



# Hitchin Historical Society

Registered Charity No. 280746

# Newsletter

Issue number 31 - July 2009

## To The Manor Born

### All Together Now!

We ran our first coach excursion for several years this May, in response to requests from members. The trip was to Bushey Museum in the south west of the county, and to the nearby 19th-century Reveley Lodge which was bequeathed to the museum six years ago.

Twenty five members had a guided tour of the buildings and gardens, followed by tea in the drawing room of

Reveley Lodge. The outing was such a success,



This year's AGM saw two changes to the committee: secretary Simon Walker and treasurer Phil Rowe stood down after many years of exemplary, not to say exhausting, service to the society. Simon has been snapped up ....sorry, co-opted to fill the vacancy of Journal Editor while Phil has been (reluctantly) granted a respite. Meanwhile we offer a hearty welcome to Geraldine Couchman and John Skeeles as secretary and treasurer respectively, and send our thanks to Simon and Phil for keeping us on the straight and narrow for so long.

Autumn promises to be busy with two more publication launches coming up, details inside. Now, here's a little something not at all controversial to balance the weighty matters in this issue. Five hundred years ago this year, in 1509, Henry VIII granted the Manor of Hitchin to Princess Katherine of Aragon at their marriage, and in 1534 it formed part of the dower of Queen Anne Boleyn - and there wasn't a single Scrutiny Committee in sight.

*Zena Grant, Editor*

## The Museum and the Town Hall

Many, if not most, of us are aware that North Herts District Council has decided, in principle, to replace Hitchin and Letchworth museums with one new North Herts Museum and to provide a new collections centre/store.

After four years' rumination there were no clear outcomes on how this would be done. Financial pressures earlier this year sparked a Council decision to close Letchworth museum in two years' time; simultaneously Hitchin Town Hall was identified, subject to a Feasibility Study, as a possible home for the new district museum. HHS, Hitchin Forum, Hitchin Art Club, the Hitchin Society and Keep Hitchin Special have met to discuss the implications of these developments. Debate has been difficult as the policy framework is still unclear; for example what might happen to the existing Hitchin museum building (Charnwood) and the Physic Garden if the Town Hall option goes ahead.

HHS has now written formally to the Council to express deep concern over museum provision in Hitchin, saying

the people of Hitchin are being asked to give up an existing facility with no clear idea of what will be put in its place. HHS has so far not been invited to contribute in any meaningful way even though we have worked with Hitchin museum for over thirty years, including giving financial help, some inputs for exhibitions, and drawing attention to the value of the collections through regular publications for both popular and academic audiences.



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In our letter we ask to be included in consultations; to be invited to comment on the Terms of Reference for the Feasibility Study and possible move to the Town Hall; to be given clearer indications of what a new museum might provide in terms of space, topic (i.e. Hitchin) coverage, study and research facilities and storage, and

what other activities are being considered for the building which might impinge on museum needs. We are awaiting a response.

*David Howlett, Chairman*

A full text of our letter of 10th June appears on our website at [www.hitchinhistoricals.org.uk](http://www.hitchinhistoricals.org.uk).

## Hitchin Conservation Area Review 2009

You may have read in the local papers that the District Council recently engaged consultants (The Conservation Studio from Cirencester) to review the Hitchin Conservation Area and List of Locally Important Buildings. This List includes buildings of particular importance to the town's history and environment which do not qualify for English Heritage Grade I or II Listing. The last review was in 1997 and since then there has been increasing concern because of the pressure for housing development, especially flats; the recent demolition of Rose Cottage (built c1855) on Walsworth Road highlighted the lack of protection for Hitchin's Victorian heritage.

The consultants' key tasks are to examine the extent of the existing Conservation Area and to consider changes to it; to consider the Local List and possible additions; and to assess the Character Statements of the basic urban characteristics of the town. HHS has been involved in providing background material and suggestions for how conservation policy might be changed.

