitude to so synthetic, dangerous and apparently untouchable a building scheme regardless of the infrastructural shortfall. The message would be to withhold support from any candidate willing to back this wilful and negligent programme.

Nonetheless, it was a dramatic moment. It is rare that a civic society should feel its location so beleaguered that it would even consider so radical a step.

**General Election
May 2015**

**Vote
Responsible
Housing
Development
Party**

The Harpenden in Question

being a series of editorial commentaries on important Harpenden issues that should challenge thought and encourage inquiry and action.

16. Lighten our darkness...or purify our pavements



You probably saw the paradoxical announcement from the county council that it was going to 'update' street lighting and make it darker between 11.00 p.m and 6.00 a.m by a factor of 25%. Despite the claims that much money is saved by switching off street lights, recent research by the Road Research Laboratory begs to differ. There is a demonstrable correlation between night accidents and street lighting. At 64 sites where street lighting was improved there was an average 30% reduction in night accidents and 45% reduction in accidents involving personal injury. Cost-benefit accident savings show annual savings greater than the cost of energy consumed. A pilot project in Worcestershire, admittedly over a small area, where two out of three street lights were extinguished after midnight, has witnessed a definite rise in offences where previously the crime-rate had been negligible.

Let me say at once that I recognise the need to make savings not so much in money as in energy pollution – but, at the same time, I strongly believe that there should be a trade-off by way of safety. Four times now I have personally fallen foul of walking the streets in Harpenden's post-midnight blackness and, when all is said and done, twelve o'clock is not so very debauched a time to be returning from the theatre or some other event, say, in London. The army guardroom, when checking in soldiers who had been out for the evening, used to enter the abbreviation S.P.D after their names, were it merited. It meant 'Sober and Properly Dressed'. On all four occasions I was S.P.D, honestly. Fortunately, I



escaped with only slight injuries each time. These were very gloomy moonless nights and what I did was walk into cars parked on the pavement.

I think it reasonable to ask that, if we are to have a black-out, then the pavements should be free of obstruction. The charity 'Living Streets' nobly campaigns for a total ban on pavement parking and advises people to canvas their local authority accordingly. The SADC parking office, when last I approached it, claimed to be neither instructed nor resourced to act. The legal situation is shadowy although the 1835 Highways Act and Rule 244 of the Highway Code would appear to cover the case. Nor am I being so obsessed as to object to temporary parking on pavements for visits or calls in daylight.

Let us, however, consider the practical proposition of the car owners who believe they somehow have the right permanently to keep a private possession on a public thoroughfare. It is bad enough when people colonise a stretch of the public highway as if it were their own and locate their private possession thereon but at least they are only inconveniencing other motor car drivers. It is the private decision to occupy part of the public footpath on a permanent basis that needs addressing from the pedestrian viewpoint.

It is a noxious phenomenon that has grown gradually and insidiously over many years, self-evidently relating to the rise in car ownership. In 2013 there were 34.5m registered vehicles in the UK, 28.7m or 83% of which were cars, something of an advance from the 2m of 1948. Somewhere along the line the convention, pleasingly inherited from the days of horses and carriages, that private vehicles should be privately housed has been abandoned. Harpenden has some 12,500 houses and some 22,500 vehicles. The overspill is obvious.

Yet there would be uproar if we decided to plant others of our possessions on the footpath. A lockable fridge freezer; a rabbit hutch; a tool shed, all on wheels; most likely of all, a couple of wheelie-bins; why bother dragging them backwards and forwards every week?

The authorities, whether it be council or police or both, should, in principle, return the pavements to the pedestrians. If not, the least they could do is switch the lights both up and back on and keep us safe. A forlorn hope for, as one transport commentator recently and sorrowfully pronounced, 'in the struggle for the streets the pedestrians lost.'

