



Annual Report 2020/2021

Looking back - Looking forward

A brief account for the Annual General Meeting of the Society's activities during the year 2020/2021 with a glance ahead to the coming year

The Chairman looks back...and forward

This is the second report I've made reflecting on yet another unusual year because of the impact of the COVID crisis. The Society continued to function in the same 'behind the scenes' fashion as we were obliged to from March 2020 with the Committee continuing to represent the interests of our members across a whole raft of developments and activities affecting our community. Of course, we could not hold our regular public meetings and electronic communication usually by email became the order of the day. Because of the actions of our stalwart team both producing and distributing the newsletter we were still able to mostly publish and circulate paper copies of our regular newsletter to our members and to the wider community and thanks must go to all involved. We must remember that there are Society members and quite a few people across the town who don't have access to or don't otherwise use the internet and paper communication is still the best way of the Society reaching them. We ventured into holding our AGM (which should have been held in April 2020) by electronic means in December 2020 to avoid further delay in this necessary part of the business of the Society and in February 2021 we held an open and well attended Zoom meeting with our MP Bim Afolami briefing us and taking questions on local as well as national issues.

Despite the country and the community dealing with COVID nevertheless both new and ongoing proposals affecting the town went forward. London Luton Airport Ltd continued to press its proposal to increase passenger numbers from the present maximum of 18 million passengers per annum to 19 million passengers per annum despite opposition from numerous public bodies and community groups including this Society. The District Council Local Plan was rejected by the Planning Inspectorate which throws the whole future of the various proposed new developments around the town into the air. However, I suppose even more importantly the government presented its proposals on a new planning system

in the document 'Planning for the Future'. This represents a fundamental shift away from the current system of planning decisions being taken locally albeit within the framework of national guidance on planning. HMG argues

that a radically new system is needed to encourage developers to build the national target of new homes. To say these proposals are controversial is an understatement and the political fallout for the government has already been significant. I think it's fair to say that along with many other local bodies the Society is extremely concerned about the problems that the proposals, if implemented, will cause and we are pretty sure that in towns like Harpenden they will not address

housing need. Alongside the uncertainty surrounding the Local Plan which the District Council is relaunching, the lack of clarity brought about by the state of the national proposals and increasing challenge to the data which underpins government calculations on housing need (post Brexit and as we emerge from COVID) means we all need to be on our guard in order to protect the character of our town. Further proposals were made to adjust healthcare provision in the wider area around plans for Watford General, Hemel Hempstead Hospital and St Albans Hospital and we continued to press for better and new use for the Red House. See page 7.

(Continued on next page)



The new reception area at the Red House

The Chairman looks back...and forward continued.

As we emerged from lockdown with the loosening of restrictions in April, we learned that our long running group that had kept the library open on Wednesdays until COVID struck was not able to continue. Unfortunately, in the intervening 14 months since the first lockdown a large number of our volunteers had moved on or decided that they could not continue and after much soul searching it was agreed that the Society could not recruit sufficient replacement volunteers and that it was not possible to continue with the volunteer scheme. The efforts of the volunteers have been much appreciated in allowing the local library to stay open on Wednesdays and I would like to use this report to place on formal record the appreciation of the Society to Liz Trounce the team organiser and the library volunteers for their tremendous contribution to the town.

Since the loosening of restrictions in April the Society Committee has been planning the return of a programme of face-to-face public meetings starting this Autumn on a number of key issues facing the town. Obviously, we can't be definite as we will, like everyone else, have to take the latest health advice and it may mean that some of the meetings will take place by Zoom. The Local Plan is being re-launched and we hope to hear and question the District Council on what this means. This is especially important as the uncertainty surrounding the government's planning proposals 'Planning for the Future' lies in the background. The urgency of the international debate on the climate crisis is apparent in all the

news we read, and you will have seen that Society has contributed to highlighting some of the issues by publishing a sustainability guide and suggesting what we as local residents can do to ameliorate the climate crisis. We plan for some of our meetings to deal with climate and sustainability issues

and we will ask our local councils what they mean, for example, by declaring a climate emergency. As you read the reports of the portfolio holders covering the arts, planning and the built environment, transport, health, public safety, education it's clear that the pace of change and development has not slackened despite the impact of COVID. The role of a Civic Society in providing a channel for residents to comment, contribute and influence on what is happening to their town in a non-party political way has, in my view, been never more important. We recognise, however, that we do not hold a monopoly of civic knowledge and views and

increasingly we are working with other civic groups in the town such as the Harpenden Trust, the Local History Society, the Friends of the Nickey Line, LADACAN and Harpenden Sky in order to share ideas and co-ordinate where civic action and pressure needs to be laid before decision makers. It only remains for me to thank the members of the Committee for their tireless efforts in 2020/21 (and coping with the vagaries of electronic communication!).