The consultants have now provided the Council's Conservation Team with draft proposals and the next stage is to hold a Consultation Exercise. This includes a public exhibition where visitors will be able to comment, either on questionnaires or separately. Once all the views have been submitted, final decisions will be made on any changes and these will be adopted by the Council as an updated conservation policy for Hitchin. Please take time to visit the exhibition and make your views known. If you want to feed in comments via the Society please get in touch with either Scilla Douglas or David Howlett. The exhibition was launched on 4th July and is open for public viewing on

6-16 July at Hitchin Town Hall, Brand Street  
20 July - 21 August at Hitchin Library  
24 August - 4 September at Hitchin Town Hall

Council officials will be in attendance at the exhibition at these times:

10 July from 10.00 am to 1.00pm (Town Hall)  
21 July from 2.00 to 5.00pm (Library)  
1 August from 10.00 am to 2.00 pm (Library)  
20 August from 3.00 to 7.00 pm (Library)  
2 September from 2.00 to 5.00 pm (Town Hall)

### 2009 Society Outings



(Outings photos courtesy of Stephen Bradford-Best)

### The Train Now Leaving .....

Despite the 'downturn' and associated 'retail gloom', things are not overwhelmingly negative on the Society sales front. We are currently in the process of waving goodbye to a couple of stalwart old friends, "*Take the Train from Hitchin*" and "*Before the Paint was Dry*", now officially Out of Print. Sales, whilst not exactly buoyant, are ticking over on other items of stock. Book orders are now arriving online from the big trade suppliers, through the ISBN route, which add variety to the Inbox and elicit a tentative response from the Publications Officer (Sales). Hopefully she will upgrade her skills before October, when a new title hits the shelves.

Many thanks, once again, to everyone at **Shilcock's** in Bancroft who have helped us store our overflow items in such civilised conditions. Carpet and a radiator are a "first" for our stock!

*Pauline Humphries (Publications Officer,*

### Books Added to our Library since January 2009

The following are not necessarily new publications but are new acquisitions to the Society's library. Many of these are donations from the author or members, or even non-members, for which we are very grateful. *Audrey Stewart*

#### Hitchin

Halsey, Stuart & Stancombe, David, eds	We were there... Memories of Hitchin Boys' Grammar School. Old Boys Assoc. 2009
British Schools Museum	Memories of the Queen Mother's Childhood. Exhibition catalogue. February, 2007
Watts, Jean	Painting all their Lives: the History of Hitchin Art Club 1943-1993. Hitchin Art Club, 1993

#### Hertfordshire

Guide Book	Ashridge. 2009
Guide Book	Hatfield House. 2009
Baker, Margaret	Discovering Hertfordshire. Shire Publications, 1969
Eckett, Murray.	Signals: a Railway Miscellany, Hertfordshire, Buckinghamshire & Bedfordshire. Book Castle, 2008
Hurt, J.S.	Bringing Literacy to Rural England: the Hertfordshire Example. Phillimore, 1972
-	Oil paintings in public ownership in Hertfordshire. Public Catalogue Foundation, 2008
Rowe, Anne	Medieval Parks of Hertfordshire. University of Herts, 2009
Thomas, Sir William Beach	Hertfordshire. Robert Hale, 1950

## News in brief

### Triangle History Group

The 19th century Radcliffe Arms, having been saved from residential redevelopment, re-opened on 19th June as a 'gastro pub' (complete with WWII searchlights flashing across the night sky in celebration). The inglenook fireplace has been removed because of damp, and a bookable function room has opened upstairs.

### Archaeology

Following the radar survey at St Mary's in July last year, HHS has agreed to donate a maximum of £500 towards some excavation of the church on 25-26th August. There will also be archaeological work at the Biggin on 25-26th July.

### Gainsford Court

HHS organised the manufacture and wording of a commemorative plaque at Gainsford Court, once St Saviour's School, then a Sikh temple, and now flats. This followed the annual presentation, by the Hitchin Society, of the Civic Award to David Kann Associates and Conack Homes Ltd for the conversion. The plaque was unveiled on 3rd April.

### The Symposium

HHS needs your help for the annual *Herts Association for Local History* symposium which, this year, is being organised by the British Schools Museum. Date: 7th November; venue: the British Schools Museum; theme: "Educating Our Own". Richard Whitmore will speak on evacuees from Eastbourne Grammar School and Val Campion on Girton College. If you'd like to be there, particularly if you can help with marshalling or manning our stall, please contact Pauline Humphries or Scilla Douglas.

### Reginald Hine Award

At the AGM, this year's award was presented to Val Campion for her book about the women's college at Benslow House, Hitchin, the forerunner of Girton College, Cambridge.

