



Winter News 2022/2023 Founded in 1930

Public Halls site: SADC rethinks its strategy Sell-off to private developer now on the cards

Shortly before this newsletter went to press, St Albans District Council's supposedly well-advanced plans for the redevelopment of the town's venerable Public Halls site at the north-east corner of Harpenden Common, were abruptly thrown back in the melting pot. At a reportedly unremarkable council meeting in late January there was a call for a 'reality check'.

It was suggested at the meeting that retaining ownership of the 28,600 sq ft site, with direct responsibility for its redevelopment, in order to provide it with future housing and commercial rental income was 'over ambitious', given SADC's already overstretched finances. It was voted to begin the process of offering the Public Halls site to 'interested parties', implying its sale to a private developer.

Whether any of the formerly-declared worthy intentions of offering 'affordable' housing on the site to first-time buyers and others can be salvaged, via the planning conditions it is able to impose on an 'outside' developer, must remain questionable. Development companies tendering for the contract would be sure to drive a hard bargain, knowing they were dealing with a council 'on the back foot'.

Because the council's own plans – after a four-year gestation period, costing a reported £720,000 – for a mixed housing and commercial development on the Public Halls site had reached such an advanced stage, with a formal planning application submitted only in the last month or two, it appears likely that, in site layout and architectural detail, SADC would prefer very similar – if not identical – plans to be adopted by the outside developer.

That scheme envisaged 29 dwellings housed in four separate, albeit adjacent, blocks up to four storeys in height. Somewhat controversially, the ground floor was designated as 'commercial space', 3440 sq ft in area – a likely bone of contention for an incoming new developer with eyes on the greater financial return from housing.

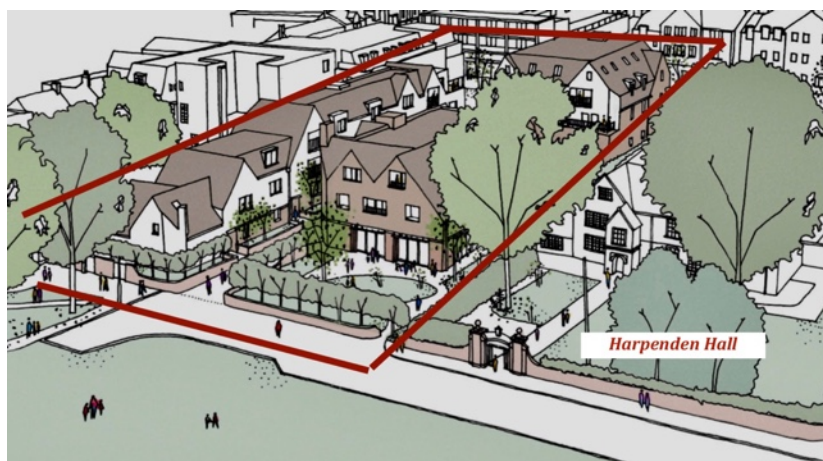
Residents' car parking in SADC's own plans amounted to 28 spaces augmented, in an assumed nod to environmental aspirations, by 59 cycle spaces. A further 'green' gesture was embodied in the inclusion of 'a shared communal garden for residents'.

Meanwhile, recognising the unquestionable need locally for starter homes, SADC had declared that ten of the apartments would be 'affordable' – though with this newsletter continuing its editorial policy of necessarily putting that word in inverted commas. The requirement from older Harpenden residents wanting to downsize was likewise addressed. It was

pointed out by SADC that such considerations were in compliance with the Harpenden Neighbourhood Plan.

Because of the visual prominence of the site, in the heart of the town's Conservation Area, the opportunity had been taken, said the council planners, to ensure the appearance of the intended new development from the Arden Grove side was no less appealing than that facing the Common – in contrast to the hitherto untidy look of the rear of the Public Halls. That pledge included a somewhat equivocal reference to the line of lime trees in Arden Grove alongside the development site, declaring that those of a 'lesser quality' would be replaced.

See page 2 for the Harpenden Society's response to the latest turn of events in the Public Halls site proposals – proposals which are now necessarily in abeyance.



Our response to latest twist in the Public Halls site saga

Re-development of the Public Halls site is up in the air again, as our front page story makes clear. And although everything now points to the erstwhile St Albans District Council 'in house' project being handed over to a private developer, it will nevertheless of course remain subject to the same planning constraints, albeit with SADC no longer in a dual poacher/gamekeeper role.

