



## It's Teamwork for Harpenden Town

In the summer of 2011 The Harpenden Society made a fundamental reform in its organisational arrangements. First, it was unanimously agreed that its possible range of activities would be broadened to encompass all the social and cultural life of the town. Seven themes of concern were identified covering this civic canvas.

### Seven Working Groups

Second, it was also decided that seven Working Groups should be established, with a committee member acting as the Convenor for each of them. Volunteers were recruited from amongst the membership of The Society who could bring skills and enthusiasm of this specific nature and sometimes people joined The Society when invited or persuaded that they might play a part in a Working Group.

The Working Groups are primarily 'virtual' in character, sometimes meeting but more often offering advice or drawing attention to issues via email exchanges. As a reminder, the categories are **Public Order, Built Environment, Economic Activity (a 'Thriving High Street Network') Transport, Health and Social Welfare, Environmental Services, Education and Leisure.**

Some eighteen months on – and a convenient time to assess the value of this exercise. In the first place, there is no doubt that the referential frame of The Society has widened considerably to include more readily such concerns as shopping, health, schools and so on. In a word, The Society has become more a civic society in the widest sense and less an amenity society with a prime emphasis on planning, architecture and the overall ambience of the town.

Eyebrows have occasionally been raised over some of our interventions and the question asked whether we were being political. The answer is, of course, that we have attempted to be a 'moral barometer' – the phrase former Town Mayor Michael Weaver eloquently coined to define our role – for the well-being of Harpenden in all kinds of ways. We have been prepared to query providers of services, both public and commercial, and to bring together interested parties to further decision-making. All this has been with a view to sustaining the high standards of life in the town.

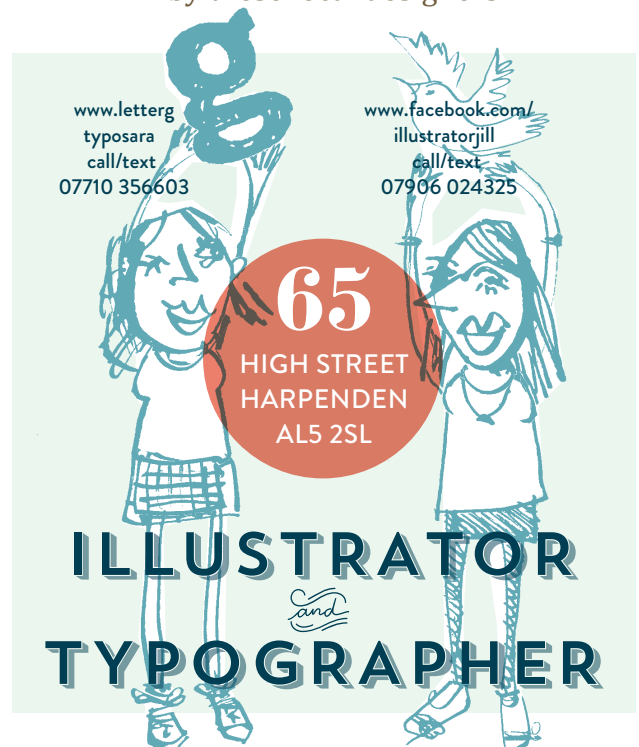
In pursuit of this the Working Group venture has proved reasonably successful. Almost all the seven teams are up and running, although there is always room for new volunteers. Apart from advice and counsel, the groups have also involved themselves more practically. For instance, members of the Education and Leisure Working Group organised and provided the speakers for the recent public meeting on the town's leisure potential. (see page four for a report of this exercise)

### A Strong Task Force

Moreover, there is another important element in all this. There are now as many as fifty people engaged at varied levels of commitment and energy in these Working Groups. That in itself is worthy of remark. It means that your committee has equipped itself with a strong task-force in support of what it does and thinks. This augurs well for the future. The Society has, in effect, assembled a nursery of talented and dedicated people who will undoubtedly supply leadership in the next generation of The Society's ongoing story.

### New graphic design & logo

The Society's new look has been created  
by these local designers



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# The Harpenden in Question

being a series of editorial commentaries on important Harpenden issues that should challenge thought and encourage inquiry and action.

## 8. Harpenden is Full



This time we revisit a theme addressed in the first of this series of essays (Spring 2011 issue) namely, the value of 'balanced communities'. These have been pleasingly defined as being composed of 'a mixture of people in terms of class, income, age, ethnicity and household type and provide a range of services, homes, schools, employment and transport, all easily accessible to their residents. They also tend to exhibit high levels of attachment to and participation in community life, mutual support and skills sharing.' Harpenden ticks many if not all of those several civic boxes.