Phil Waters

Education - Looking back

Education! Education! Education! What a year it has been for our local schools. Students have been in school, out of school, survived remote learning and weekly Covid tests, stayed within their bubbles and managed to reach the summer holidays with a smile on their faces. Hopefully they will return in September to what feels like a normal school.

The Society's Write Me A Story competition was postponed, but will be relaunched again in October offering our budding young writers the opportunity to share their writing skills. In an attempt to hear the views of our youngsters the Society's Newsletter is publishing articles from senior students informing us of their opinions on local and global issues. Even during the pandemic students have met with MPs, visited Westminster and held various conferences on topics such as Black Lives Matter, Bullying, Send My Friend To School. Students from one Secondary school are attending the Labour Party Conference and then at the COP26 in Glasgow, hopefully sharing with delegates the wonderful work that is going on in our schools.

The Society was very pleased to award Katherine Warrington School with one of its annual awards. The new school has been awarded a top award plaque for its buildings. The

plaque will be presented to the Headteacher in the new school year. At a recent meeting with the Headteacher it was pleasing to hear that the school is fully subscribed and settling in to its new site without too many problems.



Spacious areas inside the Katherine Warrington School

Looking forward

Looking to the future the Society will continue to work with all our schools allowing youngsters to voice their opinions on all matters. It would also be great if some of our youngsters got more involved with our Society, we are always looking out for new members however old they may be!

Chris Armitage

Transport - Looking back

Transport issues reduced significantly in 2020 as the Coronavirus pandemic curtailed all forms of travel for most of the year. This has continued to be the case for the first half of 2021 too.

Air traffic was down significantly, reducing the incidence of noise pollution in the town substantially. However, this didn't stop Luton Airport from submitting a planning application to increase air passenger numbers to 19 million from 18 million. The planning application also seeks to remove until 2031 the noise limitations contained in the 2014 planning permission that had already been breached several times in recent years. Many groups and individuals have objected to this application, with a substantial number focusing on the incompatibility of air passenger growth with reducing the effects of climate change too. Separately, the proposed timetable for nearly doubling air passengers at the airport has been pushed out, reflecting, in the airport's eyes, the desire to be more "sustainable" (whatever they mean by that). Various other initiatives to reduce aircraft noise (such as the re-organisation of airspace in the south east) moved into the "slow lane" in 2020 but we anticipate these will be resurrected in 2021.



Locally, car traffic decreased as people were encouraged to "stay at home". Furthermore, in order to improve safety in Harpenden, the lower High Street was partially pedestrianised. As the Coronavirus crisis has eased, this has created a lot of debate about the future of this part of the high street, with retailers asking for the road to be reopened and a large number of residents preferring that the roads remain closed. A welcome addition to the town's car parking facilities are the additional spaces created next to the new leisure centre (albeit that a substantial number are reserved for electric vehicles and are currently underutilised).



The railways were also quiet in 2020 as most commuters worked from home. Whilst rail commuting (particularly into London) has begun to recover, it remains significantly lower than the pre-pandemic levels. The addition of a direct link from London to Luton Airport has now opened but its impact on existing commuter traffic has been minimal.

Locally, 2020 saw a significant increase in cycling and walking as residents made use of the many paths and open spaces that surround Harpenden although the inclement weather made some pathways very challenging to negotiate.

Looking forward

The Society remains committed to the vision set out in the Harpenden Neighbourhood Plan 2018:

"That Harpenden residents are able to walk and cycle around safely and comfortably, and travel is managed via predominantly environmentally friendly, interchangeable methods, with the appropriate quantity and quality of cycle storage and parking provision, in an atmosphere of sustainable growth and significantly reduced pollution."