Any new developer, hoping to be chosen in what would be a competitive tendering process would, before putting its plans together, do well to examine carefully what the council had intended to build on the site and necessarily pay heed to the many objections submitted, in the hope of avoiding similar opposition.

The Harpenden Society was in the forefront of those opposing numerous aspects of those plans. We expressed concern for example that the design and 'bulk' of the proposed buildings would have a detrimental impact on one of the most important and highly-visible locations in the town, with little recognition of the adjacent historically- attractive Grade II* and Grade II Listed Buildings, namely Harpenden Hall and no 2 Southdown Road respectively.

We said the importance of the location in terms of sightlines across Harpenden Common, at 'the gateway' of the town, had not been sufficiently recognised. It appeared evident that too much consideration had

been given to maximising residential and commercial accommodation on the site.

The inclusion of almost 3800 sq ft of commercial space was considered unnecessary, the location being unsuitable for office or retail users (though no shop frontages were envisaged in the plans).

Judging by previous planning applications and decisions, there is a likelihood that a private developer would want to eliminate the ground floor 'commercial space' proposed for inclusion by SADC's architects, in other words to maximise the residential capacity. That could be achieved within

apartment blocks which were lower in overall height – a subject concerning a number of objectors.



Grade II listed no 2 Southdown Road should not be 'dominated' by development.



Planners expected to insist on retention of lime trees along Arden Grove

Society to fund University transport study

An agreement has been reached between the Harpenden Society and the University of Hertfordshire's 'Smart Mobility Unit', under which the Society will fund a detailed study of the everyday pressures on Harpenden attributable, directly or indirectly, to transport issues.

The substance of the study will comprise:

- a current analysis of the road transport pressures on the town.
- a view of the potential impact of an additional 550 houses built along the A1081 north of the town.
- options for addressing transport issues in general from other work done by the unit.

- options for limiting car access on the Lower High Street and their likely impact on retailers, based on evidence from such restrictions elsewhere.

It is intended that the findings of the study will form the subject of a presentation to Society members and other invitees.

The UoH transport analysis is expected to become an independent supporting element in the Society's submitted objections to Legal & General's 'North-West Harpenden' housing development proposals, adding valuable credibility to the widespread opposition to the project expressed by many townspeople.

It is hoped that by bringing fresh minds to the transport-related challenges facing the town, the analysis will also generate ideas across a wider spectrum, bearing in mind that any such ground-breaking proposals from our county, district and town councils have, to date, been conspicuously lacking.

L&G housing scheme opposition growing

In our Autumn newsletter we reported on the efforts by the Legal & General insurance group to avoid future possible Local Plan obstacles by applying its undoubted legal and financial muscle to obtain planning consent for building up to 550 homes on the 62 acres of Green Belt agricultural land it owns alongside the A1081 north of Harpenden.

As readers will have seen, the Harpenden Society set out a reasoned response to L&G's proposals, objecting to the scheme for a number of crucial reasons, among which the issues of traffic congestion and loss of valuable Green Belt remain key factors.

Our opposition is strongly supported by two local interest organisations: the long-established Harpenden Green Belt Association and the more recent, specifically-targeting 'Stop L&G' group, whose team of potentially-affected residents have been actively lobbying local councillors at town, district and county level, raising awareness of L&G's development plans and their implications for the people of Harpenden.

St Albans District councillor John Galvin is a core member of the 'Stop L&G' team. (pictured right) On a positive note he says 'SADC has rebuffed L&G's attempts to get away with an abbreviated environmental assessment when they formally present their proposal'. The council has demanded that L&G provide full traffic and residential travel assessments.

In what is being seen as a precedent, the 'Stop L&G' group points out that the council's planning committee has recently rejected a proposal to build on Green Belt land elsewhere in the district, at Chiswell Green on the south side of St Albans, where traffic issues played a major part in the decision. As with the L&G plans, there was vigorous opposition from local residents.



It is also worth noting that, under pressure from many MPs representing constituencies in predominantly rural areas of the south-east of England, the government announced its intention to make housebuilding targets advisory rather than mandatory and that Green Belt land should not be used in meeting those targets.

However, until those laudable intentions of protecting valuable countryside become law, there can be no guarantee that they will be considered when planning applications are submitted. And based on the evidence of L&G's exploitation of SADC's Local Plan delay, spelled out in our Autumn newsletter, it must be possible that a similar 'hurry up' strategy would be invoked to beat the revised national housing policy deadline. Vigilance must therefore be the watchword for the 'Stop L&G' group and for the Harpenden Society in its declared opposition to the gigantic so-called 'North-West Harpenden' development.

