

# Tighter control on developers in updated Local Plan

**St Albans District Council's all-important Local Plan, redrafted following its earlier rejection through the council's 'failure to co-operate' with adjacent authorities, notably Dacorum to the west, was the focus of the Harpenden Society's early October public meeting.**

Councillor Mary Maynard, SADC's portfolio holder for planning, was the main speaker at the meeting, held in Rothamsted's Fowden Hall. Her presentation was preceded by a brief update on Harpenden Town Council's Neighbourhood Plan from its steering group chairman Geoff Newman. He said the referendum asking for NP local approval was due in late January 2019, in adequate time for its recommendations to be embodied in SADC's finalised LP. Key among those recommendations was the need to maintain Harpenden's character as a town.



*Cllr Maynard: 'no ifs or buts' with developers'.*

Cllr Maynard said the revised LP, drafted following the latest 'Have your say!' public consultation process that yielded 2413 responses (from a district population of about 140,000), had been agreed at a council meeting on July 11. It was now important to move forward in getting it approved to the satisfaction of the Secretary of State by next March.

Another failure to do so, said Cllr Maynard, could mean future planning policy in the district being taken away from SADC and handed to either central

government or even to another local authority, either of which would lack district awareness. She made no reference however to the alleged ongoing dispute with Dacorum, reported in the September 27



*Geoff Newman 'Need to maintain Harpenden's character'.*

Herts Advertiser, over the site allocation for 5000 homes on SADC's western boundary which, if not resolved, could, the newspaper report asserted, lead to just such a second LP rejection.

But she added that every two months a meeting was now being held with the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (at the time of writing James Brokenshire), to ensure that LP progress was 'on track', with particular scrutiny on new home numbers.

The critical objective, being demanded by 'government methodology', is for 913 new homes a year to be built in St Albans District, through the period covered by the plan, up to 2036 – that is almost 15,000 in all. Continuing controversy surrounds the sites designated for housing development. The formal 'call for sites' consultation brought 150 submissions. But many were rejected for reasons not made entirely clear, notably the Lawes Trust site at Redbourn which was said to potentially accommodate as many as 1000 new dwellings.

**Continued over...**

Accordingly, the number of key sites chosen for major housing development has been whittled down to eight, two of them in Harpenden: between Bloomfield Road and Cooters End Lane in the north-west and beyond Batford council estate in the north-east. Those two sites – currently designated Green Belt land – are deemed capable of accommodating, respectively, 580 and 760 homes.

In accordance with declared government policy, plans for new major housing projects submitted by developers would be required to include a percentage of ‘affordable’ housing, said Cllr Maynard. Plans for small to medium-sized (maximum three-bedroom) houses and flats giving first-time buyers a chance to purchase, would be favoured. It was a matter of regret, she said, that nowadays essential – typically public sector – workers in Harpenden, including teachers for example, could not live in the town, because of prohibitive housing costs.

In line with that policy, development on the critical 36 acre north-west Harpenden site, alongside the A1081, would be required to deliver 580 new homes at a density of over 16 dwellings per acre. Its practical fulfillment on the available acreage has been questioned, not least by Harpenden Green Belt Association planning advisors, especially given the LP’s declared requirement for supporting infrastructure, including a primary school occupying 6.2 acres, and an over-50s care home plus ‘recreational and public open space’.

Aside from the ‘capacity’ of the site, the LP sets out further demanding requirements, such as ‘new walking or cycling facilities to promote car-free access to Harpenden town centre’, which some attendees at the meeting found difficult to envisage.

Similar exacting conditions are specified for the larger (47 acre) NE Harpenden site nominated in the LP, adjoining Batford council estate, where 760 new dwellings are proposed at a similar density to the NW Harpenden site and again with a primary school included. However it is described as a ‘masterplanned development led by the Council, in collaboration with local communities, landowners and other stakeholders’.

A comprehensive timetable for implementation of the LP was included in Cllr Maynard’s presentation. Headed ‘Housing Trajectory’, it listed the favoured sites and the numbers of dwellings scheduled to be built. The timetable is based on an assumption that the LP will be finalised and approved ready for implementation in 2020, with projections through to 2036.



It is clear however from scrutiny of the data in the timetable that many of the numbers are more ‘statistically theoretical’ than realistic. Regarding the NW Harpenden site, for example, the trajectory data indicate that development is not due to start until 2022/23 and then for an average of 75 dwellings to be completed each year through to 2028/29, followed by a further 55 a year later. On the Batford site, the timetable indicates an even later start to development: 2026/27, with development continuing through to the LP’s final year, 2036.

Relationships between SADC and potential major housing developers would be different in the future under the terms of the LP, asserted Cllr Maynard. Developers would effectively be told what to build, with stricter conditions imposed, notably in the provision of schools, parks, care homes and so on.