### Film Archive

The team has transferred Frederick Ashwell's 8mm colour films to Master DVD and are putting together sequences of local events from the 1950s and 60s. These include a "Local Yokels" carnival procession, Pirton Traction Engine Rally and the Bancroft Players in rehearsal. They also have old films shot by Frederick Maurice Keeley (a Hitchin schoolmaster) and our own Richard Whitmore. If you have, or know of, any other old Hitchin films let Richard know so he can build up our archive and ensure the films are preserved for future generations in a modern format without harm to the original.

**Publication launch: "Phebe Lucas's Diary"** by John Lucas (below) on 31st October. Philpott's in Sun Street have very kindly offered to host the book launch in their downstairs window. Their premises are on the site of the old Lucas brewery and feature heavily in the book as Phebe Lucas was born at the Brewery House in 1816.

**Publication launch: Walks Along...** leaflets series: **Tilehouse and Bridge Streets** by David and Bridget Howlett and **Sun Street** by Zena Grant, drawings by Clarissa Szirtes, on 12th September in the Market Place.

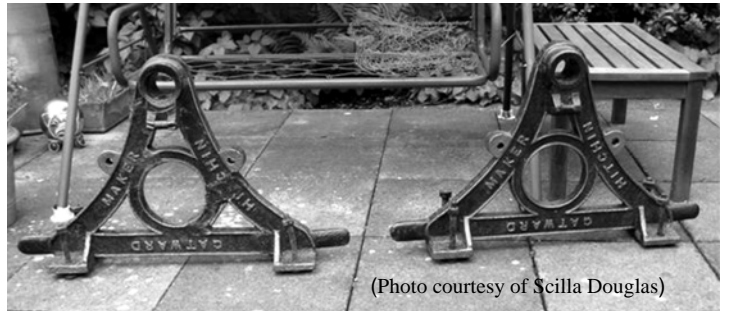


*John Lucas, who travels all the way from Wales every month to attend our meetings. Here he speaks to members at the AGM about his book, 'Phebe Lucas's Diary', which HHS is publishing in October (see above)*

(Photo courtesy of Stephen Bradford-Best)

## Mystery of the Gatward Frames

No, not the latest blockbuster novel but a real-life mystery. When Scilla Douglas was alerted by a friend about two locally-produced cast-iron Gatward frames at a car boot sale recently, she purchased them on behalf of HHS for £50. They now await a permanent resting-place somewhere in town, but where were they originally and what were they used for? Scilla hopes members, with all your experience and knowledge, will have an answer.



(Photo courtesy of Scilla Douglas)

It's been suggested the frames were once fitted to some sort of agricultural machinery, possibly a horse-drawn seed drill, but so far we have been unable to verify this. The museum has been unable to produce a photo of a seed drill. If you think you know what these frames were and to what sort of machine they were attached we would very much like to know. We're sure they would have been fitted upside down from how they appear in this photo but Scilla, resourceful though she is, didn't think trying to balance them on end was a good idea: they are VERY heavy.

Scilla's hoping the frames can be used as part of a seat or a flower box, but all options are being considered. It would help if we knew more precisely what they were, so if you have any idea, or know how we may find out, Scilla or any of the committee would really like to hear from you.

## Tony Handscombe and Dr John Williams

It is with very great sadness that we report the deaths of two people closely associated with the Society.

**Tony Handscombe** became Secretary in 1996 and filled this key role for four years in an indefatigable and energetic way. He was a prime mover in establishing our twice-yearly Newsletter to supplement the Journal. Tony was a lively and likeable character and his sense of humour was applied to Hitchin's history through a number of special Christmas cards he illustrated from *The Buildings of Hitchin* by Gravelly Earnest and Gravelly Earnest Jnr, allegedly published in two editions in 1912 and 1952. One of his most famous Christmas features was *The Hitchin Cabmen's Shelter - The Chinese Connection* which later featured in a 2003 book touching on Hitchin's railway history (!). Although Tony had been very unwell for some time, we know he was still taking an interest in the activities of the Society. Our deepest sympathy goes to his wife Sue.

**Dr John Williams** was husband of Jean Williams, one of our founder members and for many years an active Committee volunteer. Many of you will remember John helping Jean organise our Garden Parties in the 1980s and 1990s and helping at Christmas parties too. John's passions included gardening and music, and he often drew on both in aid of Society functions. John had also been unwell for some time, preventing his recent involvement with Society activities. Our deepest condolences go to