It is necessary to rehearse these values at this time because, once more, the spectre looms, as many will have become aware, of major encroachment on the green belt of the town as well as other sporadic plans for development. The short-term, knee-jerk reaction of authorities is to stick new houses on the edges and in occasional patches of existing flourishing areas in the knowledge that the amenities are already there – and someone else will be left with the task of cramming children into already crowded schools or forcing cars down already packed roads. That delicate balance is spoiled. In a word Harpenden is full; its civil and social capacity is, in several regards, at tipping point.



In a recent document the Herts County Council has estimated that, at current levels of demand and suggested degrees of development, Harpenden will require over the next few years the equivalent of one six form entry secondary and one two form entry primary school, as well as extensions at existing schools. Can this be guaranteed as a prerequisite of

building more houses? Infrastructure requires bold decisions. You cannot easily add a fraction of a school because, say, fifteen more children have arrived in the town, any more than you can latch on a piece of roadway because thirty more cars have turned up. We need to be sure the amenities are properly in place before or at least at the same time as the occupation of the new housing.



A major structural deficit in Harpenden is employment. A report this January from the Centre for Cities recommends that major house building, along with relevant facilities, should be concentrated on places like Cambridge or Crawley, where the bustling signs of economic growth are most near to fruition, or like Burnley or Dundee, where building and 'retrofitting' empty houses would help kick-start stagnant local economies. Housing development that ignores the core need of jobs is lob-sided.

For half a century there has been no coherent national let alone local solution presented as the housing crisis has rumbled remorselessly on at a frighteningly increasing rate. If anything, fiddling at the edges makes matters worse, destructive often of what is reasonably equitable in social terms.

The message from towns like Harpenden should be: 'don't spoil what has been achieved here; use us as a one of the models for the creation of balanced communities for others elsewhere'

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# Memos for and from Members

## Memos for



**This will take the form of a review and exhibition of The Society's achievements during 2012 and a chance to meet and chat with members of the Committee about The Society's range of activities. The evening will include The Society's short annual general meeting; please regard this as the official notification thereof.**

**Along with your this newsletter, you have been sent a copy of CELEBRATION 2013, a review of The Society's activities during the last twelve months. This is an ambitious new initiative designed to ensure that public knowledge of what The Society stands for and is attempting to do is as transparently wide as possible. Do make a special note of the date in your diary or calendar. We look forward to greeting you at the Harpenden House Hotel on April 11th**

## Memos from

Readers have reacted to Ron Grimshaw's anxieties expressed in our last edition about the changes in Harpenden's postal services. Sheila Satchell tells us that when she went to collect a parcel too big to go through her letter box, she 'found a queue snaking round and round inside and I counted eleven people with the same form in their hand waiting to collect their package'. The assistant she spoke to was worried about how busy it would be by Christmas. Sheila drove to St Albans Brick Knoll Park to collect an undelivered letter at a cost £1.60, plus, of course time and petrol – 'I was not best pleased', and thus ignored another one, which would have cost her £1.19 to claim; 'I wonder', she concludes, 'how many Christmas cards the Royal Mail' were left with post-yuletide.

Fining the recipient for a lapse by the sender, and not even able to negotiate this on the doorstep with the postman or woman, takes us back to the bad old days before the Penny Post of 1840 when mail was paid for on delivery. The trouble is you don't know what the item is before you pay up and often cough up over a pound for a piece of junk mail.

On the other hand, Dr David Ebbels is a satisfied customer, reporting 'little change from before the closure of the Sorting Office' in the Westfield area, 'Normally deliveries are by my usual postman and usually before 10.30 am'.

He courteously congratulates us on our 'well produced' issue and has several interesting comments to make about GM crops in regard of Professor Moloney's talk, reported in the last issue of Harpenden Society News. David points out, for instance, that the advantages of transferring anti-aphid genetic characteristics from mint to wheat are environmental and economic, in that it makes anti-aphid pesticides redundant but 'it will not necessarily improve yields'. His conclusion is that 'like many other techniques GM can be used both for good and ill', for example, for cheap insulin or vitamin A rich rice, but also for biological warfare. 'Personally, I support its use for benign purposes under strict controls and I don't know of any proven instance where GM food has harmed anybody'.

**Keep the letters and messages coming. It is good to have some exchange of views even at quarterly intervals**

## Emergency! Emergency!

From our roving medical reporter

Park Hall was packed on 6th December to hear Tony Stone, a paramedic with the East of England Ambulance NHS Trust. He was speaking at one of the Society's public meetings which are devoted to topics that the Society is working on. This time it was the Society's working party on Health and Welfare that chose the subject, and Tony gave a zinging explanation of how our ambulance service works.