**‘There will be no ifs or buts’, she declared, adding that ‘written commitments would be demanded’, on which would depend the granting of planning permission. Past experience suggests however that some hard negotiating can be expected in future planning applications if developers of major sites are to meet SADC’s tough LP conditions while maintaining acceptable profitability. THS**





# Green light for new Batford school

Formal rejection on September 25, of the appeal against the judicial review which had been sought by 'Right School, Right Place' objectors, has cleared the way for building to begin on the new Katherine Warrington secondary 'free' school, on the Green Belt site at Common Lane, Batford. The Department for Education and the appointed contractors Kier are said to be working towards a construction start-up in late November.

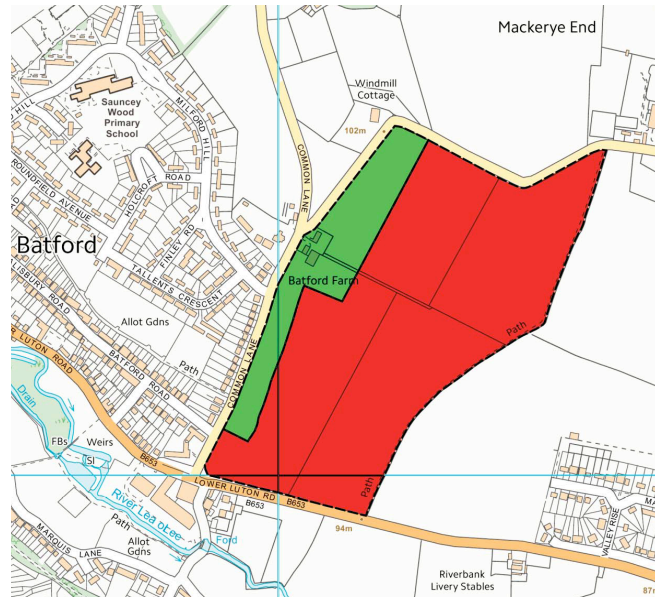


The initial objective is for a 180-place school 'for six forms of entry at year 7' to be ready in September 2019 – albeit twelve months later than originally projected. Its classrooms will be accommodated in the first school building to be completed, which will become the school sports hall when the whole development is ready for occupation – by the target date of August 2020.

At a massively well-attended open day for prospective parents and pupils held in Rothamsted's Fowden Hall in early October, the school's aims and aspirations, spelled out in the Autumn 2017 Harpenden Society newsletter, were reaffirmed by head teacher designate Tony Smith.



Particular emphasis was placed on the matter of access to the school, sited at the busy junction of Lower Luton Road and Common Lane, where the potential for serious traffic congestion at school morning arrival and afternoon departure times, has had to be addressed.



Accordingly, the school authorities have come forward with detailed proposals aimed at making it easier and safer for as many pupils as possible to get to and from the new school without their having to be 'chauffeured' by car, typically by their parents.

At no less than 22 locations in Harpenden, on routes likely to be taken by pupils and/or parents, walking or cycling, modifications to existing road and footpath infrastructure are proposed, necessarily requiring budget allocation from Herts County Council.

Notable examples include: a suggested lowering of current speed limits, from 40 to 30mph and 30 to 20mph on Lower Luton Road and Crabtree Lane; additional bus-stops near the school; zebra, toucan or puffin pedestrian crossings at strategic points on busier roads near the school; 'pedestrian dropped kerbs and tactile paving' (benefiting parents with push chairs, and minimising trip risks); enlargement of the mini-roundabout at Station Road/Lower Luton Road junction 'to increase its capacity'; footbridge improvement over River Lea from Crabtree lane, with better street lighting . **THS**





# Getting to grips with local crime

Criminal offences are on the increase in Harpenden. But the rise, in percentage terms, is no worse than across the country generally. That was one of the marginally comfortable messages from Local Policing Commander for Hertfordshire, Chief Superintendent Matt Nicholls, addressing the Harpenden Society's September public meeting in Rothamsted Research's Fowden Hall. It followed an introductory overview by David Lloyd, Hertfordshire Police & Crime Commissioner since 2012, who said that more money was being spent on front-line policing in the county than ever before.



*David Lloyd: 'Herts police funding up'.*

Year on year, for the first three months of 2018, domestic burglaries were up by 32.8%, thefts of motor vehicles by 40.8%, and thefts from vehicles by 12.1%. Total crime in the St Albans district, including Harpenden, was notably less than in several other parts of Hertfordshire. Last year, said Chief Supt Nicholls, there were 66 crimes recorded per 1000 population, compared with almost 100 in Watford and a similar number in Stevenage.



*Chief Supt. Matt Nicholls: 'closer liaising with Beds Police'.*

He highlighted the specific increase in what the Herts Constabulary categorised as 'Myriapod burglary', especially in communities like Harpenden, where thieves break into homes, usually at night, with the prime object of stealing the keys of expensive cars standing on the driveway.

Those miscreants were, he said, invariably well-equipped 'specialists' who had often travelled – typically via the M1 or A1 – from another part of the country, notably the London area, targeting more affluent streets where high-value cars were likely to be found. His implicit message was 'take your car keys upstairs with you at bedtime!'