Eric Midwinter

Housey Housey

The Editor's enthusiasm in the last issue for a proposed national programme of modern 'garden cities' twinned with existing towns prompted a few responses, some of them not terribly complimentary, although one correspondent was sufficiently delighted as to dispatch immediately a copy of the article to our local MP. Meanwhile, the battle to save the sustainability of the town from over-building continues.

One point not perhaps emphasised enough is a certain innocence among the powers-that-be about the playing of the housing game. Of the 436 dwellings that will, on average, be built each year in the St Albans District Council area, 57 or 13%, will be available for net inward migration, that is for the 142 people who will arrive outnumbering those who leave. The rest are to cater for 'natural growth', that is the normal rise in population within the district. These figures have been obtained directly from the SADC Planning and Control office and we are grateful for its help.

Two points. First, paragraph 2.27 of the Independent Assessment of Housing Needs and Strategic Housing Market Assessment, the basis for the Council's calculations, suggests, from council tax records, that those 'recorded as 'within' is massively outweighed by those recorded as 'outside' to an average ratio of 10:1...and strongly suggest that 'new-build schemes are driving in-migration to the area rather than meeting the needs of local residents'. That underlining was used by the author of the report, who goes on to say that 'this conclusion is supported by the views of estate agents', who report that most of these are from the London area. That seems to laugh in the face of the tiny 13% expected over the next twenty years.

Second, how do the St Albans Council propose to police this implied rationing system of 83% of new dwellings for 'within' natural growth' and 13% for 'outside' net migration? As the Harpenden Society News has argued hitherto, the housing needs assessment confuses cause and effect; if you build 436 houses people will come and buy them; if you don't, they will go elsewhere - and the idea that in a free-for-all housing market the authorities are able to dictate otherwise is pie in the sky. This particular game of 'housey housey' is like boxing before the application of the Queensberry Rules in 1867.



Will the provision of affordable housing, about which saintly murmurs are frequently vouchsafed, have much effect? Unlikely. In the year to April 2015 only 42,000 'affordable' homes will have been built in the UK, the lowest for some time. Indeed, reports claim that by 2018 there will be a million fewer such dwellings than in 1980. One reason for this is a somewhat opaque aspect of the new planning regulation known as the 'financial viability test'. One description says 'house-builders, claiming commercial confidentiality...obscure the financial modelling' in order to suggest the scheme would be unworkable if the required affordable housing quota was fulfilled. The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, who have done much analysis of the situation, argue that the top ten builders, who control enough land to build 480,000 homes, will have made a profit of £2.1bn in 2014, 34% more than in 2013 and a remarkable recovery from the critical years of the financial crash. However, the signs of an easement in the direction of the kind of housing that would enable the younger generation and lower paid workers to buy into the high-rolling housing market remain very limited. Recent alterations in the regulations suggest that the avoidance of building affordable housing may have been further eased.

The evidence suggests that the estate agents are right. Build houses and people from the London area will be able to pay high prices to buy them.



Memos to Members

Towards the Awards

A last chance to make your nomination for The Society's Plaque, Certificate of Merit or Letter of Recommendation for new building developments or facilities in Harpenden.

Please email awards@harpendsociety.org or post to Penny Ayres, Kinsbourne House, Kinsbourne Green, Harpenden, AL5 3PE, as soon as possible.

Apparently it has not been the most fruitful year for nominations so your late candidate could be the sweetly fortunate as well as the ripely deserving one



Above: Last year's presentation of The Society's Plaque to Harpenden Common Golf Club

Crime marches on... if we are not careful



...and Alan Jackson, The Society's Public Order Working Group Convenor, provides another series of anti-crime pointers, beginning with a couple that arise from our delight in technology.

'Ransomware', while not yet viral, is increasing in intensity. Scammers disable your computer and demand a ransom to restore access, not that they always can or do even if you pay. Sometimes they shame you by threatening to reveal you use illicit material, claiming they come from a law enforcement agency. Keep your security software updated.

