

GOOD NIGHTS WITH THE SOCIETY

The timing of the general election and other logistics made it necessary for The Harpenden Society to hold two important events in sequence at Rothamsted Conference Centre.

A Night on the Hustings



On Tuesday 21 April we held our 'hustings' meeting when four of the five parliamentary candidates for the local constituency faced a packed assembly to speak about and discuss their vision for Harpenden, especially in terms of significant matters such as housing development. Regular readers will recall the idea of the meeting grew out of anxieties felt by The Society's leaders and others about the infelicities – now there's a charitable word – of the St Albans District Strategic Plan. And the meeting proved to be a lively and bustling affair.



A Night of Celebration



The following night, Wednesday 22 April, features our AGM as part of 'Celebration 2015'. It was another successful evening, at least in terms of contents, for, sadly, there was huge disappointment over the attendance. Some said this was to do with dragging people out two nights on the run; others that Rothamsted, for all the charms of its new and refurbished conference facilities, is too distant from the town proper to appeal as an evening venue. Having had a great turn-out for the first 'Celebration' in 2013 at the now defunct Harpenden House Hotel, two Rothamsted years of relatively poor numbers must give cause for some furious administrative thought. It is being proposed that The Society's quite brief legal and technical AGM might be absorbed into one of its popular public meetings on the lyrical counsel that 'just a spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down in the most delightful way.'

Articles conclude

A Night on the Hustings



Your editor did something of a vox pop the following day, listening to what proved to be a fairly consistent line. Everyone thought The Society had provided a worthy service to the town by gathering together the candidates so they could, so to speak, be observed in the flesh. Looking back over the year at other meetings, such as those on the Red House or on the housing threat, we have obviously found for ourselves a valued niche in the organisation of such events. While everyone had, naturally, differing views about the actual candidates, there was a widespread feeling that we could not look to them as being likely to protect Harpendonians from an ill-thought out housing scheme. However, the very first comment of everyone referred to the fine job done by Chris Marsden in chairing the proceedings. Having (as the last issue explained) contemplated him standing for parliament to advertise our housing worries, maybe we should nominate him as Speaker for the House of Commons...



Above top: The four Parliamentary candidates taking questions from the audience. Above: Radio Verulam and Nickey Radio reporter Jo Coleman interviewing guests. Below: Labour candidate Rachel Burgin (third from the left) with members of the audience

A Night of Celebration

The programme, complete with free refreshments, flowed easily and well, with discussion of the exciting new Volunteering for Harpenden (V4H) concept of a unified and effective approach to recruiting and deploying volunteers, the announcement of The Harpenden Society Awards (see page 4) and comment on The Society's schools competition – the exhibition of the winning entries was there for all to admire (see page 4). A highlight was a presentation by Rothamsted Research officials of the changes made and planned at this fine site and we look forward to interesting conversations about its future.



Above: The exhibition of creative work in the School Arts competition with teachers, parents and pupils.

Below: The audience at the 'Oscar' style presentation showing their appreciation.

Bottom: The exhibition area for the official launch of the new 'Volunteers for Harpenden' organisation.



The Harpenden in Question

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

17. Increased Taxis



Putting up the rate of taxes never seems to please but what about putting up the number of taxis? That may sound counter-intuitive, for a common remark is that there are too many taxis in the town already. However, even more commonly heard comments are about parking and gridlock, of how difficult it is to find somewhere to park or how often one is held up in heavy traffic. With nearly 25,000 vehicles registered in a town of some 12,500 homes that is scarcely surprising and they generate 25,000 'trips', that is, there and back, each day. In addition, there is a busy highway through the town and lots of people driving in from nearby amenity-less locations in multiple addition.

TAXI
For hire

The basic problem is the chasm between the liberty and convenience of the motor car and the necessary rigidity of public transport, however regular and effective – and here let me post a note of approval for the much-improved 321 service, with its new comfortable buses, complete with helpful on-vehicle announcements and, in my own recent experience, sound and punctual regularity. It is, nonetheless, a choice between the sharp stiletto and the blunt instrument, the personal device available at all times versus the train or bus that, how so ever valuable for efficient and economic conveyance of the many, can't whizz out and pick up your shopping at the drop of a packet of asparagus. But that very mercy dash to the shops, with just one person in a four or five seater car, is itself an example of the social waste engendered by motoring. The airline which contented itself with only 25% of its accommodation filled would, rightly, soon find itself in the aeronautical equivalent of Queer Street.

