



## Annual Report 2016/2017

### Looking back - Looking forward

Being a brief account for the Annual General Meeting of  
The Society's activities during the year 2015/2016 –  
with a glance ahead to the coming year

## The Harpenden Society's last six years

*Chris Marsden looks back on his six years as Society chairman*

**'You chair things, Chris, so why don't you become chairman of the Harpenden Society' was the gist of what Richard Thomas, bless his memory, said to me around the time of our new year's party in 2010/11.** At the same time he was persuading Eric Midwinter that he was an ideal candidate to take over the editorship of the Society's newsletter. Shortly after that Eric and I were invited to meet committee members at Richard's house 'to have a chat about the work of the Society'.

However, it was immediately clear that they all expected me to be their next chairman, despite the fact that I knew very little about the Society at the time and had no experience of its committee and also that Eric was to join the committee as editor.

'You won't change anything, will you' was the general plea and I agreed to spend my first 6 months fulfilling Eric's headline in the May 2011 newsletter, 'ASK THEN ACT'. However, it soon became clear from the many one on one interviews I undertook that changes were needed. The Society had always done a good job as a planning watchdog and making awards for improvements to the look of the town.

It had also arranged speaker meetings on a wide range of interesting topics. However it needed to modernise both in its overall remit and the way it went about things. We asked ourselves what was the purpose of a civic society and how did that differ from the role of the Town Council.

### Role of the Society

Firstly we agreed that our job was to support Harpenden as a whole and not just the interests of our members. Membership was a commitment to supporting Harpenden not a payment in return for specific benefits. We decided that our remit should embrace everything that contributed to the overall wellbeing of the Town and the people who lived in it.

Hence, after consultations, we created seven working groups covering respectively environmental issues, education and leisure, health and wellbeing, transport, economic activity, public order (now renamed 'community safety'), and the built environment (including planning issues). Each area of activity was to be led by a committee member who was encouraged to recruit interested Harpenden residents to create a 'virtual' support group.

Apart from the newsletter, communication between committee members and with the membership generally was to be by email. Group leaders were asked to present written reports of activities by email before each meeting so that only issues requiring discussion and decisions were given meeting time. Committee meetings were reduced to two monthly and limited, as far as possible, to 2 hours each.

Our relationship with the Town Council is one of critical friend. Some councillors were naturally suspicious of our attempts to raise the Society's profile at first, but I like to think that the relationship is now one of mutual respect. Regular meetings with the Mayor and other leading councillors together with the Town Clerk have led to useful exchange of information and constructive dialogue.



*Town mayor Nicola Linacre makes the 2016 Summer Carnival draw, assisted by outgoing Society chairman Chris Marsden.*

# The Harpenden Society's last six years continued...

Unlike the Council our committee, although elected, is not democratic in the true sense and we have no formal power. The Town Council has a significant, if limited, budget and spends it on local services and projects. Its membership overlaps with both the District and County Councils, which provide the bulk of the services and project funding that affect Harpenden.

In addition to determining its own spending, the Town Council's job is also to exert influence on the spending of the District and County councils. It is the job of the Town's non-party political civic society independently to raise issues and press for changes with all tiers of local government that affect Harpenden. With a membership support of about 1000, the collective experience and expertise of our committee and its working groups over the last six years have become an influential civic voice in the Town and claim the right to encourage and lobby for improvements in the Town's amenities and services and against things we regard as harmful.

## Our achievements over the last six years

As so much of what we do is attempting to influence others and not seeking credit for ourselves, others will be better judges of this.

### Public meetings

It is fair to say that we have become the main convenor of public meetings in the Town in which people in leadership positions on important issues facing Harpenden are invited to speak and respond to the questions and views of residents. Over the years topics have ranged across all those covered by our working groups and we have regularly filled Park Hall with an audience of 100.

Most notably have been two recent meetings when respectively representatives of Harpenden sports and arts and leisure clubs and societies talked about what they did, the issues they faced and their hopes for the new facilities being planned for Rothamsted Park. Their points and those raised from the floor were particularly helpful in advising the early creative planning process for the development and identifying key stakeholders.

In 2015 we held a similar meeting for representatives of many of the Town's voluntary organisations and this resulted in the creation of the 'Volunteer for Harpenden' (V4H) project, which has been led jointly by the Society and the Harpenden Trust. Earlier on we held meetings on the redevelopment of the Red House site, led by speakers from the Herts NHS Trust, which again were instrumental in providing evidence of the strong support in the Town for a new health and wellbeing facility and what we would like included in it.