There was now an increase in 'cross-border intelligence' by Herts Constabulary, enabling the movement of suspected individuals to be tracked beyond the county boundary. Bearing in mind Luton's close proximity to Harpenden, liaison with Bedfordshire Police was especially valuable in tracing stolen goods and vehicles.

In its allocation of an £81 million local policing budget, Automatic Number Plate Recognition (ANPR) as a means of identifying law breakers was just one example of new technology being employed successfully by local police officers in apprehending criminals. Also coming on stream was the use of camera-equipped drones, typically deployed during investigations into 'rural crime', allowing farm buildings and other more remote locations to be monitored more effectively.

Policing in Harpenden specifically comes under the responsibility of Chief Inspector Lynda Coates, who followed Chief Supt Nicholls in her presentation at the Harpenden Society meeting. It was acknowledged, she said, that most locally-based crime in and around the town was committed by a small number of people, many of them known individuals. She added that her team, based at the town's police station in Vaughan Road, were always busy – even on Christmas Day!



*Chief Inspector Lynda Coates: 'vehicle crime still rife'*

That team, headed by Sgt Jordon Fox, comprised six dedicated full-time constables and six non-warrented 'special' constables. CI Coates reaffirmed Chief Supt Nicholls' assertion that theft of goods from vehicles was now the most common offence recorded in Harpenden, usually



carried out by 'opportunistic' thieves, methodically trying car doors to find those left carelessly unlocked. During the week prior to the meeting two such individuals had been arrested and charged.

Harpenden police had, said CI Coates, established monthly intelligence links with the Bedfordshire force, with criminal activity in and around Luton invariably on the agenda. In addition, a bi-monthly review was held of the Herts Police's 'Guardian' programme aimed specifically at combatting home burglaries.

A Q&A session after the presentations brought a number of complaints from the floor, claiming that police services were less accessible than the speakers had implied. There was general regret that it was no



*The Harpenden Society Chair Phil Waters, Police and Crime Commissioner David Lloyd, Chief Inspector Lynda Coates and Chief Superintendent Matt Nichols.*

longer possible to go into Harpenden police station and talk to a duty officer face to face, even though CI Coates asserted that the station was always 'open'.

She pointed out that a telephone on the outside wall of the building provided direct communication with a duty officer, though an audience member who had made use of it complained that its voice clarity was poor, particularly against Vaughan Road background traffic noise.

**Members of the public in need of police assistance were urged by the police representatives at the Harpenden Society meeting to make contact by telephone, using the traditional **999** service for emergencies or **101** for non-urgent matters. The internet also provides a direct phone number for Harpenden police station: **01582 768769**. Meanwhile the Hertfordshire Constabulary website, at **[www.herts.police.uk/report](http://www.herts.police.uk/report)** provides quick links to different law enforcement matters.**

THS

## Getting to know you...recent new members

### HESTER GABBUTT

I and my husband moved to Harpenden about four years ago from St Albans. We wanted to downsize and were attracted by the green spaces and village feel of the town. We had lived in St Albans ( the old home of the Schweppes business) as I worked for Cadbury Schweppes as a lawyer and company secretary. I joined The Harpenden Society as it is important to have an organisation that represents the townspeople as we face threats of over development, loss of retail units , decline in train services and too much traffic.



### I'm Valerie O'Connell and I founded French Assist in 2012.

A French native, I have been living in the UK since 1999. French Assist offers the following French language services to individuals and professionals: Language Tuition •Property Management •Marketing & Communications • Translation & Interpreting • Business Culture • Business Support • Relocation • Consulting • Event Management

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# Thameslink chaos – a way forward?

An open letter from The Harpenden Society chairman Phil Waters to all those parties who have played a part in this year's rail service debacle



One of the roles of the Harpenden Society is that of 'guardian' of the town's character and welfare. And because so many Harpenden residents commute by rail, mainly in and out of London, we have as a community been adversely affected in recent months by the undeniably poor levels of service provided by Govia-Thameslink (GTR).

For well over a century the town's wellbeing has been significantly dependent on reliable train services. The Harpenden Society initially refrained from commenting on this year's operational issues involved. There are others, such as the Association of Passenger Transport Users (APTU) and the Harpenden Thameslink Commuters Group who have a closer understanding of those issues.

But, on behalf of the whole town, we feel obliged to express our concern at the still ongoing delay in restoring an acceptable level of service for careworn commuters and to examine the potential measures needed to avoid a recurrence of the crisis.

## What went wrong?

Quite clearly disagreements emerged within the rail industry on how the revised May 2018 timetable should be formulated and implemented. It should therefore have been decided to postpone the changes – regardless of any resultant management face-savings and embarrassments.

The UK rail industry is, alas, unacceptably fragmented. It is no longer structured so that an individual senior director or manager can be held accountable for such demonstrably critical decision making.