MP Afolami affirms bank hub support

Strengthening the campaign, reported in past issues of this newsletter, for a bank hub to be set up in Harpenden to compensate for the wave of branch closures, the town's MP Bim Afolami has reaffirmed his unequivocal support. He made his comments in a report in November, saying that such hubs could become centres of community, offering not just financial services but other public services and community advice.

As chair of an all-party Parliamentary Group on Financial Markets at Westminster, Mr Afolami said he envisaged district council owned and managed bank hubs in towns across the country facing the same challenges as Harpenden. It should be added that banking services specialist and Harpenden Society member Derek French has been instrumental in continuing to highlight the need for bank hubs through the national as well as local media, generating positive coverage in the Financial Times, the Mail on Sunday and specialist business publications.



Concerns raised over Station area makeover plans

On the front page of our Autumn newsletter we detailed the plans put forward by Hertfordshire County Council, in collaboration with Network Rail, for the makeover of the townscape around Station Approach and Harding Parade. In a public consultation exercise, the views of Harpenden residents and local organisations were invited.

Accordingly, the **Harpenden Society** submitted the following detailed response:

Following correspondence with the senior engineer heading the County Council's Highway Improvements Group, the Society expresses its overall support for the scheme's aims and intentions. That part of the town is unquestionably in dire need of updating and we hope that the proposals, duly amended in the light of residents' and our own feedback, are implemented.

Our continuing concerns relate primarily to the following issues:

Dropping off rail travellers

Parking along Station Road

East station car park access

Dropping off rail travellers

It appears from the consultation plans that the proposed 'improvement' involves simply converting two existing Station Approach car park spaces into a 'drop off zone'. In our view that barely addresses the existing problem arising, most acutely at peak times, from the restricted space in front of the main station entries.

There would remain insufficient room for cars, having dropped off their passengers, to execute the necessary U-turn for leaving the station, without impeding vehicular access to the West station car park. In consequence, many 'drop-off drivers' would, as now, especially in inclement weather, be tempted to drive instead into the East car park, where there is no proper provision for dropping off passengers adjacent to the ticket booths. (see further comments on the East car park below).

Without materially improved drop-off facilities – which, in our assessment, the upgrade plans fall short of addressing adequately – drivers would continue simply to stop on double yellow lines in Station Road, Victoria Road or Carlton Road to drop their passengers, doing little if anything to ease current levels of traffic congestion around the station.



Limited space for dropping off and picking up travellers



A tight turning circle for cars and taxis

Station Approach and Harding Parade

Improvements outlined in the designed proposals for the townscape around Station Approach and Harding Parade are welcomed.



New crossing and improved visual appearance.

The removal of the hoardings around Station House and all the new proposals in Station Approach would provide the basis for the total revision of Harding Parade into a visually stunning new look. And the new crossing just beyond Victoria Road would improve access to the station.



Parking along Station Road

Though not included in the original station area upgrade proposals, the intention to ease the effective traffic 'bottleneck' in Station Road, currently created by permitted kerbside parking on the north side of the road at the point where the width of the roadway narrows (adjacent to Simmons the bakers), is to be welcomed. However, by way of parking restriction enforcement, the installation of bollards along the length of the hashed white lines would act as a more visible deterrent to would-be thoughtless parking miscreants.



East car park access

Whilst not an integrated part of the station area makeover plans, access into and out of the East car park, at the difficult junction of Station Road and Carlton Road, creates formidable traffic problems, particularly at school times as well as during peak commuter movements.

In the absence of materially improved drop-off provision within the station precincts (as outlined above), the chaos at the East car park entry/exit – aggravated by the absence of definitive traffic priority road markings – can only increase.

Priority should be allocated to widening the 50 yards or so of access into and out of the East car park, enabling cars to safely pass one another. Consideration should also be given to the installation of (at least peak hour) traffic light control at what is, in reality, a four-way junction; that would necessarily need to be integrated with the immediately adjacent light-controlled pedestrian crossing in Station Road.



Council echoes Society's concerns

At its end-of-November meeting Harpenden Town Council debated the station area upgrade issues, broadly agreeing with those put forward by the Harpenden Society. Councillors stressed in particular the need to address the presently constricted access in and out of the East station car park at what is effectively a four-way junction. The Station Road traffic 'bottleneck' adjacent to Simmons – though outside the scope of the HCC/Network Rail upgrade proposals – was also highlighted.