Perhaps our most remarkable achievement in convening meetings, however, were the two held on the topic of the Strategic Local Plan and the one-off hustings event at the time of the general election, each of which attracted audiences of over 200.

## Strategic Local Plan

In addition to the public meetings, a lot of effort has been committed to responding to the consultation on the SLP. An important motivating factor behind so much of our input on this has been the over-arching threat of Harpenden being forced to expand beyond that with which its infrastructure can cope. This ongoing work is a key example of our 'watchdog' role.



**VOLUNTEER FOR  
HARPENDEN**  
working together



# The Harpenden Society's last six years continued...

## Library Express

There are also a number of specific achievements of which we are proud. When we heard that the new library was to be located in the High Street, we were concerned that it was to be closed completely on Wednesday afternoons. Not only was this a convenient time for many library users, its closure then would also reduce footfall for other businesses in the Town.

So we met with the library staff and after several most constructive meetings agreed that the Society would provide volunteers to staff the Library Express section from 1 to 7 pm each Wednesday. This has proved so successful that not only have usage figures easily matched those on other days but our example has led to similar schemes elsewhere.

## The Red House campaign

Although we are still waiting patiently for the new health and wellbeing development on the old Red House site, we are assured it will be up and running in the next couple of years. We know from what we have been told, that without the untiring work of the Red House Forum which the Society has jointly led from the beginning, this new facility would probably not have been forthcoming.

## Cafe in the park

At least five years ago we began a campaign for a community, coffee and toilet facility in Rothamsted Park. We will never know how much influence this had, but we are delighted with both the facilities being offered by the redevelopment of the old James Marshall site and the proposed new sports, arts and leisure centre.

## The evolving High Street

Despite the growing trend to on-line shopping most Harpenden retailers have maintained their presence on the High Street. Those who have closed or moved away have been replaced by growth sector businesses: men's hairdressing, beauty/health and cafes/fast food. Our objective of keeping a 'Thriving High Street' has been helped with the creation of several marketing campaigns involving many of the local retailers and support from the Town Council. 2017 promises to be a tough year with increased business rates to come in April. Our continued involvement, we hope, will help keep the High Street thriving.

## Other achievements

Three successful schools competitions have been held, which attracted considerable interest from schools, children and parents. Regular topical information and advice on community safety has been provided in both the newsletter and the website. Finally, credit is due to those who have worked hard, as editors and contributors, to make our newsletter an informative, challenging and entertaining 'must read' journal and our website, which is now a valuable source of information about Harpenden.

It has been a privilege to chair the Harpenden Society over the last 6 years. I would like to thank all the officers, committee members and helpers, who have been such a pleasure to work with. Thanks also to our membership for their vital continued support.

**Finally I would like to thank our Town Councillors and officers for the work they do on behalf of Harpenden and wish them and the Harpenden Society all strength and determination in maintaining and developing Harpenden as a wonderful place to live and work.**



## Health and Welfare

During the year John Harris, a member of the Hertfordshire Community Trust (HCT) Red House Project Group, took over responsibility for the Society's Health and Welfare group from Eric Midwinter – who continues to co-chair the Red House Forum.

The main focus for the group has been the future of the Red House, through close involvement with the Red House Forum 'ginger group', established about six years ago. An account of the current position on the Red House development, which follows, has been produced by John on behalf of the HCT Project Group which is driving the development. An Outline Strategic Case for the development of the new Health and Wellbeing Hub has been agreed by HCT, and an Outline Business Case (OBC) is being prepared. It is due to be presented to the HCT Board in March. Meanwhile architects have been appointed to advise on the property transactions and design.

In preparing the OBC, the Trust has actively sought to establish the detailed requirements of service providers, including local GPs, Health Authority Commissioners and local voluntary organisations. HCT has responsibility for some 60 properties across Hertfordshire and is under pressure from NHS Estates to identify any surplus land and buildings which could be sold, although the Secretary of State has the power to take 50% of any monetary gain from such sales.



It is hoped that this will not apply to a sale of land and buildings on the Red House site, as the whole of the proceeds are required to fund the new health and wellbeing facilities in the refurbished **Stewarts building** (above). These facilities will include a wide range of diagnostic and treatment services, a children's centre and scope for the provision of voluntary support.