If there is any sort of bridge between the two it is the taxi. Were there fleets of them for use in profusion, car usage could be lowered, parking could be more forthcoming and the roads could be less pressed. The costs of running a car are debatable but a rough figure, based on a vehicle of less than £13,000 in price doing something over 10,000 miles a year, might be something between £4000 and £5000 annually. That's quite a lot of taxi fares while a more prosperous taxi trade might reduce such fares over time. Surely a two or three car family might consider the alternative of factoring in taxi fares instead of one of those vehicles of which, research suggests, each spend 90% of their time stationary.

Roads remain dangerous places and road deaths have, over the last hundred years, become almost acceptable. Whenever addressing an audience on this subject I always suggest that

for those seeking posthumous celebrity from demise by transport, the train is the better gamble. Die in a train accident – and years go by without one such accidental fatality – and you'd be on the front page of every newspaper and they'd even find a slot for you on the TV news. Die in a road accident and you're a peripheral mention in the local gazette. Happily, road deaths are declining slightly, the result of improved car technology, although that is little solace for an injured pedestrian, and improved medical skills, that is, there are no real decreases in actual accidents. In 2013 there were 1713 such deaths – but there is some psychological glass ceiling that allows us not to worry ourselves too much about this. Moreover, European Community research suggests that six times as many deaths are caused directly by vehicular fume pollution as by accidents. Consider the amount of money and resources spent on combating the alarming perils of terrorism and the column inches of the press and the time on the media given over to such awful threats. One wonders what the alarms would be if terrorists killed 1713 people a year.

Yes, there are other factors such as pollution and safety to be considered – and there are other notions floating about as well. A frequent minibus service, cheap even gratis, up and down the high street and along, say, to Kinsbourne Green, on a pick up/put down on request basis, with perhaps figure of eight alternatives taking in Southdown and Batford – that's one that has been broached. Local authority taxi vouchers for pensioners, students, say, 16 and over, people with disabilities and/or on benefits, providing either free or reduced taxi rides – that's another.

Some people recommend walking.



Given that 43% of Harpenden children are conveyed by motor car to and from school (and recalling research a year or two back that indicated that on average pedestrian and cycling pupils out-performed the chauffeured) walking is certainly worth a mention but the most important issue would be a change of mind-cast. It would be useless to impose a pattern of taxi usage without a popular mentality in favour; the ones who fume about the slowness of the traffic or the inadequacies of parking are, of course, people sitting in cars contributing to both problems.

Eric Midwinter

Schools for Thought

It was a very thoughtful, a very earnestly intense, audience of high numbers and concentration that attended the last public meeting of the season at Park Hall on 26 February. The panel was comprised of (left to right on photo below) Philip Waters, Secretary of the Harpenden Secondary Schools Trust, whose task it is to oversee the application for and progress towards a new secondary school for the town. County Councillor David Williams and Ben Bardsley, Chairman of the Harpenden Parents Group. A gathering among which many more younger faces than usual listened appreciatively to the discussion which featured the pressure on primary schools as well as the steps taken in regard of the planned secondary school. The questions were acute and perceptive but, on a subject that often generates more steam than illumination, the mood was constructive. It was one of the pleasantest recent comings together of an excellent panel and an excellent audience.



Towards the future; Harpenden in 2100

Utopian or dystopian, the town's youngsters took readily to his year's competition theme of what Harpenden would be like in 2100. Mark that date. It wasn't placed a thousand or a million years hence in some sort of Dr Who dimension; it was deliberately chosen as the point where today's primary pupils would be as old as their grandparents, a chance to muse one what Harpenden would be like in their older age.

