



Annual Report 2019/2020

Looking back - Looking forward

Being a brief account for the Annual General Meeting of the Society's activities during the year 2019/2020 – with a glance ahead to the coming year

The chairman reviews an eventful year

As I write, in the wake of the coronavirus outbreak, increasing numbers of our community, including of course Harpenden Society members, are being advised to 'socially isolate'. Accordingly, our AGM and other society meetings are having to be postponed, we hope until some time later in the year.

Luton Airport opposition

For the people of Harpenden the last year has been dominated by a number of key issues. We have faced the unwelcome prospect of a further 80% expansion (in passenger numbers) of Luton Airport. The Society responded in registering on behalf of our members our unequivocal opposition to the London Luton Airports Ltd plans, whose climate change implications in particular have been brought into focus by the latest rejection of Heathrow Airport's third runway proposals.

It seems that a legacy of the Cov-19 outbreak could be a levelling off or even a reduction of air travel globally, so that the business case for Luton's airport expansion may be undermined.



NW Harpenden 'Masterplan'

On another front the Harpenden Society has responded to the invitation from St Albans District Council to contribute our views on what the council terms its 'North-West Harpenden Masterplan', for a 580-home development on over 40 acres of Green Belt agricultural land currently owned by the Legal & General insurance group. Situated alongside the A1081 north of Bloomfield Road, it is one of the first schemes to emerge from SADC's Local Plan (which itself is now again in a state of limbo).

Along with the other local groups invited to participate, we have emphasised the many contentious issues that such a huge housing development would raise, notably with regard to transport infrastructure, especially the seemingly unavoidable creation of greatly worsened traffic congestion on the A1081



It should be added that any go-ahead for the NW Harpenden development is necessarily dependent of the release of such a massive area of Green Belt – something which Hitchin and Harpenden MP Bim Afolami and the LibDem-controlled SADC administration have openly opposed. The Harpenden Society too is in agreement with the long-established government policy that Green Belt land should be sacrificed 'only in exceptional circumstances'.

Hustings organised

The past year saw two national elections and the Society, as a leading non party political organisation, organised very well-attended hustings for both. And in February we held an open meeting where our MP Bim Afolami, after a few opening remarks, faced a mixture of inquisitorial as well as more benign questions from the floor.



NEWSLETTER

Our Spring newsletter is being put on hold, because of the likely problems, under present circumstances, of getting it printed and physically delivered through members' letterboxes.

The chairman reviews an eventful year continued.

Thanks to members

Can I thank members of the committee – mainly leaders of our working groups – for their continuing efforts, especially to Alan Falconer and John Lowe who are standing down after years of service. Also thanks again to Liz Trounce and the team of volunteers that, as a Harpenden Society initiative, support the extended opening hours of the town's library.



Harpenden Cares

A COMMUNITY RESPONSE
TO THE CORONAVIRUS



Addressing virus emergency

To return to the major issue of the day, against the background of the coronavirus emergency, local community groups, naturally including the Harpenden Society as well as the Town Council, have formed an umbrella organisation called **Harpenden Cares**.

Its primary aim is to pull together all the town's disparate volunteer organisations in order to support older and more vulnerable residents, especially those who have followed the recommendation to 'self isolate'. The object is to provide for them a source of reliable information. It a) enables people to request support and assistance, b) provides coronavirus information, while also c) enabling volunteers to offer their

services. The Society is well placed to play its part, given that many of our members are in an older age group.

That is something which helps draw attention to the fact that the Harpenden Society could, perhaps more than ever, benefit from more active membership involvement, not least in our ongoing efforts to attract younger members. So let the creation of Harpenden Cares be a clarion call for membership recruitment. Obviously we hope that our members keep well over the coming weeks and months, and the Society urges everyone to follow the relevant medical advice.

Phil Waters

Secretary's report

It has been a busy and productive twelve months for the Society. Our five well-attended public meetings embraced a diversity of speakers and topics. In January the town's seemingly intractable parking issues were addressed but, perhaps inevitably, no easy solutions emerged. At our April meeting two SADC councillors, only a month alas before the local elections had the effect of them losing their portfolios, fleshed out the plans for Harpenden's new sports and leisure centre complex in Rothamsted Park. The expectation at that time was an opening date for the arts and cultural centre (in the shell of the current sports centre building) of January 2021, though subsequent events have now made that timetable unrealisable.