Though the railways are not nationalised in the way Jeremy Corbyn would like them once again to be, the government's Department for Transport nevertheless holds ultimate responsibility for those disastrous timetable changes. The DfT controls Network Rail and awards franchises to the likes of GTR and East Midlands Trains (EMT).

But Ministers and civil servants quite obviously lack the necessary expertise and understanding to make operational decisions. In the words of Harpenden MP Bim Afolami, interviewed by the Herts Advertiser, the Govia Thameslink and Network Rail bosses behaved 'just like little boys with train sets', with scant regard to the effect on passengers. Hence the tendency for the kind of downward management 'buck-passing' that has had such calamitous consequences, not least for Harpenden commuters.

## What needs to be done?

The 'emergency' timetable implemented in mid-July brought improvements to the service but that coincided fortuitously with an easing of demand as commuters started going on holiday. There has since been a further 'tweaking' of the timetable, allegedly designed to improve matters. But, alas, with the main holiday period now passed, train delays and cancellations continue to afflict Thameslink services.

Timetable-related aggravations are compounded by the overcrowding issue. During the weekday morning peak period a Harpenden commuter feels lucky to get a seat. Those returning in the evening peak from St Pancras or even Farringdon frequently have to stand, at least as far as St Albans. Service levels need to be ramped up with additional train capacity. The advent of 12-coach trains on the Bedford-Brighton Thameslink service appears to have done little to alleviate the overcrowding.

There is now at last however some light at the end of the proverbial (not Belsize or Elstree!) tunnel. On September 20 – not before time! – the government announced a 'root and branch' review of the rail industry headed by former British Airways CEO Keith Williams. Its stated brief is to examine 'increased integration between track and train, regional partnerships and improving value for money for passengers and taxpayers'. It is incidentally perhaps a hopeful sign that the rail industry designation of passengers as 'customers' has been put to one side – for now.



The announcement effectively acknowledges that the separation of infrastructure (Network Rail) from train operation has been a recipe for problems. One would like to think that the rather bland reference to 'regional partnerships' holds out hope for 'timetable co-ordination' between Thameslink and East Midlands Trains, whose expresses come through – but do not serve – Harpenden.

This year's timetable fiasco was in large part attributable to the regrettable fact that some London-bound morning rush hour East Midlands trains no longer stopped at Bedford and/or Luton. Thameslink was therefore required to provide what were effectively substitute fast train services. It meant that some scheduled peak-hour fast Thameslink trains no longer stopped at Harpenden, where hapless commuters huddled on a crowded platform, knowing their scheduled train could well be a) delayed and b) packed, saw other apparently uncrowded Thameslink trains race through unhindered.

Unfortunately a review is only a review, not an action go-ahead. We won't hear until next year the outcome of Mr Williams' and his 'external panel's' recommendations, in the shape of a government White Paper. Bureaucratic wheels grind 'exceeding slow', and implementation of the likely reforms cannot happen, says uninspiring Transport Secretary Chris Grayling, before 2020. Until then the possibility of another timetable crisis will remain.

Rumours abound of Govia-Thameslink being stripped of its franchise in the wake of the timetable catastrophe. But the announcement of the 'sweeping' rail industry review would appear to have given it a stay of execution.

Meanwhile, the 'backwash' from the timetable-triggered rail service chaos is being felt in some less obvious places. Harpenden estate agents report a slowing-down in house purchase enquiries from people who have hitherto been attracted to the town by the promise of 'easy commuting to London in barely 30 minutes'. By the same token, commuting newcomers seduced by that prospect in recent years must hope against hope that improvements to the service will materialise sooner rather than later.

### The Next Steps

A version of this open letter from the Harpenden Society was sent in mid-July to our Member of Parliament Bim Afolami, to our Hertfordshire County councillors, the APTU, the Harpenden Thameslink Commuters Group and other groups and organisations in the Harpenden area. It affirmed that we are ready and willing to meet with any or all of the interested parties to add our weight to any rail service reforming campaign.

***STOP PRESS: From December, an extra 07.25 southbound departure will be introduced from Harpenden, and a 17.13 northbound from St Pancras, both formed of eight coaches. There will also be an increase from 8 to 12 coaches on the 07.34 fast train, as well as the 17.11 from St Pancras. And the 18.51 from St Pancras will now call additionally at Harpenden (arriving 19.15) to fill a 20 minute gap.***