Then there are those missed calls with numbers beginning 070 or 076; you are asked to call back and

you find you have been charged at a high premium rate. Report such scams to the premium rate regulator, Phonepay Plus on 0800 500 212

Back in the old-fashioned arena of crime with a human presence, if alarmingly so, an ex-offender kindly, and doubtless to the dismay of his fellow burglars, advises us thus: any anti-burglary device is likely to be a reasonable deterrent, keep your valuables in the bathroom, as no self-respecting burglar looks there (and it is unlikely that any such will be reading this newsletter and learn what he or she is missing) and don't confront a burglar in your home; go into a room with a window overlooking the street and shout through the window loudly; apparently burglars hate such noisy intrusion to their craft.

Nowadays mobile phones are awash with private data; hence they are additionally tempting to the thief. You may need a tracking device to locate your stolen phone. For advice: <http://police.uk/crime-prevention-advice/protecting-your-mobile-phone>

Finally, and again on the human front, have no truck with those door-to-door salesmen with a sob-story about being unemployed, just come out of prison, on probation, just left the army or whatever. Few, we are advised, are genuine; most are professional salesmen dropped into the area for a spell to see how much they can sell - and some may be using their sympathy engaging guise en route to distraction theft.

STOP PRESS

Further to our front page story about a public meeting for all the local candidates in the forthcoming general election we are pleased to announce that this will be:

8.00 p.m. on Tuesday 21 April in the conference centre at Rothamsted Research

**'Vision for Harpenden
Housing, schools, health & wellbeing,
roads, parking, water, sewage and
sustainability'**

Rachel Burgin, Labour

Peter Lilley MP, Conservative

Pauline Pearce, Liberal/Democrats

John Stocker, UKIP

Richard Wise, Green Party

Watch out on The Society's website and for email messages from The Society for further details.

James Marshall House Development - Projections and objections

At the pre Christmas public meeting on 11 December 2014, after the mulled wine and hot mince pies had been voraciously enjoyed, we had the chance to hear about and discuss the plans for James Marshall House. Architect Tim Riley, who gave the presentation has provided a summary of the 'Pegasus' project.

The Proposal

The proposals are for a retirement living development consisting of 38 apartments, communal & care facilities, a Seniors Club and a public café on the site of the former James Marshall House. Currently it is a backland site which houses a derelict building that has been empty for 14 years and is attracting antisocial behaviour.

The proposals consist of three buildings in a landscape setting in response to the mature landscape Rothamsted Park. The form of the buildings is inspired by the rich character of the Arts & Crafts buildings along Leyton Road and by bringing the Park and Leyton Road together we can enhance both conditions.

By integrating the facilities as much as possible with the Harpenden Seniors Club the development can encourage social interaction with the wider community. To this end the Seniors Club is located adjacent to the park where we can positively transform an otherwise dark part of the park with much needed community facilities.

The Controversy

These proposals have excited much attention and indeed controversy. The Harpenden Society's position has been made quite clear in several public statements by our chairman, Chris Marsden. The gist of this is as follows:

The Harpenden Society Committee in good faith takes a view on development issues in the Town, both positive and negative. In this case the committee had received a presentation in the Summer on preliminary plans for the Pegasus development, which included our much sought after provision for a cafe beside the Park, including toilet and community facilities. We liked in

general terms what we saw. We also were informed that the Harpenden Seniors Club, the main users of the old building, were satisfied with the new community facilities being proposed. Indeed they welcomed the proposed wider community involvement. Some months later we were informed that Pegasus were ready to go public with a more detailed plan and we felt that it would make an excellent subject for our December public meeting. We had intended that this presentation would be accompanied by one detailing the Council's plans for other developments in Rothamsted Park concerning, among other things, the Children's playground, but unfortunately this was cancelled at the last minute. The Pegasus presentation was duly made and followed by a lively question session.