Meanwhile, on the wider subject of access to the station, it was made clear that the long-debated possibility of rail passengers – as pedestrians and/or drivers – reaching number 1 platform from the south, via the Aysgarth Close cul-de-sac would be addressed by HTC, but probably not before 2024.

Museum opening now in sight

Some time later this year Harpenden Museum is due to open its doors. Housed within the Eric Morecambe Centre in Rothamsted Park on a 25-year lease, it has been a long time coming. Sixty-five years ago, in 1957, the weekly Harpenden Free Press carried a story on its front page announcing proposals for just such a 'Harpenden Museum' – something for which a number of historically-minded residents had clearly been agitating. Alas, the plans ran into the sand, one of the more obvious reasons being the lack of a ready home to accommodate such an undoubtedly praiseworthy venture.

Not until 1973 and the founding of Harpenden Local History Society did the potential contents of a future town museum start to be somewhat randomly accumulated. A small room at the rear of Harpenden Hall was made available to the LHS by the then Urban District Council for storing historical artefacts and documents and for holding modest monthly Saturday exhibitions, put together largely by the late Les Casey, one of the Society's founders who became, let us say seamlessly, its dedicated archivist.

The 'History Room', as it became colloquially known, faced two moves during subsequent years, eventually being housed within the precincts of Park Hall, courtesy of Harpenden Town Council, where the space available was, to put it mildly, cramped and wholly inadequate to house the LHS's growing historical inventory. In consequence, many items, large and small, were stored in enthusiastic LHS members' lofts and/or garages around the town, in which context Les Casey again deserves special mention, as does the late Eric Brandreth, well known for many years as Harpenden's head librarian.

As plans for the major redevelopment of Harpenden's leisure and sports facilities began to take shape during the last decade, most notably involving the conversion of the existing sports centre into what was to become the Eric Morecambe Centre, the opportunity arose for the establishment of that long-awaited Harpenden Museum.

Following protracted negotiation with St Albans District Council 'public realm' officers, space was to be made available in the lower ground floor of the EMC to accommodate an exhibition/display area and, importantly, a properly-equipped document and artefact storage room – appropriately dubbed the Les



Museum logo symbolises the famous baa-lamb trees opposite the Silver Cup

Casey Room – from which items could be readily accessible for display or historical study.

Before the museum facilities could be completed, temporary storage of the numerous items previously held at LHS members' homes and in the 'history room' at Park Hall had to be found. Willing help came from the management of St Albans City Museum who, a few years earlier, had faced similar – albeit larger scale – challenges in its move from its long-established site in Hatfield Road to the city's more grandiose and prominent former town hall.

An industrial storage unit at Sandridgegate, close to the William IV road junction on the edge of St Albans was rented by the LHS, pending full occupation of the new Harpenden Museum in the EMC. Storage space there is shared, amicably, with St Albans Museum.

Fitting out the new museum is now well under way. David Keen, LHS archivist, and now de facto museum curator, says some early problems, for example removal of some of the re-purposed building's redundant overhead ducting, were overcome. Negotiation with building conversion contractors Willmott Dixon enabled the erection of new strategically-positioned false walls and installation of new power points for display lighting.

Though the new Harpenden Museum is by definition far more sizeable than any of the LHS's own earlier display or storage facilities, with a total floor area of about 330sq ft, it nevertheless has its space limitations. And that led to the adoption of 'roller racking' in the Les Casey Room, of the kind widely used for storage in many of the country's major art galleries and museums.

It comprises four back-to-back paired shelving stacks which can move laterally on rollers, enabling an access corridor to be selected between any two adjacent stacks. Thus optimum use is made of the room's 130sq ft of floorspace. Careful attention also had to be paid to the detail of the shelving in each stack, to make allowance for the positioning, as well as the size and weight, of the museum's hundreds of artefacts and thousands of documents. It necessarily brought the related challenge of electronically tracking and recording the location of every item to ensure ready retrieval.



Fitting out the museum is well under way', says curator David Keen.



A glimpse of the space-efficient 'roller racking' in the Les Casey archive room.

It became apparent early in the planning stage that in order to do justice to what was an undoubtedly ambitious project, the museum had to be equipped to 'professional' standards. Accordingly, a Luton-based company Qwerk, experienced in the installation of what it calls 'creative environments', including for example a Raphael exhibition at the National Gallery, was commissioned with the responsibility of designing and installing the aforementioned roller racking, at a

cost of around £17,000, as well as the numerous purpose-designed display cabinets and lighting in the main exhibition room.