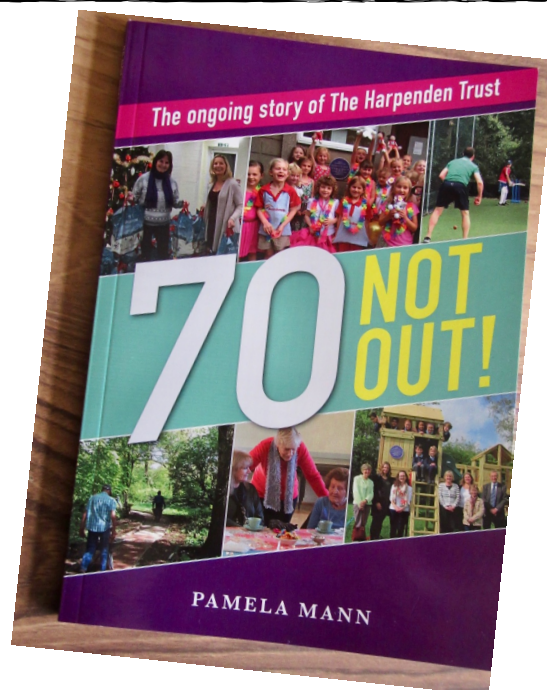


*Phil Waters: 'Timetable changes not so welcome to Harpenden'*

THS

## Celebrating 70 years of the Harpenden Trust

A newly-published 80-page book, written by local author Pamela Mann, commemorating the 70th Anniversary of the Harpenden Trust, has gone on sale, price £5.00. Copies are available from the Trust Centre in Southdown Road. Entitled '70 NOT OUT', it continues the history of the Trust and its valuable philanthropic work in the local community, spelled out in an earlier volume: 'A Lifeboat Moored in Harpenden' written back in 1990 by Reg Davis, for many years manager of Kingston House Stores. **THS**



# Incinerator plans up in flames?

Many questions remain over the grandiose plans by Luton-based energy company Emsrayne to build a large waste incinerator at New Mill End on the Lower Luton Road, barely two miles from Harpenden. In particular the co-operation and suggested involvement of Luton Airport, as a potential user of the electrical power due to be generated by the plant, was first denied by Hazel Simmons, the leader of Luton Borough Council, the airport landowner.

But, only days later, the airport's chief operating officer Robin Porter, in a letter to Emsrayne, said the incinerator proposals 'present an excellent opportunity to provide a secure, long-term renewable, low carbon heat and energy supply to the airport'. The letter went on to assert that the plans 'should be given substantial weight in terms of any assessment of its impact on the Green Belt and designated heritage assets'.

As if almost following the see-sawing equivocation of Theresa May's cabinet members on the Brexit issue, the Luton Airport's line on the incinerator question swung back yet again when, in mid August, Mr Porter effectively had his knuckles rapped for his letter of support for the scheme. Airport chairman Andrew Malcolm told Emsrayne director Andy Brewer the Porter letter 'had been signed without full and proper discussion with the (Airport) board' and that the letter of support would be withdrawn.

Any go-ahead on the incinerator proposals is in any case necessarily conditional on future planning approval from Central Bedfordshire Council, which looks set to come up against a massive and well supported campaign of objection already in full swing. Under the banner '**STOP HARPENDEN LUTON INCINERATOR**', the objectors are keen to enlist the support of all those with local environmental concerns. Objectors are urged to sign up on the SHLI website, at [www.shli.org.uk](http://www.shli.org.uk) and/or to write to their MP (Bim Afolami for Harpenden) and local councillors. The SHLI campaigners also suggest emailing the would-be incinerator developer at [info@emsrayne.co.uk](mailto:info@emsrayne.co.uk) explaining why the plant should not be built on Harpenden's doorstep.

Among the many reasons to object to the scheme, the SHLI group cites the estimated 100,000 lorry movements delivering to the plant half a million tons of waste per annum, not to mention subsequent ash removal, necessarily along the Lower Luton Road. It has been pointed out however (not by SHLI) that the site's close proximity to the main Thameslink rail line offers the possibility of a dedicated siding, from which rail-borne waste from distant sources could be discharged. Such a facility would nevertheless presumably require a rail underpass from the slow (east side) lines, of the kind proposed at the Helioslough freight transfer site mooted on the former Handley Page airfield site at Park Street, south of St Albans.

Encroachment on what is designated Green Belt is put forward by SHLI as a further reason for the incinerator plans to be scrapped, not that the roughly triangular New Mill End site is particularly attractive and is currently not under cultivation or in use for grazing. But such untended rural countryside is championed by conservationists for its valuable support of flora and fauna.

In early September a further obstacle to Emsrayne's proposal emerged. At a depth of only 1.2m (4ft), directly below the New Mill End site, runs a Total-Fina underground pipeline, constructed in 1989/90. It carries necessarily inflammable oil products from Lancashire to the Buncefield terminal at Hemel Hempstead. A letter from the British Pipeline Agency to the planning authority, Central Bedfordshire Council, says 'the pipeline operates at very high pressure and poses a number of health and safety risks if interacted with'.

The pipeline was authorised under a 999 year 'deed of grant' which restricts any construction work within 10ft of the pipeline. Though it seems the pipeline could be 'diverted' it would clearly involve a major and costly disruptive civil engineering operation, with Emsrayne likely to have to foot the bill.

Formal objections to the incinerator plan look certain to come from many local residents, in New Mill End, East Hyde and Chiltern Green especially, as well as from the main population of Harpenden. If and when Emsrayne's plans are formally submitted to CBC for approval, local civic bodies, including **The Harpenden Society** will be lodging their consolidated opposition to a scheme which has been informally described by Harpenden people canvassed for their opinion as 'outrageous', 'shocking', 'atrocious' and 'scandalous'.