In May the Society organised a hustings event for the European elections, where candidates from all the main parties summarised their respective manifestos and answered questions from the floor of a packed large Public Hall. It gave a political foretaste of the Society-sponsored Hitchin & Harpenden constituency hustings ahead of December's UK General Election.

After our Summer break, at the September meeting we welcomed the distinguished architect (and St Albans resident) Professor Geraint John to air his perceptions on what is good and not so good in modern architecture, citing a number of examples from Harpenden.

Bob Fletcher

Arts & Leisure

Our over-arching concern during the past year has been the manner in which the new Arts Centre in Rothamsted Park, now due to open during the first half of 2021, will be managed and operated. Public participation in the Cultural Centre's design phase was extensive; the same cannot yet be said of the operational phase.

The new facility was promoted by St Albans District Council (SADC) as an 'Arts and Cultural Centre' for the town. As such it will necessarily differ in character significantly from the existing Public Halls. We believe the move to the new building needs to be seen as much more than the mere transfer of leisure and arts activities from one building to another.



The Society actively initiated a dialogue, covering a range of issues, with SADC and 1Life, the company which manages the Public Halls and will fulfill the same role at the new centre. We were pleased at the extent of their interest and that of others (including Harpenden Town Council) in our initial meeting. We have succeeded in establishing a 'User Group' for the new facility and Harpenden Local History Society has concluded its plans to incorporate its long hoped-for museum in the building, which it has been decided, amid some controversy, shall be called the Eric Morecambe Centre.

We continue to seek assurances – so far not with complete confidence – that those who will manage the Centre will have the competence and experience appropriate not only to running a public entertainment venue but also to constructively encourage the development of the skills and interests of the town's artistic community.

Alan Jackson

Membership

At the last 'count' the Harpenden Society had 915 members, although 23 of those, for whatever reason, did not renew their membership in 2019. They have each received at least two reminders, by phone, email or 'snail mail'. **If, as a reader of this Annual Report, you are amongst that number who have yet to renew, and you would like (as we hope) to remain a Society member – attending our meetings and having our quarterly eight-page newsletter delivered through your letterbox – please renew your subscription (£8 single, £10 couple). Cheques, payable to 'The Harpenden Society', should be sent to the Treasurer at 66 Eastmoor Park, Harpenden AL5 1BW.**

We naturally seek new members and, by way of a minor membership drive, copies of the 2019/20 Winter newsletter, each enclosing a membership application form, were distributed to about 35 'outlets' in central Harpenden and Southdown, notably doctors' surgeries, hairdressers and cafés. It effectively constitutes an additional delivery 'round' we would like to establish – augmenting our members' household newsletter distribution – for which one or more pavement-pounding volunteers is sought.

At each of the Society's public meetings, we always endeavour to attract new members via a prominent display

and information point. It yields mixed results; at the February meeting with MP Bim Afolami, three new members (including Bim) were 'recruited'.

It has been suggested that membership numbers could potentially be boosted by a) leafleting houses which have obviously changed hands relatively recently and b) delivering more complimentary copies of future newsletters to Harpenden schools as a means of making the Society more widely known, to families especially.

Hester Gabbutt



Society Awards

This year (for the year 2019), I am pleased to report that the Awards Group have awarded the prestigious **Harpenden Society Plaque to Fairview 'Prestige' for the Welcombe House** and the associated development.



Also we have awarded a **Certificate of Merit to the Harpenden Cricket Club** for the newly refurbished pavilion which we think enhances the already lovely view of the cricket being played on the common.



We have also awarded three **Letters of Commendation** to (in no particular order) the **Salvation Army** for their new expanded building which has been achieved with care so that the green space in front neatly links in with Leyton Green and it also provides a useful hall for use by the wider Harpenden community; to **Mr Sean Coleman** for the excellent thatching of two cottages overlooking Hatching Green including the rebuilding of the flint wall in front of the cottages; also to the newly expanded **Skye Opticians** building where the building has been joined up with the next door shop to make an attractive modern yet restrained double fronted building.'