Other work of the Health and Welfare Group during 2016 has included providing feedback on NHS Sustainability and Transformation Plans (STPs) aimed at bringing together all the health providers 'within county areas'.

Somewhat surprisingly, the draft of the Bedfordshire, Luton & Milton Keynes (BLMK) STP makes no mention of Luton & Dunstable (L&D) Hospital as a vital and long-standing service provider for the substantial population of around 50,000 in Harpenden and surrounding villages, across the county boundary in Hertfordshire.

Accordingly, the Society's Health and Welfare group has responded to the BLMK plan, requesting assurance that arbitrary definition of STP county areas will have no negative impact on the currently excellent health services provided for those living in and around Harpenden at L&D Hospital. In response the Society received assurances from hospital chairman Simon Linnet – scheduled guest speaker at the Harpenden Society's AGM in April – that it would continue to serve patients from the wider Harpenden area.

John Harris

## Built Environment

It has been a busy year monitoring planning applications, where necessary attending meetings and exhibitions related to local development proposals.

In instances where it was thought appropriate by the committee, the Society has submitted comments, sometimes favourable and sometimes critical. Those observations, with accompanying recommendations where relevant, necessarily carry more weight than would be given to those from individual residents. Most importantly, during 2016, we have made detailed comments on St Albans District Council's Strategic Local Plan (SLP) and its associated District Local Plan, with attendance at the SLP Inquiry.

Two major developments in the last year – Park House, on the former James Marshall House site adjoining Rothamsted Park, and at the **Harpenden House Hotel** (below) location – have, from the earliest stages, been subjects of Harpenden Society comment submissions. These were followed by significant amendments to the original plans, in both cases easing the visual impact of the proposed buildings.



The Society's more general concerns about planning applications remain the over-development of sites in the town, particularly the demolition of perfectly sound houses which are replaced by seven- or eight-bedroom 'mansions', that are then typically occupied by just two or three people. Equally undesirable are those instances of several buildings being crammed into a small plot, despite the loss of amenity suffered by neighbours. The Society has been asked to support objections by neighbours in some cases.



The seemingly endless proliferation of restaurants opening in Harpenden, often at the cost of small retailers closing down, is another area of concern. Likewise the change of use of public houses to residential. The loss of the Three Horseshoes in its delightfully rural setting at East Common and of the former Harrow pub (latterly **Charlie's** - above) at Kinsbourne Green to residential are particularly regrettable. In the latter case the site lies across the county boundary in Bedfordshire, so local Harpenden planning requirements could, for the developers, be conveniently disregarded.

Mike & Pauline Waddilove and John Lowe



## Environment

The Environment Group continues to maintain its wide remit. It represents the Society, and indeed the interests of local residents on the committee of **LADACAN**, with its ongoing concerns about the impact of aircraft movements into and out of Luton Airport on 'Harpenden's doorstep', from air pollution as well as the more obvious noise aspect.

In contrast, but of no less concern to many people in the town, the group seeks to ensure that our local authorities carry out their civic responsibilities properly in upholding Harpenden's essentially pleasant surroundings. That translates into many mundane – yet vital – matters such as: routinely emptying litter bins before they're full to overflowing; promptly collecting bags of refuse too often left outside retail premises; clearing gutter drains blocked often with a consolidated mixture of leaves and road surface grit.

Though it shouldn't be necessary in a well-ordered community, the Society encourages its members – and others who care about such matters – to report instances of environmental concern to the relevant authority. Though in the case of neglected and therefore unsightly, unoccupied offices or retail premises, responsibility can lie with commercial property companies.



For the record, overflowing litter bins in the town centre (High Street/Leyton Road/Station Road) shopping area, should be brought to the attention of the **Town Council, on 01582 768278**. Meanwhile those in residential streets are the responsibility of **SADC's waste collection/disposal contractor Veolia, reached on 01727 809019** – the same number to which weed-filled or silted up gutters should be reported.



Confusingly, blocked drains, in common with other highway matters, such as potholes and defective street lights, are Herts County Council concerns and are most readily reportable via the HCC website, though they can also be reported by telephone, on **0300 123 4047**, where a reference number is assigned and should be noted for use in any follow-up calls/complaints.

**John Davis**

## Community Safety

Crime levels in Harpenden have remained at remarkably low levels in recent years, at least by national standards, despite the government requirement that Hertfordshire Constabulary has made savings of £40 million over three years, by means of greater sharing of resources with Bedfordshire and Cambridgeshire police forces and more 'low cost' policing through additional use of volunteer Special Constables.