To meet these aims, in a post-Coronavirus society, the Society intends to work with our local, district and county councillors and local residents groups to increase the volume of safe cycleways and pedestrian routes in and around the town. In particular, the Society will support appropriate proposals that create a sustainable, long term answer to the question of what to do with the lower High Street that meets the needs of all parties.



Furthermore, the Society will

encourage the relevant authorities to implement and update the Harpenden Car Parking Strategy 2017-21 and, in conjunction with this, encourage better policing of anti-social parking, to encourage traffic flows.

The prospective expansion of Luton Airport will continue to occupy the Society in 2021 as the owners continue to promote its 32 million passengers per annum proposal. Whilst the Society does not object to the growth of Luton Airport per se, the complete disregard that the airport's owners and operators have for the quality of life of its surrounding communities means that the Society has to be vigilant in holding them to account on its past and future environmental commitments.

Karl Wingfield

Treasurer's report on the accounts to 31 December 2020

The Society earned a surplus for 2020 of £2,689.44 compared to a deficit of £234.27 in 2019.

Income was down by £160 due to a slight fall in membership. Expenditure was down by £3,085 mainly due to the reduction in meeting costs as a result of restricted gatherings due to Covid-19: Public meetings down £2,260, AGM down £374 and Committee meetings down £90.

The Society is in a strong financial position with funds at 31 December 2020 of £17,951.45

Harry Downie

Built Environment - Looking back

The last year has seen high numbers of planning applications for extensions and alterations to existing dwellings, a growth which provided work for the building industry and related trades. Unfortunately as smaller houses are enlarged it automatically creates a shortage of less expensive property for the first and second time buyers. This is the consequence of builders focusing mainly on constructing large and mainly detached properties – which no doubt generates maximum profitability. However without a good mix of housing, the younger buyers will be driven out of the town.



With relaxed rules for “Permitted Development”, some of the extensions are out of proportion and overbearing. We have also seen a growth of traditional homes being demolished and replaced by another of very contemporary design, some of which change the character of the street. Unfortunately the Planning department, in my opinion, have effectively lost control of good town planning as they have allowed inappropriate buildings to be constructed and it is difficult for them to refuse other similar later applications.

The Society objected to a number of applications considered inappropriate for various reasons or contrary to the adopted Local Neighbourhood Plan. As an example a scheme by Jarvis and a partner to build a large residential Care Home on the site of Chelford fabrics in Coldharbour Lane, an established commercial employment area. This was opposed by the Society for a number of reasons, but despite it being contrary to the Neighbourhood Plan, the Town Council did not raise any objection. Thankfully the District Council refused consent but the Applicants have now lodged an appeal.



Looking forward

The new rules relating to Permitted Development are also having an impact on the Town Centre, as one of the relaxations allows for shops under a certain size (150 sq m) to change use without having to apply for planning consent. This has spurred on the number of new cafes and restaurants that have opened and will no doubt have future implications. On line shopping has obviously had an impact on the viability



of some of the local businesses and as the core of retail units changes to food and drink, there is a risk that it will be less attractive as a shopping destination. The situation is compounded by the recent closures of Santander Bank, Halifax and Nottingham Building Societies, M & Co. In addition the former Nat West unit remains vacant.

The relaxation of Permitted Development rules for both commercial and residential property has taken away much of the local control that has worked well for many decades. It helped Harpenden to grow into an attractive and desirable location. As more and more inappropriate development has now become “lawful” the Society and the residents of the town need to be even more vigilant.

John Lowe

Membership - Looking back

The last year has been an unusual one for us all. As a relatively new Membership Secretary, I started before the days of lockdown with a new recruitment leaflet and an expectation that we would be trying to raise our membership numbers back to the target figure of 1000. Instead it turned out to have been a time of admin of membership lists, arranging getting newsletters to members during lockdown etc. We are very thankful to our excellent team of newsletter distributors. We are also thankful to the many members who have stayed loyal to the Society during the hiatus, but membership numbers have slipped a little further.