THS





# Movement at last on Public Halls' future



Now that development of the new cultural hub and sports centre complex in Rothamsted Park has been given the go-ahead, 'subject to Secretary of State approval', St Albans District Council project manager Barry Cronin has said his 'thoughts are turning to the potential development of Harpenden Public Halls'. To that end his department has scheduled for November 16/17 a design 'charrette' allowing Harpenden residents to offer their undoubtedly widely-differing views on what should happen to the Public Halls once their theatre and meeting hall functions have been replaced by the more lavish and contemporary facilities in the cultural hub.

There are indications that among the more likely possibilities is the demolition of the rather straggling

80-year-old building and its replacement with one or more apartment blocks to help meet SADC's Local Plan housing commitment. Given that the site is council owned, such apartments could well constitute 'social housing', demand for which has perhaps never been greater, with house prices out of reach for so many first-time buyers.

'On the hoof' proposals for the future of the Public Halls site, canvassed among Harpenden Society members, just before this newsletter went to press, include a multi-storey car park – which need not necessarily look ugly – and a new budget hotel to make up for the loss of the Glen Eagle and Harpenden House in recent years **THS**

## Hopper service due back in February

It is hoped that the Harpenden Hopper minibus service, which had to be suspended a few months ago due to mechanical problems with the ageing vehicles, will be resumed next February. Service manager Andy Buchanan says two much newer, and hopefully more reliable, replacements are being acquired. They will be operated over newly designated routes, identified in the light of requests and enquiries from would-be passengers. It is expected that the revised routes will extend to the Southdown area. Mr Buchanan says future recruitment of volunteer drivers for the Hopper service should be eased through an easing of regulatory restrictions on minibus driver qualifications. **THS**

## Steeper climb clarified

In our Summer newsletter, reporting on the Society's Luton Airport meeting in May, there was a reference to aircraft taking off to the west being required in the future to climb more steeply, in order to reduce their noise 'footprint'. By way of clarification, the revised requirement, if and when implemented, would be for planes to be 1000ft higher than currently by the time they pass over the Thameslink rail line, that is to have reached an altitude of 6 to 7000ft. **THS**

## Awards alert!

Harpenden Society members are asked to start considering possible nominations for its 2018 Awards.

Please look out for developments, including refurbishments as well as new buildings scheduled for completion in the town during the current calendar year. A pro forma in our Winter newsletter will give you the opportunity formally to nominate worthy recipients of the annual Society Plaque, Certificates of Merit and Letters of Commendation.

## ***Wanted – a new Membership Secretary***

Jan Smith, the Harpenden Society's stalwart Membership Secretary for the last three years, is having to relinquish her role, for personal and family reasons.

It means we are looking for a worthy replacement.

Could you be that person? As well as maintaining membership records and monitoring subscription payments – most of which are now paid by banker's order – the role involves the convivial task of 'meeting and greeting' attendees at the Society's public meetings five or six times a year. Those meetings invariably attract a number of non-members, providing the opportunity for the amicable recruitment of new members. The Membership Secretary also sits on the Society's Committee, helping to plan future activities and frame its policy in addressing the many civic issues confronting the town. Should you be tentatively interested, but would like to know more, please contact

General Secretary Bob Fletcher at  
secretary@harpendensociety.org

**THS**

# Did You Know? From Harpenden's history St Nick's celebrates 800 years

**Just three years after King John signed the Magna Carta at Runnymede, Christian worship was first recorded on the site of Harpenden's St Nicholas parish church, as proclaimed on an 800th Anniversary banner on the church railings. The precise date of 1218 is difficult to verify, though Harpenden Local History Society researches indicate that 'by about 1216, a church of St Nicholas was established on the site, as a "chapel of ease" under the auspices of St Helen's parish church at Wheathampstead'.**



It was a so-called travellers' church, built to obtain alms from those using the north-south route through the parish, along the line of today's A1081. It was a small building, cruciform in plan with a central tower. The tower was modest in height and the nave was joined to the aisles by arches only 8ft wide, separated by 6ft-long piers.

Alas, of the original building there survive only a few stones. They were discovered in about 1930, not in or even close by the present church, but half a mile away in the garden of Welcombe House (now under development as new housing) in Southdown Road.

Pre-dating the first church on the St Nicholas site by several decades is the font, still in use for christenings today, the bowl of which is of Purbeck marble. It is thought to have been transferred from St Helen's (originally St Helena) when the Wheathampstead church acquired a new one in the 14th Century.

Harpenden parishioners still had to go to the 'mother church' at Wheathampstead to be married or have their children baptised. Though, by a 'papal deed' of 1319, in recognition of the difficulty of carrying corpses along the Lea valley in bad weather when flooding was common, local people then had a "right of burial" at St Nicholas instead of St Helen's.