The exact date of the Harpenden Museum's public opening has yet to be determined, being dependent on a number of factors including the timetable for moving everything from its temporary storage. But the hours of opening have been provisionally set: 10am to 4pm on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays. There are plans for a children's area aimed at broadening the museum's appeal.

Meanwhile it is receiving a degree of advance publicity directed at everyone attending events at the EMC, by way of a 'mural' in the entrance lobby depicting 'Historic Harpenden Through the Years' in the form of eight photographic images of an attractive Hertfordshire village over several centuries.

Even when the museum is closed to visitors, EMC theatre patrons will be given a 'taster', thanks to an illuminated 'shop window' containing a regularly-changed display facing on to the theatre exit corridor.

AWARDS 2022

We continue to invite nominations from Society members and/or their friends and neighbours for the 2022 annual **Harpenden Society Awards**. Let us know which new building developments or facilities completed in the town during the 12 months of 2022 that you consider worthy of special recognition.

In addition to new or facelifted buildings, there are clearly more modest and less prominent developments with visual appeal which can be identified as contributing positively to the townscape.

Your views will augment those of our experienced judging panel, acknowledging the need to include commercial and civic as well as residential properties across the whole of the town.

Please go to the Society website (www.harpendensociety.org) or email to awards@harpendensociety.org to nominate your entries. Our Awards Committee will visit and examine all nominations and select the winners, in three categories:

The prestigious Harpenden Society Plaque;

Certificate of Merit;

Letter of Commendation.



Two possible contenders for 2022 Awards.



Pavilion of splendour to boost park's attractions

Cricket and football teams who play in Rothamsted Park can look forward to greatly improved facilities in an all-new, more attractive and well-appointed sports pavilion planned by Harpenden Town Council, which took ownership of the park in 2021. It would replace the park's two existing time-worn 'shed like' pavilions, both of which have long been fenced-off for health and safety reasons including asbestos issues.

It is proposed that the new pavilion would be located on or close to the present Amenbury football pavilion's position, that is adjacent to Harpenden Town FC's ground and close to the park's projected 3G all-weather pitches destined for use by the Colts and other teams.

Though its design detail has yet to be finalised, Sports Clubhouses – a Coulsdon, Surrey based consultancy – has been appointed to work to a brief which includes the following key features: a high-ceilinged main sports hall with a floor area of at least 1500sq ft; two changing rooms for use by either cricket or football teams, with direct inside and outside access; separate internal toilet facilities for non-players and sports hall users; kitchen/bar space; external patio area; full-height bi-fold glass doors to main sports hall; full disabled/wheelchair access.

Additional sustainability and environment-friendly features of the proposed new pavilion include solar panels and rainwater 'harvesting'.

Clearly dependent on cost projections, more ambitious design features are said to be under consideration, including: a 650sq ft clubroom, separated from the main hall by a foldaway wall; two additional changing rooms; a larger, 130sq ft kitchen area; a small office space; and a roof terrace overlooking the park pitches.



Existing time-worn pavilions have long been fenced off for asbestos-related safety reasons.

Development plans in the pipeline

The number of planning applications being submitted to St Albans District Council – and being monitored by the Harpenden Society – for residential new-builds, extensions and alterations in the town is much lower than a year ago. The downward trend is almost certainly attributable to the recent decline in house prices, itself a function of the economic situation, which has brought in its wake higher interest rates for mortgage borrowers.

But it appears to have had little or no dampening effect on the opening of new restaurants and cafes in the town centre, though the plans for an Oakman's 'gastropub' in the former Kingston House shop unit remain on hold, at the time of writing, after its plans to include a rooftop eating area resulted in an initial rejection.

The more noteworthy planning applications submitted in 2022 include:

Harpenden Football Pitch, Rothamsted Park, where consent has been granted to the Town Council for the installation of a new 3G 'all weather' football pitch plus improvements to the surroundings. Approval was granted conditionally on the new facility being used 'for seven days a week up to 10 pm'.

Harpenden Public Halls, Southdown Road. As our front page story makes clear, the application by the site owner SADC, submitted only a few months ago, for the redevelopment of the site, must now by default be withdrawn. Those plans in any case attracted a good deal of opposition. Objections were lodged by the Harpenden Society and, also notably, by the owner of the immediately adjacent Grade II* listed Harpenden Hall. Clearly the private developer eventually chosen to take over the project will, in submitting

its own plans, be only too well aware of those well-documented earlier objections.