During the same period we have seen the appointment of a Police and Crime Commissioner effectively to replace what was the Hertfordshire Police Authority, and the national decision was made to include 'cybercrime' (which now constitutes over 50% of all recorded offences) in official crime figures.

The nature of what is normally thought of as crime has changed considerably. Preoccupation with ubiquitous crimes such as theft, robbery, burglary and assault remains. But, perhaps understandably and encouragingly, greater attention is now being paid to the wider issues of community safety, from upholding trading standards to protecting the vulnerable elderly from cybercrime. Supporting the victims of crime has become a sharper focus of police work.

Social factors help keep traditional crimes low in Harpenden, though burglars and bag-snatchers, mostly from outside the town, continue to be attracted to our relatively prosperous town. And, in the 'computer age' of the 21st Century, we are as vulnerable to cybercrimes as any community in the country.



More than ever before the Police are asking for our help in solving crimes, stressing the importance of community involvement in policing, notably via Neighbourhood Watch – whose Police Community Support Officer for the Harpenden area is Tom Perrin (phone 01707 806129; email: [tom.perrin@herts.pnn.police.uk](mailto:tom.perrin@herts.pnn.police.uk)) or or visit OWL Watch ([www.owl.co.uk](http://www.owl.co.uk)).

**Alan Jackson**

## Membership

**At the end of 2016 the Society had 587 members compared to 576 a year earlier. Taking into account that most of these are family members, this represents 979 people compared to 960 in the previous year. By the end of January 2017, 462 (79%) have already paid their annual subscriptions for 2017 amounting to £4,420.**

## Transport

At a meeting of the St Albans Bus Users Forum in November, many of the detailed issues raised were concerned more with St Albans than Harpenden. But the forum nevertheless provides us with useful points of contact with representatives of the bus companies and Herts County Council. Lobbying for the continuation of subsidised services for lesser used routes proved unsuccessful.

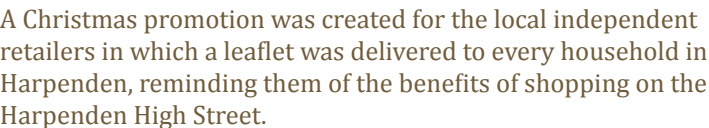
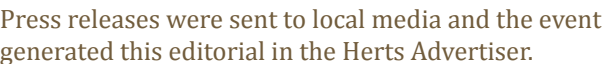
The group continues to maintain a watching brief on changes to rail services, through membership of the Association of Passenger Transport Users (APTU), which continues to monitor the performance of Govia Thameslink and to produce its regular reports on developments including planned changes to the timetable, station staffing and electronic ticketing. It is tempting to say Govia's poor – to put it mildly – operating performance of recent months can only get better. There is some hope for that as its new rolling stock gets settled in.

A response was provided to the Herts Transport Vision 2050 consultation, setting out the HCC estimates of future traffic volumes and other issues throughout the county and the consequent need to reduce reliance on private cars and encourage moves to more sustainable modes of transport.



## Publicity/PR

Posters like the one below for the Society Public Meeting on Jan 26 were installed in shop windows, the Library, the Public Halls and Council notice boards ahead of the event. The event attracted over 80 people and was deemed a great success.





# The Way Ahead for the Harpenden Society

## By Chairman-Designate Phil Waters

**When Alison Steer approached me to see if I was interested in taking a role with the Harpenden Society, I was of course aware of the contribution that the Society has made to the town. However, it is only since I joined the committee in September that I have seen at first hand the extent and quality of the work undertaken by the Society's working groups and committee members.**



The summary by Chris Marsden reflecting on his six years as chairman lists some of the numerous representations made by the Society on behalf of our community and its many achievements. These have been down, in no small measure, to the drive and force of personality of Chris as chairman, but also to the work of the 17-strong committee and to the many members who participate in Society meetings and activities.

Certainly the profile of the Society has grown and a good working relationship forged with Harpenden Town Council. That's not to say everything has gone the Society's way, but that is down to the pressures of issues connected with housing development and congestion, as well as societal changes such as the growth of internet retailing pressures – all issues that have affected many towns, particularly in the south-east of England.