The winning entries, neatly arrayed by the skilled and adept hands of John Whitehead, primary school teacher, Society member and one of the judges, were exhibited to generally pleasing approval at Rothamsted Research on 22 April. The awards ceremony was a joy. The room was well-filled with children, parents and teachers. A winning piece of music, indicating at slower pace the longer leisure and a faster pace the increased pace of life in 2100 was played; two amusing newscasts were screened and a short story, mature in its compactness and elegance, The Return, was read out aloud. The Society's chairman, Chris Marsden, proceeded to give out the prize-winning certificates, each one marked by a burst of applause, and here and there a wholesome cheer, and an individual photograph. Each participating school receives a W.H.Smith's voucher and every single child who enters the competition gets a certificate.

The pleasure derived on such a heart-warming day by both participants and spectators makes us keen to repeat the process and take the competition into a fourth year.

The Harpenden Society Awards 2014

In her customary succinct and friendly fashion, Penny Ayres, who chairs the awards committee of John Davis, Mike Waddilove, Anthony Steel and Sue Vinther who were thanked for 'their wise input and for their help in making these difficult decisions', announced the following as being winners of this years' awards at 'Celebration 2015' on 22 April.

The prestigious **Harpenden Society Plaque** for 2014 was awarded to the apartments known as **Lea Springs** on the corner of Common Lane and the Lower Luton Road at Batford. This has been chosen because not only does it enhance the local environment, it also provides 38 flats for older people, sixteen of shared ownership and the remainder at affordable rents.



Although the Awards Committee considered that no nomination was worthy of a Certificate of Merit, **Letters of Commendation** were to be presented to the new **Scout Hall at Kinsbourne Green built for the 9th Harpenden Scout Group** because not only does it enhance the neighbourhood, it also provides much needed new meeting rooms and a spacious hall - all available for public hire.



The **Old Post House** which is on the corner of Arden Grove and Station Road. It is now a block of nine luxury flats developed by Oakbridge Homes and retaining the original well preserved rich red brickwork. It also provides convenient town centre housing.

The newly renovated house at **39 Crabtree Lane** with its turret feature and its newly planted front garden that has nicely complemented the recently completed housing nearby which includes the Eliot Place development by Marchfield Homes



WANTED

Assistant Editor

I am looking for an ASSISTANT EDITOR to, well, assist in editing the much-loved Harpenden Society News, with a view to taking over the editorship of this august chronicle sometime in 2016. I shall by then have been editor for five years and it is, for everyone's sake, a time for a change, provided, that is, I am not sacked or otherwise dislodged before then.

It is a laughably simple job. There are four issues of six pages a year, amounting to an annual sum of about 10,000 words. That represents no more than, very approximately, 27.39726 words a day. What a doddle! And it gets even better in a leap year when you only have to come up with 27.322404 words, always remembering that you persuade other people to write some of the pieces anyway.

So all that talk about 'I'm much too busy to volunteer for anything because my life is so full' becomes meaningless in the face of having to find a mere 27 words a day. The proof-reading, the photographs, the design, the printing and the distribution, all tumultuous tasks, are taken care of, leaving the editor with all the kudos and something like 23 hours and 50 minutes of every day free for lots of other activities, having produced the 27 necessary words in ten minutes. This, then, is a task for an extremely occupied and engaged person with only a little time to spare.

My only anxiety is that I am not sure I shall be able to cope with the avalanche of candidates but I have advised the electricity authorities of the likely surge in power on broadband in the few hours after the arrival of this edition of the Harpenden Society News on your hall mats.

Eric Midwinter at
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Society members.

Unbuilt Houses

Richard Rogers, (below) Baron Rogers of Riverside, the influential architect, declared in May that there was no need to build on green belt. In London alone, he calculates, there are sites for 216,000 dwellings already with planning permission and in total capacity for 450,000 new builds, sufficient, he says, for ten years building activity in the metropolitan area. Others have offered prognoses of land-banks up and down the country all primed for development.