Looking forward

My vision is a Harpenden Society post lockdown able to return to a full programme of activities concerning our lovely Town able to attract existing and new members. We are particularly lacking in younger members. In my role of membership secretary I need to make sure we take full advantage of recruitment opportunities. Please can you help me by notifying changes of postal and email addresses...and tell your friends and neighbours about the Society and its modest annual subscription !

I am sure that target of 1000 members again is achievable!

Hester Gabbutt

Publicity & Economy - Looking back

The Society continued its support for High Street businesses, being included in several of the High Street Shopping Guides AND the donation of a Hamper to the Christmas Shopping Guide competition. Inevitably there have been several closures in the last 12 months - 20/20 eyecare; The Land Office; Great Wall Chinese Food; All Floors; Cote Brasserie; Notts Building Society; Santander; Barbarello; Fitness Space and TUI. Some new faces have appeared - Vinsanto; Atesh; Nonnos Pizza; Travelfourseasons; Golden Touch Barber and Brad & Dills. And in Southdown a new Turkish Barber and The Goode Kitchen.

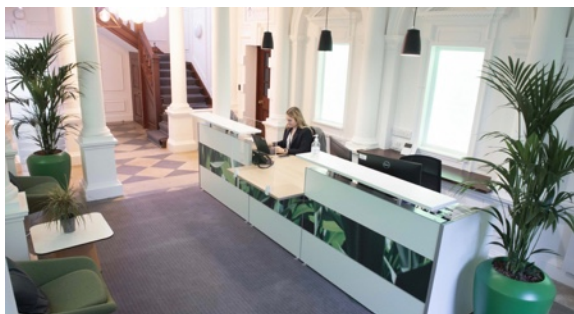
In a return to our involvement with school arts we launched 'TELL ME A STORY' in autumn 2020 to senior schools. A writing competition with prizes of book tokens. Whilst attracting a lot of initial attention, Covid curtailed full involvement which led to a postponement. The 12 entrants were awarded book tokens for their efforts.

Before the first lockdown we staged a public meeting in Feb 2020 with Bim Afolami MP as guest speaker. Both projects generated editorial coverage in the Herts Ad and social media,



Looking forward

Our PR and promotional coverage to residents is governed by our activities within the Town from each of our Group leaders. We will reach out to residents via the social media networks and the Herts Advertiser with information and reports throughout the year ahead. The future of the High Street continues to be a contentious subject. Our 'TELL ME A STORY' competition is being relaunched in November. We hope to reintroduce our public meetings and appear at Town events like the Summer Carnival. The opening of the Eric Morecambe Centre will bring high profile events to the town. Rothamsted Enterprises are a fine example of business innovation, developing their assets like the Russell Building (below) into office space for rent and hot-desking.



We will continue to monitor business development in line with the policies of the Neighbourhood Plan and report findings of importance.

Ron Taylor

Newsletter - Looking back

In 'normal' times, free of Covid restrictions, our quarterly newsletter has traditionally included a goodly helping of news about direct Society involvement in organising public meetings or participating in other events in Harpenden.

Regretfully, over the past 18 months or more, the effect of successive pandemic lockdowns has been to prohibit the majority of such activities. But it has meant the newsletter taking on a new importance, becoming an even more essential means of maintaining contact and communicating with members, some of them effectively housebound during lockdown, who might otherwise have become unaware of, or oblivious to, the ongoing work of the Society.

Under what were undeniably challenging circumstances for everyone, the newsletter continued to be circulated to – and welcomed by – members every three months. If nothing else it served as a reminder of the Society's ongoing 'civic watchdog' role in monitoring events and developments in the town, notably with progressive updates on the new leisure centre in Rothamsted Park.

Readers will have noticed that the extent of newsletter coverage has happily reached the point where we were obliged to increase the size of the Summer 2021 issue from the usual eight pages to twelve.

Looking forward

As some kind of post-Covid normality in everyday life resumes, it is hoped that there will be more activities in and around Harpenden, especially those with Society involvement, on which to report in the newsletter.

We are also now endeavouring to widen the newsletter's appeal by including, where we can, written contributions from young people in Harpenden, particularly senior students from the town's (now four in number) secondary schools. It is hoped that through their involvement we can, via parents and teachers, make the Society and its work better known among the town's population at large, prompting recruitment of new members.