Penny Ayres

Built Environment

Harpenden's 'Neighbourhood Plan' (NP), locally supported by a referendum result, purported 'to ensure residents have some control over what development takes place over the next 15 years'. Time will tell how effective (by way of enforcement) the Plan proves to be in ensuring developers abide by its provisions.

Over the past year an overwhelming number of planning applications have been made by Harpenden homeowners wishing to extend or rebuild their properties. The scale of some projects seems inappropriate and detrimental to neighbours' concerns. There has also been a trend for traditional dwellings to be demolished and replaced with what many would consider ultra-modern architectural designs which, in the Harpenden Society's view, are of such radical appearance as to mar the character of the street scene. Regrettably, precedents have been set, making it difficult for any neighbour's (or NP-based) objections to be upheld by SADC's planning decision makers.

Redevelopment by Jarvis of the Pan Autos site in Grove Road, in the face of considerable local opposition to the size and (three storey) height of the building, was finally given planning consent, for 39 flats, albeit on condition that some 'affordable' housing be included, and a financial contribution be made by the developer to a variety of improvement projects nearby.

Fairview Homes' development on the former Harpenden House Hotel site in Southdown Road was completed during 2019. Renovation of the grade II* listed Welcombe House into five spacious and luxurious apartments has been widely approved. The adjacent new-build terrace houses and apartments are in what some consider an unhappy contrast, although the Fairview development as a whole has been awarded the Harpenden Society's Award plaque for 2019.

Plans for the redevelopment by Beechcroft Homes of the former Redclyffe care home in Salisbury Avenue have been rejected twice following objections from adjoining owners as well as being deemed inappropriate for what is a designated conservation area. Meanwhile, proposals for a new care home to be built in Coldharbour Lane on the Chelford Fabrics site have been summarily rejected. The issues surrounding the big 580-home 'North West Harpenden' scheme are dealt with in the chairman's report on page 1.

John Lowe

Transport

Car parking has remained the top priority for the Society's transport group concerns during the 2019/20 year. The Society-organised public meeting early in 2019, held in collaboration with HarPark, the Harpenden 'ginger group', focussed on the parking issue. At a subsequent meeting with the then leader and a senior official of SADC, proposals were put forward, distilled from a HarPark survey of car drivers' – and indeed council tax payers' – immense parking problems in the town.

Notwithstanding the change from Conservative to Liberal Democrat control at SADC, we expect the council – as the governing authority on parking matters – to give due

consideration to those survey results. Harpenden's particular situation is expected to be properly addressed in a 'parking strategy' due later this year, morphing from the existing SADC Car Parking Advisory Panel. The Harpenden Society was also represented at a joint SADC/Herts CC Highways Liaison Meeting where road safety and budget issues, covering footway and tree maintenance in particular were updated. A local initiative saw speed limits of 20 and 40mph introduced in the East Common area.

Concerns about the Thameslink rail service were eased after timetable alterations in May. Meanwhile further service improvements are being sought for Harpenden commuters, with pressure from authorities to augment Midland Main Line stops at Luton and St Albans in order to relieve overcrowding on London commuter trains to and from Harpenden.

During 2019 the Harpenden Hopper hail-and-ride minibus service was increased to provide four runs on five days a week, serving the southern part of the town more comprehensively. Service reliability was also improved with the commissioning of two brand new 16-seat Peugeot buses in place of the initial secondhand time-worn Mercedes vehicles.

Our transport group is meanwhile monitoring the local transport implications of the proposed further expansion of Luton

Airport, new retail development plans in and around Luton and the north-west Harpenden housing scheme which, if implemented, would see an additional 580 dwellings alongside the A1081 creating greatly increased road traffic congestion.