There is no question that the Society has been a force for good while managing to tread that fine line between raising issues on behalf of the community and entering the political fray – the role of our elected politicians. A civic society is not a party political organisation, but nevertheless has to seek to protect and enhance the amenity – in the broadest sense – of its community and promote the ethos and local sense of pride and belonging. Our Society achieves this role, but we mustn't be complacent, especially given the pressures the town is under.

We will have to continue to work hard with the Town Council, St Albans District Council (SADC), the County Council and other bodies (eg the Health Trusts) to draw attention to the issues and seek to bring people together who can reach solutions that maintain and enhance the quality of life in Harpenden.

Looking to the future, the Society's committee has been deliberating on the issues on which we need to focus. Clearly the Society has to continue scrutinising proposals for development and, in doing so, consider how we care for our current town environment, while promoting community safety and economic activity.

**Providing any new development can be done properly and sensitively, without damaging our pleasant public spaces, the factors that deserve priority might be summarised under the following headings:**

- education and school places
- sporting, arts and leisure amenity
- solving congestion and parking
- ensuring that good local health facilities are available.

A town such as Harpenden, with proper education provision for its young people, with its population actively engaged in community sports, arts and leisure pursuits, well provided for by the relevant health bodies, and with its congestion issues and parking under control, will be a good environment in which to live.

This does lead to a number of related questions:



How do we encourage the various education providers to deliver the right number of school places for the town?

How do we engage in the promotion of sporting and arts and leisure amenity and, in doing so, how are the SADC plans to develop a new sports centre and arts hub in Rothamsted Park to be taken forward?

**Continues on back page...**



# The Way Ahead for the Harpenden Society continued...

How we address the growing problems of congestion and parking by encouraging walking, cycling and greater use of public transport?

How do we help persuade the health authorities to provide adequate local provision within the town, notably on the Red House site?



Our working groups promise to be as active as ever in the coming year and beyond. **The Built Environment Group** scrutinising development in the town; **the Environment Group** monitoring litter and other 'civic pride' issues; **the Community Safety Group** liaising with the police and providing crime and anti-social alerts; and **the Economic Group** working with retailers and other local firms to promote the town centre shopping areas and other economic activity in the town.

Our **Transport Group** sponsored the very lively public meeting in January – fully reported in our Spring newsletter – on combatting congestion in the town. Out of that meeting came the suggestion that the **Harpenden Neighbourhood Plan** should become a focus for bringing a range of transport ideas and initiatives together.

In a minor reorganisation of responsibilities, the Society's former **Health and Welfare Group** and the **Education and Leisure Groups** will become a single **Health Group**, focussing particularly on initiatives such as the Red House Health and Wellbeing Centre plans; and a newly-constituted **Arts and Leisure Group** will concentrate on the aforementioned Rothamsted Park proposals, encouraging the establishment of an Arts Forum which would bring arts-related interests of the town together.

Another innovation is the creation of a **Sports Group**, to work with a new Sports Forum – born out of the Harpenden Society's immensely successful sport-focussed meeting last Autumn. (photo above right) It is hoped that it will not only contribute to the Rothamsted Park complex planning, but also promote participation

in sport more generally, given all the associated health and wellbeing issues.



Above. Concept for the new Leisure / Sports Centre in the Park

Finally, and of immense importance, a **new Education Group** has been formed, in which I hope to take a close personal interest. It will not only look at the opportunities for creating much-needed school places, but also promote linkages between all education providers in the area to benefit all residents.

We would very much like to engage many of the talented people in the town – not just Harpenden Society members – in the activities of the groups, as we believe the ideas that can be generated and being presented to councils and other decision makers will add considerably to the quality of life in our community.

At the same time the Society welcomes the decision by the Town Council to develop its **Neighbourhood Plan** which, despite the continuing uncertainties surrounding SADC's Strategic Local Plan, will bring the opportunity for Harpenden to influence, at a practical level, future developments affecting us all, with transport issues perhaps at the forefront.

**From my perspective as chairman-designate, it is clear that interesting times lay ahead for the Harpenden Society and for our town and, although we are all aware of the pressures of continuing housing development, we hope we can contribute to Harpenden remaining a wonderful place in which to live and work.**

Please note that this is your official notice that the 2017 Annual General Meeting of The Harpenden Society will take place as part of it's general meeting to be held at 7.30 for 8.00 pm on Thursday 20 April 2017 at Park Hall, Leyton Road, Harpenden.