But, as always, and importantly, written contributions from Society members with a 'Harpenden angle' will continue to be sought and, of course, welcomed. The editor is not (necessarily) looking for deathless prose; a bullet-point outline can often be moulded into an interesting report or article. Likewise, straightforward suggestions for topics worthy of coverage in the newsletter's pages, possibly from members hesitant about putting metaphorical 'pen to paper' will be gladly received; email those ideas to editor@harpendensociety.org.

Alan Bunting



Arts Leisure & Entertainment - Looking back

The main focus of the Society's work to achieve its diverse objectives in the arts, in leisure and in public entertainment has long been on the future of the town's Public Halls in Southdown Road. Five years ago the owners, St Albans City and District Council (SADC), following in part initiatives taken by the Society to draw attention to the issue, recognised they were no longer fit for purpose. An integrated project was formulated that would involve converting the swimming pool in Rothamsted Park into a multi-functional sports centre and simultaneously repurposing the existing sports centre as a replacement for the Public Halls. The Society was very active and effective in helping to maximise public participation in the project's formulation. Importantly, we were promised more than just a replacement for the existing Public Halls: the new facility would be an arts and cultural centre for the town.

To ensure that the new arts facility would be financially viable it would need to feature local organisations and stage popular performances that would attract people from outside Harpenden.

Looking forward

The Covid pandemic has had a dramatic effect with three specific impacts on the project described above. Firstly, the pandemic had a direct impact on the completion date for the repurposing of the former sports centre: the arts centre now opening up to nine months later than had been planned. Secondly, hopes that the centre (now officially named the Eric Morecambe Centre) could be launched with an ambitious arts festival have been dashed: such a festival would have required a lead-in time of at least a year. Finally, the existing Public Halls have been temporarily acquired by the NHS for use as a Vaccination Centre.



A User Group for the new Centre has held two meetings, but due to Covid restrictions has not met during the period under review. Through this Group the Society will aim to ensure that the facilities at the new EMC are affordable to local organisations, that the Centre is used at least 50 percent of the time by local groups and that an inspirational and uplifting programme of arts and cultural events is staged in addition to the high revenue-earning popular concerts.



SADC's proposal for redeveloping the Public Halls site in Southdown Road

Although not strictly an arts and entertainment issue, the Group has taken an active part in formulating proposals for determining the use to which the existing Public Halls site will be put after the Halls have been demolished. A broadly satisfactory outcome has been achieved, but implementation has inevitably been delayed whilst the site is being used by the NHS.

Alan Jackson

The Environment & Climate Change Looking back

As climate change and environmental awareness has moved to the forefront of all our minds The Harpenden Society took the initiative to show we are committed to generating awareness and encouraging positive change in Harpenden. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) published its report recently and made it clear that time was running out for the world to take action to slow the impact of climate change. This and many other reports prompted us to create a concise and information packed guide specially targeted for Harpenden. As individuals, families, community members, consumers, schools and business groups. Published in early Summer you can read it on the Society web site.

www.harpendensociety.org

Looking forward

Publishing the Guide is just the beginning of a movement to involve other like minded individuals and groups in Harpenden to work together. The Guide covers many subjects which we will explore to see how they can be conveyed to the local community and actions taken to bring tangible results.

Ron Taylor



Health & Welfare -Looking back

In our last Annual Report we expressed a view that the Wellbeing Centre promised for the Red House site might not materialise. With the transfer of ownership of the site from the Herts Community Trust to Central London Community Healthcare Trust this now seems a possibility.

Looking forward

Harpenden Memorial Hospital

We want to ensure that Harpenden residents are regularly briefed on the patient-related services at the Hospital with regular dialogue with Central London Community Healthcare Trust (CLCHT) representatives and visits to the hospital. Part of this involves the the Society being recognised as the 'common path' to CLCHT. We can then enter into discussions about the planned service provision versus a realistic 'shopping list' of what is needed at the Hospital. AND that there must be a coherent long term deliverable plan for the estate. We wish to ensure that the fabric of the hospital is maintained and not allowed to deteriorate any further. We will further our aims by Increased working with local patient groups and other Harpenden networks.