Alan Falconer



Society Finances

The Society incurred a deficit of £234.27 in the year, the first deficit since 2015. In the intervening years surpluses enabled the funds to be built up to some £15,000. The biggest cost increase in 2019 was the cost of venues for public meetings and the AGM. Rothamsted Research's Fowden Hall was a particularly expensive venue, costing £830 for the December General Election Hustings organised and sponsored by the Harpenden Society.

Fortunately, we have been able to find a number of less-costly venues for future meetings, enabling our finances to return to a more comfortable surplus. John Bristow, our (statutorily required) Independent Examiner has recommended that we prepare and work to a more structured budget in regulating and monitoring the Society's future finances.

Income from members' subscriptions is down slightly on the previous year, but efforts are being made – at some additional cost in advertising and promotion – to recruit new members.

Overall, we are in a sound financial position. At December 31 2019 we had some £14,800 in the bank, equivalent to 2½ years income so we are well placed to deal with all but the most unlikely expenditure that could arise.

Harry Downie

Environment

Any community can quickly look uncared for if the local authority fails in its duty to council tax payers by allowing litter bins to overflow, gutter drains to get blocked and other maintenance-reliant issues to arise. Alas, our local public services continue to fall short of most residents' quite reasonable expectations. And the Harpenden Society duly encourages its members to maintain a watchdog role by reporting matters to the relevant authority. Herts County Council (phone 01300 123 4047) is responsible for highway matters (notably potholes and streetlighting faults – though these can also be reported on-line via the Herts CC website). Other publically-accountable environmental shortcomings should be reported to the SADC/Veolia St Albans District call centre on 01727 809019.



Any review of environmental issues in Harpenden must, of necessity, include Luton Airport and its iniquitous plans for a further near-80% growth in passenger numbers. The concomitant increase in frequency of flights and accompanying noise disturbance, along with the inevitable rise in aircraft and road vehicle climate-change and pollutant emissions locally, make the expansion totally unacceptable. The Harpenden Society has accordingly registered its unequivocal opposition, in alignment with residents groups such as LADACAN.

John Davis

Health and wellbeing

Clearly any report on issues of health and wellbeing, in Harpenden or further afield, are totally overshadowed at present by the Covid-19 emergency, where the Town Council – with the involvement of local organisations such as the Harpenden Society – has initiated the establishment of the 'Harpenden Cares' movement to help those with particular needs.

Until the current emergency burst upon us, the Society's Health & Wellbeing group's main focus had been on the long-standing (and repeatedly revised and delayed) Red House proposals, under which the former Harpenden Memorial Hospital buildings in Carlton Road are due to become transformed into a new multi-purpose Health Centre.

From last April provision of adult health community services in Hertfordshire were taken over, amid some controversy, by the Central London Community Healthcare Trust (CLCH). At a public meeting in September, held by Herts Valley Clinical Commissioning Group (HVCCG), the subject of a detailed report in the Harpenden Society's Autumn newsletter, a CLCH director expressed confidence

that the new centre would be completed by early 2023. That now appears optimistic, in the light of present health-related circumstances.



Some better news however is that in September Luton & Dunstable Hospital, after many years of planning, was granted £99.5 million capital allocation to build a new five-storey acute services block housing a greatly-expanded Neonatal Intensive Care Unit with new operating theatres and the provision of upgraded critical and maternity care.

John Harris

Education

The initial opening of Katherine Warrington School in September was welcomed as, for the first time in many years, there should be no need for children from Harpenden having to travel outside the town for their secondary education. Our excellent primary as well as secondary schools today provide a second-to-none education preparing our young people for a fulfilling place in the world.

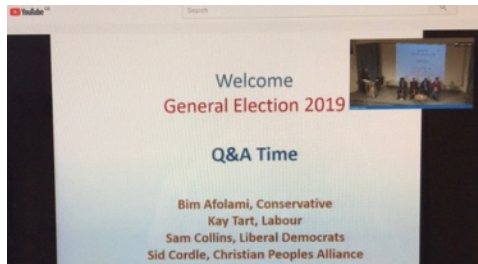


Students from all age ranges in Harpenden have joined together to make their voices heard – peacefully – on the crucial issue of climate change, sending a message to MP Bim Afolami, via school delegations to Downing Street and Westminster, and to the wider community. Their message is that action must be taken, to which end they are organising talks to schools by environmental experts. A 'Green Leaders' programme has been established for sixth form students, drawn from our four secondary schools, with the aim of getting climate change and related environmental issues across to younger children, including those attending the town's primary schools.