That papal grant was however, astonishingly, not confirmed until more than 200 years later – during which time the Harpenden graveyard must have become well occupied – when King Henry VIII gave his royal stamp of approval in 1537.

Meanwhile, even with a chapel on the St Nicholas site, it was not thought easy to reach for some parishioners in more distant parts of the parish. William Inge, as Chief Justice of the King's Bench, clearly a resident of considerable substance and influence, lived in a house bearing its owner's name, ie

Inge's Place, where Hammonds End now stands. In 1297 he was licensed by the bishop to have a 'chantry chapel' on his estate. There were conditions attached however. Mr Inge 'was forbidden to erect a belfry or ring any bell', for fear that passers-by would be enticed to hear Mass in his chapel instead of going, as they should, to their parish church.

During the 14th Century, Harpenden's parish church was enlarged by the building of the south aisle and transept, while the north transept became the Rothamsted Chapel for the Lord of the Manor – at that time Ralph de Cressy, who had come to the district in 1355, a hero of the Battle of Crécy from which he evidently derived his name and his fortune.

A link with the 15th Century is St Nicholas's oldest bell, which was cast some time between 1420 and 1450 and bears the inscription 'Intonat De Celis Vox Compana Michaelis' (A voice sounds from heaven, the bell of Michael). It carries the merchant's mark of a cross, used by John Walgrave, a London bell-founder.

Great alterations to the church building took place in the latter half of the 15th Century. The 14th Century rebuilding of the south aisle had left the nave walls at their old height. Now the north aisle was heightened and the nave roof raised, allowing the addition of higher clerestory windows to lighten the church interior. The original low central tower was replaced by that at the west end of the church which remains today, with its south-east corner turret. It is built of externally-plastered flint 'with bond stones and quoins (corner stones) of ashlar (square hewn stone blocks)'.

It was not until 1859 that full parish status was conferred on Harpenden, three years later the original church building being demolished, leaving just the less ancient tower. During the demolition charred timber and re-solidified molten lead were found, suggesting that the old central tower had been burnt down and the chancel damaged. Historians have speculated that the destructive fire might well have been related to the War of the Roses, during which the second battle of St Albans in 1470 was fought on Bernard's Heath, only a few miles to the south of Harpenden.

In place of the demolished church a much more modern – in relative terms – place of worship was built over the next three years, nevertheless blending attractively with the older belfry tower. St Nicholas as we know it today was consecrated on November 7 1862. Now, 156 years on, Harpenden's parish church is able to celebrate its barely uninterrupted eight hundred years.



*St Nick's church tower is over 500 years old.*

**Acknowledgement: Harpenden Local History Society**

**THS**



# Filling in some WWII history



*Pumping concrete into the shelters at Bowers Way (left) and Leyton Green (right).*

Notwithstanding the ever increasing political instability in the world, the likelihood of Britain being subjected to air raids of any kind in 2018 or the foreseeable future appears minimal. Such thoughts must have helped confirm Harpenden Town Council's decision to fill in its three main underground air-raid shelters. Long neglected and largely unknown to many residents, they were deemed unsafe, that is in danger of eventual collapse resulting from almost 80 years of inevitable structural corrosion. The work of pumping them full of low-density concrete was undertaken by contractors during September.

Situated below green spaces at Bowers Parade, Leyton Green and Queens Road, the shelters date back to August 1939 when war looked inevitable and preparations were being made to protect the public from likely air attack. Harpenden Urban District Council as it was then duly granted planning permission for the construction of a number of 'trench' (ie subterranean) air-raid shelters. The Bowers Parade shelter was located on the site of the village's former Cock pond – which had been drained and grassed over some eleven years earlier.

Construction of all three shelters was on the cut-and-cover principle, using pre-cast reinforced concrete sections for the walls and 'roof'. As has been shown on numerous older civil engineering structures in recent decades, moisture can eventually penetrate the concrete, degrading its strength and corroding the steel internal reinforcement rods. Hence the consultants' recommendation that the shelters be filled in.

During the Second World War when Harpenden's shelters were ready for use following an air-raid warning, wooden benches along the sides provided rudimentary comfort for those inside, who also enjoyed the dubious facility of chemical 'Elsan' type toilets, located behind sackcloth modesty screens.

They were of 'dog leg' configuration. Rather than one long 'tunnel' like some wartime shelters, the Bowers Parade shelter comprised six shorter 10-yard lengths connected by 90 degree corners. It was designed to accommodate up to 180 occupants, seated along both sides of the 'tunnel' sections. Though more likely to induce feelings of claustrophobia in the occupants furthest from the entrance steps, the layout was intended to minimise the effects of blast should an explosion occur in 'blast range' of an entrance. There were, in any case, two additional intermediate emergency 'escape' hatches accessed via vertical iron ladders. In March 1941, battery lighting was installed in the Bowers Parade shelter.