Care Home on former Pan Autos site, Grove Road – The unexpected planning application by Jarvis for the building of a 75-bed care home on the site, in place of the company's previously proposed residential apartment block development, has attracted objections particularly from nearby residents – as well as from the Harpenden Society – because of the proposed building's overall size and the limited parking provision.

Cross Farm Fields – At the time of going to press at the beginning of February no application had been submitted for the building of up to 30 homes on 16.5 acres of Green Belt farmland, as reported on page 5 of our Autumn newsletter, despite the stated intention of the Lansdown property group to do so before the end of November 2022.

6 High Street – As mentioned above, the former Kingston House premises remain empty and forlorn, following refusal for Oakman Inns to convert it into a pub/restaurant and pub. To date no appeals have been lodged.

3 Cross Lane – The owner has appealed against the refusal to grant consent for the erection of three new dwellings on the site, which is located directly opposite the similarly contentious Cross Farm Fields site.

Land to the north of Wheathampstead Road – An outline application has been submitted for up to 40 houses to be erected on an area of paddocks behind Aldwick Manor and adjacent to the entrance drive leading to Aldwickbury Park Golf Club. The Harpenden Society has lodged an objection on the basis of Green Belt erosion and also the narrow width of the Piggottshill Lane access from the Wheathampstead Road/Alzey Gardens junction roundabout. It has also attracted many other objections. Councillor Gaskell has asked for it to be 'called in' if the planners are minded to grant consent.

Airport expansion inquiry: verdict awaited

The eight-week Public Inquiry into Luton Airport's application to grow airport capacity from 18 to 19 million passengers per annum – bringing an increase in local noise, air pollution and traffic congestion – wound up in mid-November. The application, already, and unsurprisingly, approved by the airport owner Luton Borough Council (LBC), had been 'called in' (a standard local authority planning term) by the two relevant Secretaries of State, for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and, separately, Transport.



At the completion of the inquiry, held in Luton Town Hall, the three government-appointed independent inspectors set about reviewing all the evidence, ahead of submitting their recommendations to the Secretaries of State. Their report is due to be submitted before the end of February and a decision from Whitehall is expected by late May.

It is worth recording that the nature of the inquiry was a legally adversarial process. The airport operator and LBC were each represented by a King's Counsel supported by junior counsel, solicitors and others deemed to be 'experts'. The long-established LADACAN (Luton and District Association for the Control of Aircraft Noise) lobbying group represented local communities including the Harpenden Society, whose representative Karl Wingfield made an opening statement to the inquiry. He also put questions to airport representatives during the specific noise and planning sessions. Donations of over £100,000 had been raised through LADACAN to fund the services of King's Counsel Richard Wald and supporting experts in climate change, economics, noise and planning.

During the inquiry the airport operator strived to assert that the planned expansion in allowable passenger throughput was in accordance with government policy. Unsurprisingly, LBC did its best to agree. LADACAN, the Harpenden Society and other interested parties meanwhile questioned the evidence on which the application had been determined. It was clear however from the demeanour of the airport's and town council's legal representatives that they paid little if any heed to the concerns of the local community, with some of their answers to vital questions, by common consent, lacking serious credibility.

Under its new banner of Luton Rising – itself the subject of some derision at its 'unveiling' – the LBC airport-owning company is maintaining its far more ambitious, some say grotesque, aspiration to increase the airport's capacity by almost 70% to 32 mppa over the next 20 years. Quite separately from last Autumn's inquiry, it has recently confirmed submission of its statutory DCO (Development Consent Order) application to the government's Planning Inspectorate by the end of February. The final form the application will take is not yet clear but a few 'cosmetic' tweaks to the proposals based on consultation feedback seem likely.

At the ensuing public inquiry, which would notably not be an adversarial process, the Harpenden Society plans to submit its own evidence. Our position remains, as we set out in our Spring 2022 newsletter, that this huge further expansion of the airport is unwarranted, due to inevitable and totally unacceptable increases in road and rail congestion, noise, air pollution and greenhouse gas (CO₂) emissions.

To those environmental considerations must be added the evident absence of a business case to justify such a massive expansion, especially given the perilous state of Luton Borough Council's finances and consequently related doubts as to whether such a major project would attract sufficient funding. The broader question must also be raised of the airport's acknowledged status as the least appropriate for expansion of all the airports in the London catchment area (short runway, poor infrastructure and site location).

When details of the new inquiry are announced it will be open to any member of the public, as well as special interest groups like the Harpenden Society, to make their representations to the inspectors.