When should we dial 999? What happens when we do? What can the ambulance crew do for us when they arrive?



We were left with a better understanding of a vital public service, and more importantly we had a greater respect for the skills and dedication of the people who work in it.

*Photo above. Tony Stone(left) with Richard Thomas, Vice-chairman and Joint Convenor, Health and Social Welfare Working Group. Photo right: From the left: Vicky Evans, Rachel Tuckley, Eric Midwinter, Caroline Fleming, Ron Taylor.*

## Hear! Hear!

From our roving leisure reporter

Despite the snow and freezing temperature over 60 people came to Park Hall on Thursday 24th January. The Society had arranged the evening so that you could give your views on four topics raised by its Education and Leisure Working Group – the Public Hall, a café with toilets in Rothamsted Park, an Arts Centre in the town and the Schools Competition.



The audience was divided into four groups and four stimulating and interesting speakers... Vicky Evans, Caroline Fleming, Ron Taylor and Rachel Tuckley... and with Eric Midwinter, Joint Convenor of the Education and Leisure Working Group, acting as compere. They found out what you wanted so that the Society could put forward proposals about which people have been consulted.

The hard work and preparations of Vicky, Caroline, Ron and Rachel were repaid by the enthusiasm of the audience.

## Caution! Caution!

The Society's Public Order Working Group has several pieces of advice to offer householders:

\*don't keep car keys near letter boxes – crooks have been 'pole-fishing' for them locally and driving off the cars.

\*anti-social behaviour, of which there has been some recently in the area – don't get involved; dial 101; that's the number for non-emergency URGENT calls as opposed to 999 for emergencies.

\*scams and vulnerable people/unsolicited 'cold' calls: on the doorstep, take care, don't be distracted, shut the door or ask for ID – on the phone, ring off or ask for their number and say you'll ring back; check by ringing 1471 afterwards – by emails, basically if unsure delete.



# High Street History

The disappearance of Jessops camera shop from and the doubts over HMV on the St Albans shopping front were further reminders in the new year of the fragility of High Street trading. 'Twas ever thus. In relatively brief historical time the High Street has undergone many transformations and there are more around the street corner.

Originally the site of the 'work-shop' where craftsmen and tradesmen made and sold their wares, one catches glimpses of the early High Street in visits with Jane Austen's Emma to the 'busiest part of Highbury...when her eyes fell only on the butcher's tray...and a string of dawdling children round the baker's little bow-window eyeing the gingerbread' or with Miss Matty and Miss Jenkyns to Mrs Johnson's dress and fabrics shop in Cranford. It was the so-called 'Retailing Revolution', a spin off from the Industrial Revolution, that, through improved methods of transport and of preservation, for instance, canning and through large-scale manufacturing processes, saw an end to the reliance on merely localised trading. It was the dawn of a national retail network, with national brands such as William Hartley's jam or Henry Tate's sugar. By 1936 three-quarters of British meals consisted of processed foodstuffs. In literary terms, one might think of the flourishing Baines store in Bursley, focus of Arnold Bennett's *The Old Wives Tale* – or, because there was ever frailty on the high street, Mr Polly's bankrupt drapery in Fishbourne.

Curiously, there were about the same number of shops in Britain – some 500,000 – in 1950 as there were in 1900, but the ratio of multiples and chains began to change, especially with the advent of the supermarket, with Premier Supermarkets opening the first British one in Streatham in 1951. Slowly, many smaller shopkeepers were dislodged. However, the so-called 'independent' retailers need to recall that, utilising current Harpenden instances, when in 1860 the ten year old Jesse Boot helped his widowed mother run her herbal medicine shop in Nottingham...or when William Henry Smith joined the family news-vending shop in Little Grosvenor Street, London in 1846...or when James Sainsbury and his wife Mary Ann opened their grocery at 173 Drury Lane in 1869...or when Michael Marks asked Tom Spencer to partner him in 1894 with his Penny Bazaar in Leeds...they were all 'independent' retailers, too. Let that be an encouraging thought.

changes such as the immense growth of eating out and take-away feeding (as short a time ago as 1980 this did not figure at all on the General Household Expenditure surveys; now it is a significantly high figure) the high street continues to undergo change. Harpenden's high street area bears rich witness to this trend. Many of the suggestions about how the high street should meet these challenges involve a community element and, with the coming use of the old Argos site for the public library and youth services, Harpenden has taken an emphatic step in that direction. Nationally, experts are proposing, often basing their suggestions on pioneer exercises up and down the country, ideas such as more niche shops, 'click and collect' depots, childcare and creches, outlets for medical provision and the care of older people, socialising areas, music and art venues, bureaux for public advice and assistance and much else, not forgetting a general appeal to refurbish and deploy the upper stories of shops for modernised residential use. Jamie Oliver's 'Ministry of Food' kitchens, offering cookery classes from Rotherham to Stratford, is one colourful example, but much depends on local authorities and community groups finding compromise solutions over costs and support.