Two years after the end of hostilities, in October 1947, Harpenden UDC took over responsibility for the shelter, blocking the entrances with manhole covers, at a cost – council records indicate – of £30, and for some reason erecting fences around them, the fences remaining in place until the 1960s. In 1983, to further block access, following incidents of youngsters allegedly indulging in 'glue sniffing' in the shelter, the manhole covers were barred and padlocked.

A similar pattern of events unfolded, during the early part of the war, at four other sites in Harpenden. War preparations brought a halt to plans for a garden on the west side of Arden Grove to be included in the development of the new Public Halls. Instead, below an area of what is today a car park, a subterranean air raid shelter was constructed. The shelter's air vents can still be seen in what is now the scrappy hedge alongside Arden Grove.

Two separate shelters were dug below Leyton Green. They were of the same 'three sides of a 10 yards-square' configuration, each intended to accommodate 100 people, with staircase access at both ends, angled to minimise blast, and a manhole (with ladder) escape hatch at one corner. Both Leyton Green shelters are now filled in.

An altogether larger cut-and-cover shelter was built on the edge of the town, below Harpenden Common, adjacent to Queens Road. Its stated – though perhaps optimistic – capacity was 400 people, but that must have assumed all the occupants to be standing and uncomfortably close together. It was laid out in the form of a 10 yard square, accessed via stairs midway along two opposite sides. In December 1940, 16 double sleeping bunks were installed. Problems with rain ingress through the 'roof' required the soil covering to be removed and a layer of bitumen applied.

As recently as 2007 detailed inspections of the Bowers Parade, Leyton Green and Queens Road shelters (though not of the Arden Grove installation) were carried out and the inspectors' findings published. All were found to be 'sound and dry', the only exception being at the Bowers Parade site, where several roof slabs proved to have 'cracked and sagged', though remaining in place.

However, a detailed inspection of the shelters carried out in 2013 showed further structural deterioration, leading to the 'filling in' decision, despite some protests that one at least of them should be preserved for posterity, as effectively a museum exhibit, open at selected times, reminding visitors of a traumatic period in our local history.

THS

# EDITOR'S VIEW

Alan Bunting

## Clearing the air on the school run

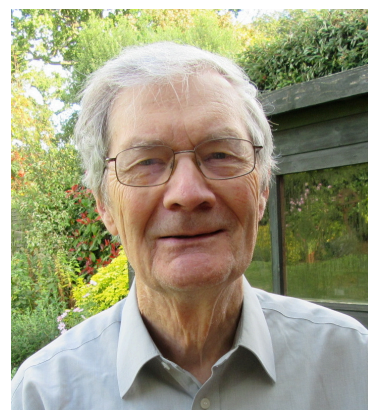
More and more electric cars are appearing on Harpenden's roads, emitting zero tailpipe pollutants. Less significantly, but nevertheless welcome from an environmental viewpoint, many of today's petrol- and diesel-engined cars feature an automatic stop-start function. When the vehicle comes to a halt for any reason for more than a few seconds the engine is switched off; it restarts again as soon as the driver's foot touches the accelerator.

Exhaust emissions are cut, to the benefit of air quality nearby and it of course brings a reduction in fuel usage. Though there have been assertions that repeated stop-starts allow engine temperature to fall, with a resulting drop in fuel efficiency and possibly increased engine wear, such claims have not been widely substantiated.

What has all this to do with Harpenden, you will quite understandably be asking. The answer relates to those many local drivers for whom an auto stop-start system has no appeal or relevance. They seemingly care little or nothing about the pollution they are creating nor, it would appear, about their fuel bills as they leave their engines idling.

It is those – let's call them thoughtless – drivers who were targeted last year by an appeal from St Albans District Council, asking them to switch off their engines when stationary, especially while parked near any of the 39 schools or nurseries in SADC's jurisdiction, including Harpenden. The council offered schools, at no cost, signs saying 'Switch off engine for cleaner air' to be installed outside school entrances. The take-up was, reportedly and regrettably, zero.

Elsewhere in the country, as reported in the national press, schools have imposed rigorous parking restrictions designed to force 'chauffeuring' parents to drop and pick-up their offspring several streets away from the school, forcing the children to walk the last



two or three hundred yards. It is a move intended to reduce the concentration of harmful emissions close to school premises, while reducing the general melee of cars, parents and children around the school entrance.

Commendably, the authorities planning the infrastructure around the new Katherine Warington school at Batford, due to open in September 2019, are doing everything possible to avoid, or at least minimise, the twice-a-day 'school run chaos'. It is an aspiration which would necessarily benefit air quality close to the school. Through incentivised encouragement, parents are being urged to let their offspring – all in the 11-plus age group – to walk or cycle to and from school where the distance from home makes that feasible. The measures being taken are described in the 'school green light' article on page 3.

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### SOCIETY PUBLIC MEETING DATES

**Speakers are yet to be confirmed for late 2018 and early 2019.**

**Please check our web site for details [www.harpendensociety.org](http://www.harpendensociety.org)**

Please send comments on any of the articles or issues raised in this edition to the editor:

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