Above. Newly equipped consulting rooms and a reception section now ready for use at Harpenden Memorial Hospital

St Albans City Hospital Urgent Treatment Centre

This unit closed at the start of the COVID pandemic, and since then Harpenden residents have continued to use the excellent UTC at the L&D. (A service we can continue to use) The Herts Valleys CCG are currently consulting on new access and governance arrangements for the UTC , favouring allowing access to patients with appointments, who are referred from NHS 111, or their GP practice. This new service is planned to open in April 2022.

New build Watford General Hospital

This is an ongoing consultation (for several years) regarding the new build Watford General Hospital, and the upgrading of St Albans and Hemel Hempstead Hospitals. The Society's committee has agreed that our input into this consultation should be focused on the transport and access stakeholder group where we are represented by Karl Wingfield.

An artists impression of the new build Watford Hospital



Mount Vernon Cancer Centre review

An independent review in 2019 concluded that the current buildings on the Northwood site are unfit for purpose. Whilst work is progressing on possibly reproviding the Cancer Centre in a new build on the Watford Hospital site, eventually Harpenden residents may be served by a new 'North' radiotherapy unit at either in Luton or Stevenage, reducing journey times and enhancing cancer treatment.

Ian Barrison

Secretary's report

The Covid pandemic has resulted in 2020 being a very strange year for the Society. We had a very well attended public meeting in February 2020 when our MP, Bim Afolami, gave a short presentation before answering questions from his constituents. Unfortunately this was the last public meeting of the year as we had to cancel all our future meetings due to the lockdown.

We held a much delayed AGM in December 2020 which was carried out on-line using Zoom but this became the last meeting of the year. We were hoping that the situation would significantly improve in 2021 but we now feel that we will not get a high attendance at public meetings until late in 2021 or early 2022 so we are reviewing our meeting schedule to take this into account.



John Davis retired from The Harpenden Society committee in early 2021. With over 20 years of service his achievements were recognised in the 'Without Whom' award presented by Society Chair Phil Waters.

Bob Fletcher

Community Safety - Looking back

Looking back over the last year, crimes in Harpenden showed a reduction over the previous year with anti-social behaviour and violence being the most prolific perhaps due to lock down.

Looking forward

Things to be aware of include:

- Insurance mis-selling on home appliances saying your warranty has run out.
- Cloned telephone numbers calling you that appear to be legitimate saying such things as you have outstanding NI payments and unpaid tax bills.
- Door to door traders offering maintenance or garden work testing peoples vulnerability.
- Try before you buy fish seller who then charges a lot for inferior products.
- Keyless car thefts when technology is used to read and duplicate them. Keep them in a special scan proof location.
- The Herts Police with extra funding available plan to increase police numbers by 65 to 2,267 to use as a "prevention First" model.



• Police Commissioner David Lloyd's priorities are:

Put victims first
Keep crime low
Protect local policing
Increase officer numbers
Keep tax low.

- Local police priorities are fly tipping, Anti-social behaviour (in parks) and speeding



Paul Gardiner

Awards - Looking back

The presentation of the Harpenden Society Plaque for 2019 was delayed because of Covid restrictions. It was, however, finally presented by the Harpenden Society's chairman, Phil Waters, to Chris Pollard the Buildings Director to Fairview Homes, on 2nd July 2021.



A Certificate of Merit was awarded to The Salvation Army on August 10th for their newly expanded building which has been achieved with care so that the green space in front neatly links in with Leyton Green and also provides a useful hall for use by the wider Harpenden community and also a Certificate of Merit has been presented to Skye the opticians for their newly expanded premises which complement the nearby shops.

The Awards for the year 2020: The Harpenden Society Plaque was presented to the Katherine Warington School on August 24th. A Certificate of Merit will be presented to The new Harpenden Leisure Centre and two Letters of Commendation will be presented to local developer (Jarvis) for – 1) the new Hollybush Mews and 2) The Appleyard (Off Ox Lane).



Looking forward

We will be looking forward to receiving suggestions for the 2021 Awards in the new year. So keep your eyes open for something that you think is worthy of nominating

Penny Ayres

Please send comments on articles or any other issues raised in this Annual Report to: Ron Taylor
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Visit the Society's website –
www.harpendsociety.org

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