Chris Armitage

Publicity and the local economy

Efforts to maintain a high profile for Society activities have met with considerable success during the past year. Two important election hustings events organised by the Society were well attended and, for many of those non-members in the large Public Hall, helped publicise the Society's activities or, perhaps in some cases, its existence! The General Election hustings meeting in December was filmed and edited into five short videos which could be viewed on YouTube.



Other Society activities included participation in the June Harpenden Carnival where, in partnership with Harpenden Fitness Space, our stand attracted numerous keep-fit enthusiasts, eager to indulge in some beneficial exercise. Publicity for Society endeavours enjoyed coverage, not only in our quarterly newsletter, but in social media such as Harpenden Network, Next Door and Harpendia.

Retail business in the town had another mixed year. Some shops reported good trading while others fared less well. In Southdown Stage Door sadly closed, as did the greengrocer Reads after only a year or two. The George and the Old Cock both underwent major refurbishments to attract diners as much as drinkers. More recently the Slug and Lettuce in Lower High Street reopened as 'The Wheatsheaf' describing itself as a 'sports bar'.



Meanwhile the 'Mad Squirrel' bar failed to attract regular drinkers and closed. Jackson's Kitchens closed after over 25 years, as did Fine Kitchens, though thankfully Dwayne Edwards replaced them with its first retail outlet after making kitchens near Flamstead for 17 years. Skye Optometrists reopened their existing store in Bowers Parade by expanding into the long-empty Galloways shoe shop. On the commercial front Rothamsted Research is converting its historic original home, the Russell Building, into an office hub, whilst British Coal Pension Fund, the Southdown Industrial Estate landowner has terminated its leases for The Big Space (which has closed down) and Artscape (which has moved to Coldharbour Lane).

The most significant commercial/retail property news though concerns 'The Harpenden Estate', the block of shops, offices and flats between the High Street and Leyton Road from Church Green to Pappa Johns pizza outlet. SADC led by the LibDems, with support from Labour councillors, has voted to proceed with the purchase of the whole block for over £18 million, via a 50-year mortgage, notwithstanding great concerns about the risks and financial viability of the venture raised by opposition Conservative councillors and others.

Ron Taylor

Community Safety

During 2019 an additional 75 officers were recruited by the police in Hertfordshire, taking the total number to more than 2000. Meanwhile Police Community Support Officer Ilias Poulakis is a newcomer to the police presence in Harpenden (Vaughan Road police station no: 01582 768769).



According to official police statistics the number of crimes dealt with in Harpenden during 2019 was down on the two previous years at 2895, that is compared with 3118 and 3132 in 2017 and 2018. The most criminally active months last year were April, May and October.

Police say their current priorities locally are to combat fly-tipping and drugs as well as parking and/or speeding near schools. Shoplifting appears statistically to be on the decline; last year incidents were down from a peak of 38 in May to just five in December. Burglaries went up in number but only to eight and nine in November and December respectively, and Harpenden is still regarded as a 'safe area' by Hertfordshire and St Albans District standards. Among the categories of assorted theft, a recent arrest was made for the audacious removal of an exhaust silencer from underneath a car, whose enclosed catalytic converters could have been sold for its precious metal (eg platinum) content.

Scams perpetrated via email or text are an ongoing problem for law enforcers, as are rogue traders – including cold callers – typically offering to carry out repair work on say allegedly damaged roof tiles. Another emailed scam, aimed at the innocent elderly, asks victims for their bank details in order, it is claimed by the scammers, to pay for their TV licences.



Harpenden Society members and their friends and acquaintances are urged to sign up to the Neighbourhood Watch OWL scheme on www.owl.co.uk to be kept aware of local crime activity, notably burglaries or attempted break-ins in their immediate vicinity.

Paul Gardiner