At the time this newsletter went to press there had been no further announcements on the prospective Luton Airport departure and arrival flightpath revisions that threaten aircraft noise increases over parts of Harpenden and which were detailed in our Autumn newsletter.



An Artful Enterprise

In our Autumn newsletter the article about Southdown Hardware proved unusually popular with readers. 'Let's have more coverage of long-established small independent businesses in Harpenden' was a typical reaction. One suggestion was to turn the spotlight on Artscape, which began life almost 40 years ago as a small shop supplying artists' materials at no 35 High Street, on the corner of Thompsons Close.

In 1985 the founder of the business Gurmeet Singh Suharan took over what had previously been 'The Studio' and later 'Studio 35' focussing mainly on photographic supplies and gifts, though with a modest stock of artists' materials, including picture frames, in the basement area of the shop.

As has happened regrettably all too often in recent decades with shops in our High Street, rent increases eventually proved unsustainable for Artscape, making its move to a less visibly prominent address inevitable. But fortunately by that time, as Gurmeet explains, the company had built, largely through word-of-mouth recommendations, a substantial reputation and customer base extending well beyond the confines of Harpenden.



Artscape's founder Gurmeet Singh Suharan in front of the company's fourth Harpenden home – in Coldharbour Lane.

So its relocation to 'Unit 4' Bowers Parade, the small industrial estate behind the shops – which has since been supplanted by The Foresters housing development – meant a minimal loss of 'passing trade'. But Artscape's business had by then grown to the extent that it was able to make worthwhile use of what was a more than threefold increase in floorspace, even though Gurmeet concedes that the move was initially a big financial risk.

It was increasingly apparent that customised picture framing had become a major part of the business; and a workshop dedicated to the production of frames of every conceivable design, size and construction was established, and has remained, the vital core of the enterprise.

Frames can, says Gurmeet, be grouped in three broad categories of quality and therefore price, namely 'standard', 'conservation' and 'museum'. Many picture

frames produced by Artscape are supplied complete with glass. 'So what?' one might ask. The answer is that the customer has a choice of eight – yes, eight – types of glass, necessarily varying in price, to enhance and often protect every painting, or photographic image.

In December 2007, with Jarvis ready to develop The Foresters apartments behind Bowers Parade, Artscape was obliged to move again, this time to 35% larger premises – nevertheless made full use of – on Southdown Industrial Estate.

There the owner of the land (location for many years of Harpenden gasworks), that is the UK Coal Pension Fund, announced its intention to redevelop the site, initially with the hope of exploiting what would be its enhanced value for housing. When such a change of use was blocked by SADC planners, the landowner 'back pedalled' submitting revised plans for 'commercial use'.

Artscape was nevertheless required, for the third time in its history, in early 2020, to find another new home. Gurmeet notes wryly, as an aside that, nearly three years on, Artscape's erstwhile Southdown premises remain empty.

So it was that in February 2020 the company moved to its present, slightly smaller, 2800sq ft, site on the other side of Harpenden in Coldharbour Lane, where its offerings of every conceivable range of art and craft materials, including off-the-shelf picture frames, are on attractive display. More down-to-earth merchandise which provides Artscape with steady business includes stationery and computer supplies, in addition to photocopying, black-and-white plan printing and laminating.



Arts Selection of artist's materials in abundance

Gurmeet Singh Suharan, Artscape's proprietor, was born into Kenya's Sikh community in 1949. He came to Britain in 1967 and before setting up the business in Harpenden worked for some years as an acoustics engineer. One of the notable projects in which he was involved was the design and installation of the fibreglass sound diffusers, nicknamed 'mushrooms' in the Royal Albert Hall, below the domed roof, which greatly reduced the echo effect which had previously marred the enjoyment of audiences at promenade concerts and other musical events

Did You Know?

From Harpenden's history

Rothamsted Manor – through the centuries

Harpenden's history is inextricably bound up with that of the Manor of Rothamsted, its name having been derived, it is suggested, from either 'red enclosed space' or 'rook-frequented homestead'. There was thought to be a small farmhouse on the site in Saxon times. In the Middle Ages it became a sub-manor within the area of most of Harpenden and Wheathampstead that was then notionally owned by Westminster Abbey, under a charter of Edward the Confessor.

The name Rothamsted was first noted in the year 1212, when it was held by one Richard de Merston, and again nine years later when it belonged to Henry Gubion. The original house was

probably a timber-framed building, set on flint and surrounded by a moat. It subsequently passed through several ownerships and by the end of the 16th Century was a substantial residence with at least 16 rooms.