The Society noted the objections, particularly on grounds of the height of the building, which we believe was the main reason the Council subsequently rejected the proposal. At the end of the public meeting in a show of hands regarding the height of the building 40 people were in favour and 17 against. Nevertheless we accept the Council's decision and now await a revised proposal.

With regard to the alleged conflict of interest caused by the coincidence of the lead architect for Pegasus, Tim Riley, also being on our committee, we were aware of how this might be perceived but feel we acted honourably. Our support for the initial plan and agreement to hold a public meeting on the issue was taken by the committee without our architect member taking part in the decision. We were delighted when he originally joined the committee in November 2011 as part of our initiative to attract younger members onto our committee. His association with Pegasus Life began in July 2013. He was the inspiration behind our original 'cafe in the park' campaign in 2012, the demand for which emerged strongly from our meetings with young parents. He is and remains a valued member of our committee and has acted with the utmost discretion in balancing his committee membership with his professional role.



Lend a hand...

'Lend a Hand on Land' was one of the many rhyming and other tongue-tickling injunctions issued during World War II to exhort the civilian population to greater efforts. The cause may not be so critical nor the tasks so crucial, but The Harpenden Society is in need of a few more hands. Last year we asked for money for a fighting fund, particularly to help in our campaigns to have the Red House refurbished and the sustainability of the town defended from promiscuous over-building. You gave generously and in the region of £2,000 was quickly raised. Thank you very much. It will be gainfully utilised.



Now, as we look to our spring annual general meeting and the advent of a new year the call is for voluntary help of a more hands-on kind. The Society has become more and more involved in the actual business of the town's civic activities – and this can become quite time-consuming. The most overt example is the group of dedicated volunteers who guarantee that the library is open on Wednesday afternoon and early evening. But there are other instances – the Red House campaign; the schools competition, the new 'arts hub' project, the varied efforts to galvanise the high street into a higher tempo, the work involved in The Harpenden Society Annual Awards process, the strenuous efforts to protect Harpenden and its green belt from building exploitation...and there is much more that could be achieved with more hands being loaned.

Thus there is quite a range from getting quite heavily involved to being one of a 'virtual' advisory team...so: 'lend a hand'.

Contact The Society's Secretary, Bob Fletcher:
membership@harpendsociety.org

Wellness not illness

The Harpenden Society's declared policy of basing its public meetings on issues close to Harpenden He(a)rts scored another brownie point on 29 January when another all-ticket full house listened attentively to a first-rate NHS presentation.

David Radbourne of the Herts Valley Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) and Dr Jill Bartlett, GP Locality chair St Albans and Harpenden presented the structure of the ongoing review of services. David Radbourne is Programme Director of the West Herts Strategic Review which aims to find how well current health and social needs are met, what opportunities exist to meet future needs, how services should be accordingly configured and what would be the best methods of delivering them.



Above: From L2R; David Law Chief Executive, the Herts Community NHS Trust, Harpenden Town Mayor Cllr Mary Maynard, David Radbourne, the Herts Valley Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG); Dr Jill Bartlett, GP Locality chair St Albans and Harpenden, Chris Marsden Chair of The Harpenden Society.

As well as joining intently in the discussion, those present were asked to complete a questionnaire relating to the Your Care, Your Future programme. There was a warm response for David Law, Chief Executive of the of Herts Community NHS Trust. He reiterated the Trust's belief in the plan to redevelop the Harpenden Memorial Hospital site as a Health and Wellness Campus and hoped that it would be up and running in 2018, in spite of the several hurdles that had to be surmounted.

David Law has been a sympathetic and courteous attendee at meetings of the Red House Forum, the ginger group established by The Harpenden Society. Both Davids, Radbourne and Law were encouraged by the discussion, particularly in terms of the emphasis placed by several speakers on the value of preventative and wellness, advice and the priority that should be given to local community involvement and voluntary support.

Please send comments on any issue raised in this edition to the editor:

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