Happily, such a blend of localised and socialised activity, alongside the presence of a few multiple giants as well as a goodly range of smaller shops, would bring back something of the communal colour to the Harpenden High Street in the 21st century that characterised Elizabeth Gaskell's Cranford of nearly 200 years ago.

*Below: Putterill Bros: Circa 1929/30 High Street, Harpenden.  
'Courtesy of John Cooper'.*



# Society Talking Points

## The Harpenden Society



Encouraging Harpenden's primary schools to bring out the creative talent of their pupils

### 'What do I like about Harpenden' Our Schools Competition

We are pleased to announce that no less than eleven of Harpenden's thirteen primary schools have registered to participate in The Society's schools competition, the results of which will, we trust, be on show at The Society's CELEBRATION 2013 on Thursday 11 April at the Harpenden House Hotel at 7.30 pm.

The question raised for the children is: 'What do I Like about Harpenden' – and the answer is invited in many guises: pictorial, creative writing, drama, music and singing, photographic, with individual or group entries equally welcome. The competition has been planned by three members of The Society's Education and Leisure Working Group, **Vicky Evans, Eric Midwinter and Ron Taylor**, the last of whom, The Society's Publicity Officer, has worked zealously to persuade the schools to join the artistic fray.

The competition has the dual purposes of attempting to open the minds of the pupils to a sense of civic awareness and of finding a practical way of engaging The Society with the town's excellent schools. The schools who have agreed to involve themselves in the competition are:

**Grove Junior  
Crabtree Infants  
Wood End School  
St Dominic RC Primary  
Crabtree Junior  
Grove Infants  
Sauncey Wood Primary  
High Beeches Primary  
Manland Primary  
St. Nicholas Primary  
Roundwood Primary**

#### STOP PRESS.

Early indications from the participating schools suggest real enthusiasm and a diverse range of content from the children including music, drama and photography.

**Closing date for entries is March 15th,**

*Above right Harpenden Common photo courtesy of Society Committee member Alan Jackson*

## The Morning After...Harpenden Common Hangover

Our photograph reveals why several Society committee members have become alarmed at the condition of the Common following major shows, such as a big top circus. The Common is a great asset to the town and attracts its fair share of walkers and ramblers, but it is, of course, the chief site for a sizeable urban population for circuses, fairs, vintage car shows, Discovery Days and so on.

The problem is that the latter impose on the former when they cause heavy deterioration and it is important to secure and guarantee a regime which ensures that any damage is quickly made good and that the timings of such events are seasonable in terms of the likelihood of such environmental hangovers.

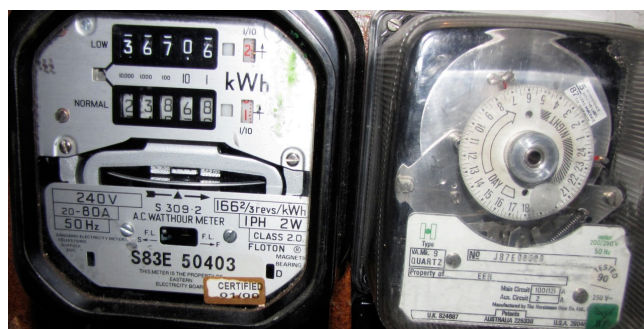
**John Davis**, Convenor of the Environmental Services Working Group has taken this matter in hand.



## Power to the People...Collective Purchasing and Switching Schemes

**Steve Gledhill**, our lynx-eyed Press Officer, was one of The Society's committee who spotted this initiative and wondered whether The Society might seek a role therewith. Following a government-sponsored working party, the Secretary of State for Energy, Edward Davey, sent a letter to all local authorities with recommendations about how to take forward Collective Purchasing and Switching schemes, whereby businesses and householders might negotiate better deals on energy bills through concerted action.

Apparently local authorities, business combines and community groups have successfully pioneered such practices across the country, with Cornwall a particularly fine example.



**Bulk buying energy for Harpenden could have quite a bright future.**