Then notably in 1623 the manor was bought by the Wittewronges, a family of Calvinist refugees who had fled under religious persecution from Ghent in the Low Countries. They had built up a brewery business in London which was returning a substantial net profit of over £1000 per annum. Rothamsted manor's appearance as we see it today was largely attributable to John Wittewronge, hence its Dutch architectural style.

He had graduated from Trinity College, Oxford in 1634. By the age of 18 he had become Lord of the

Manor. He was later knighted by Charles I, made a commander of Aylesbury garrison by Cromwell and made a baronet by Charles II. He served as MP for Hertfordshire. He was married three times and fathered six children.

Inhabited by the Wittewronges until 1763, the manor then passed to a cousin John Bennet and then to his nephew John Bennet Lawes the elder, who rather neglected the fabric of the house, thanks to his supposed impecuniosity, allegedly attributable to his friendship with the Prince Regent.

Of great significance locally, in 1814 John Bennet Lawes the younger was born. He went on to establish Rothamsted Experimental Station – forerunner of today's Rothamsted Research – where he conducted pioneering trials on fertilisers and nutrition. And he set up a fertiliser manufacturing plant at Deptford in south-east London.

He played a prominent part in local Harpenden affairs and showed great concern for the wellbeing of the village population. Meanwhile in 1863 he extended the manor house, adding the Great Drawing Room, which retained the Dutch exterior style. In 1900 Rothamsted's ownership passed to his son Charles, an athlete but also a sculptor responsible for statues in the manor house grounds, and making numerous internal alterations, including the addition of a library.

Charles died in 1911 and in 1934 ownership of the estate, including the experimental station's extensive acreage of land, passed to the Lawes Trust (whose funds were raised by public appeal), as remains the case today. The house was let until the Second World War, when it was used by the army, after which it became a hall of residence for Rothamsted staff and laboratory visitors.

Notable features of Rothamsted Manor building include its Dutch style gables, its clock tower over the front entrance porch with its classical columns cut into the brickwork and, on the wall above, the Wittewronge coat-of-arms and a plaque for the Sun Fire (Insurance) Office, issued in 1726, when the house was insured for £1000.

The prominent group of five octagonal chimneys are dated 1654. Even more venerable are the stone fireplace and staircase in the hall which date from 1635, though the hall's linenfold panelling came from Clare in Suffolk in about 1900.

More about Rothamsted's past at
www.harpenden-history.org.uk



EDITOR'S VIEW

Alan Bunting

New charges a deterrent to car park usage

Car parking in Harpenden faces intractable and many-faceted challenges, with which different bodies – ie district and town councils as well as well-intentioned pressure groups like HARPARK – have wrestled, for what seem like decades.

Harpenden Town Council undertook a wide-ranging 'transport and movement' survey before the Covid emergency, but its findings appear (at the time of writing) to be still under wraps.



Meanwhile, however, St Albans District Council published in November its own 'Parking Strategy Consultation Update' which despite its title also delved into such wider issues as air quality and the (not directly related) 'climate crisis'.

SADC's motivation for carrying out the so-called update is, of course, not primarily one of altruism for the frustrated motorist looking for somewhere safe to leave his or her car. Given the acknowledged formidable pressures on council budgets, there is a clear need to improve revenue; and its income from parking charges must be seen as an inevitably 'soft target'.

Increased off-street parking charges have accordingly been recommended for Councillor's approval– A notable example comes with the proposals affecting Harpenden's largest public car park, in Amenbury Lane, which is used by commuters but also, importantly, serving the adjacent Sports Centre and Eric Morecambe Centre.

Introduction of an evening charge (hitherto free for everyone) is set to bring several unwanted side effects. Though £1.00 per 2 hours is nowadays for many a small



amount to pay, it will be seen as an irritant, involving the often fiddling procedure at the pay machine, made worse when there is a queue of drivers waiting to pay.

One result is likely to be more disturbingly unwelcome kerbside parking in the nearby (and more poorly lit) residential streets, such as Avenue St Nicholas. It might even deter people from coming into the centre of the town to eat, or attend events at the EMC, with some preferring to enjoy their evening leisure time elsewhere.

Enforcement of the proposed new charge implies an additional cost for the council by way of pay for a parking attendant (time and a half for evenings?). And whether the extra revenue from the summated £1.00 charges – when the number of cars parked will inevitably drop – would cover such an attendant's wage bill must be questionable.



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