Yet building is at a low ebb. In the twenty years to 1980 4.3m new houses and flats were built; in the twenty years before 2000 the figures fell to 2.3m and the decline has continued. Why is there this chasm between the opportunities and the deliveries? The primitive state of the British building industry must take some of the blame. Notoriously inefficient – one estimate suggests it is four times less productive than its Danish equivalent – and with no national strategy to guide its random deliberations, there are also often signs that some cherry picking occurs in a desire to gain rich profits. The lack of 'affordable' housing points to this, as does the minute scale of housing association activity in the UK. 0.6% of the housing stock is of this helpful kind compared with 8% in Austria, 15% in Norway and 18% in Sweden.

Land is an allied problem. The murky annals of land registration are difficult to decode although apparently 432 people own a half of the private rural land. Whatever else, land value has rocketed. In the 1930s 2% of the cost of a new house was on average for the land upon which it was built; now that element is 70% of the cost, 35 times as much.

No wonder the proportion of housing costs, whether mortgage repayments or rentals, as a proportion of income has risen steeply. The Resolution Foundation reports that 1.6m households, nearly a tenth of the UK total, expend more than half their income on housing while there were 50,000 repossession of homes in 2014 for inability to sustain repayments. The average price of a house in Central London is 25 times the average national salary.

It is going to need some urgent governmental action to ensure that some rational sense is brought to repair this unwholesome combine of sloth and avarice and that houses are quickly and efficiently built at less cost and in the right places with everyone decently housed and at a reasonable price

Keeping Watch

Our Community Safety Working Group advice to Householders and others.

Breaking in - on 6 May the Police issued an alert: there has been a recent increase in the number of burglaries in the Harpenden area with offenders targeting homes to steal vehicles, valuables and money. All the usual sensible precautions should be taken.

Catching up - Four people who were seen breaking into a house on the Lower Luton Road in January were chased (two on foot, two in a car) and subsequently arrested for burglary.

- Also in January, a dog unit tracked a suspect who had been witnessed by a Harpenden resident in their garden; a male was subsequently arrested for 'going equipped' and for being drunk in charge of a vehicle.

- A female (police speak) arrested at Harpenden train station was found to have nearly 300 counterfeit DVDs in her possession. A search of her flat in London revealed cannabis and counterfeit tobacco packaging. She was charged with eight offences and has been bailed to a London court.

Signing on - One of the benefits of being signed into the OWL (Online Watch Link) police/NHW information system is that you can access 'Fix My Street'. This enables you to notify your council of local problems such as fly tipping, potholes and broken street lamps. You can also avoid rogue traders by accessing 'Trading standards approved businesses'. To sign up to OWL, go to www.owl.co.uk

Helping out - Looking for a new challenge? The Police and Crime Commissioner is looking for volunteers (see how he keeps costs down?) to

check the safety of police custody cells and those held in them. The volunteers check on the welfare of the people held in the cells to ensure that their human rights are being upheld. More information on the PCC's website www.hertscommissioner.org or email commissioner@herts.pnn.police.uk.

Taking in - No sooner had the last Community Safety report warned of threats from fraudsters in regard of the new freedom to use 'pension pots' than the police issued a formal warning. The precautions to be taken have been mentioned in these reports repeatedly. For further information visit the Government's new advice service at: www.pensionwise.gov.uk

Please keep an eye on The Society's website for further information and advice garnered by the ever-watchful and conscientious members of the Community Safety Working Group whose members include:

Alan Jackson (Group Convener and Harpenden Society Committee Member); Paul Gardiner (retired Harpenden South Ward NHW Coordinator and Secretary of the Harpenden, Redbourn and Wheathampstead Group Neighbourhood Watch).

John McHale (Harpenden Fire and Rescue Service)

The Group is also in contact with Susan Grout (the North Ward NHW Coordinator) although she has decided it would not be appropriate for her to become a formal member of the Group (Susan works for the Trading Standards Institute). Susan Grout's contact details are: susan.grout2@yahoo.co.uk
Tel. 01582 767571

RICHARD THOMAS

It is with very genuine regret that we announce the death on Saturday 16 May 2015 of Richard Thomas. He was vice-chairman of The Harpenden Society – but much else besides as a man who worked ceaselessly in many roles for the benefit of the town, its inhabitants and its surrounds. This sad news came just as the newsletter was going to press. A full and appropriate appreciation of Richard will appear in the autumn issue.

