



# Hitchin Historical Society

# Newsletter

Registered Charity No. 280746

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## Summer Battles and Honours

**W**e have a new president! Priscilla Douglas was elected President of the Society at this year's AGM in April, to much applause and acclaim. Her first task within minutes of being elected was to present this year's Reginald Hine Award to John Lucas, author of *Phebe's Hitchin Book*, published last autumn. Though taken by surprise, Scilla stepped up to the mark and did John and the Society proud. Congratulations to both John and Scilla on their well-deserved honours!



One change to the committee at the AGM: Geraldine Couchman stood down as secretary and Leslie Mustoe was elected in her place. We thank her for her year's work, and offer Leslie a warm welcome. Since the AGM Phil Rowe, our former treasurer, has been co-opted to liaise between the Society and the Herts Medical and Pharmaceutical Museum Trust and to help with the website. We are delighted he's back.

Churchgate's future won't be settled quickly, unlike King Henry IV's, 507 years ago. On 6th July 1403 he stayed overnight with the Carmelite nuns at Hitchin Priory en route to Shrewsbury, where on the 21st he fought in battle against Sir Henry 'Hotspur' Percy.

This was the first time massed troops armed with the longbow were pitted against each other on English soil. Henry *Zena Grant, Editor*

## The Society and Churchgate

**T**he District Council and developers Simons are considering a major shopping and residential scheme for the Churchgate area. Hitchin has evolved as a classic market town over more than a thousand years and change has been a constant companion; it has kept Hitchin a living community. The "New Churchgate" plan has, however, the potential to be the most significant single development ever to affect the town centre. Our Society is very concerned that:

Any redevelopment must safeguard Hitchin Market, probably dating back over 1300 years. We cannot be a "Historic Market Town" without a Market.

The size, shape and form of any redevelopment must be carefully crafted. It would lie at the centre of the Town Centre Conservation Area abutting St Mary's Church, a Listed Building of national importance, and touching a whole array of other Listed and Locally Listed buildings such as the Biggin, Churchyard, Market Place and Warner's Almshouses.

Whilst the scheme is only a "Vision" or concept it does indicate major building masses near the Biggin and Warner's, fronting Market Place and along the south side of St Mary's; the elevations seem to reduce the impact by playing up the sizes of the adjacent historic buildings.

Any redevelopment must reinforce the existing, distinctive mix of businesses in the town centre, and not attract major multiples into one location leaving gaps in the historic core. If business migrates in this way who will care for the historic buildings affected?

As retailing becomes more and more influenced by 'shed' outlets our historic market town will prosper only if we play to its strengths of mixed economic activity in a characterful, well cared-for environment.

There is no future in becoming another "Anytown" clone.



The Society's Committee has decided to participate, along with Hitchin Forum, the Hitchin Society and the Hitchin Initiative, in the Churchgate Liaison Forum (CLF) convened by the Council in conjunction

with Simons. It is important the CLF discusses all facets of the possible development and how it might fit with the historic town centre. As it does so our Society will evolve its own view of the worth of any proposals put forward.

The first substantive meeting of the CLF, including an initial opportunity for public discussion, will take place at Church House, Churchyard at 6.30pm on 28<sup>th</sup> July

Full text on our website: [www.hitchinhistoricals.org.uk](http://www.hitchinhistoricals.org.uk)

## Hitchin Conservation Area Review 2009

The review of the Hitchin Conservation Area and List of Locally Important Buildings continues. It was set up by North Herts District Council with The Conservation Studio from Cirencester, and the Society is playing its part in the consultation process.

The List contains buildings of particular importance to the town's history and environment which don't qualify for English Heritage Grade I or II Listing. The Society is supporting additions to the List of properties in Wymondley Road and The Chilterns, and Thomas Bellamy House. Also, the Lodge at Little Benslow Hills; The Glover Centre, Burymead Road; Workshop/Factory Unit, Dacre/Walsworth Roads; Highover Farm, Highover Way; St Mark's Church, Lancaster Avenue; Wells Garage, West Hill (regaining its original place on the 1998 List); Whinbush Grove, Whinbush Road; Dowlands, Wymondley Road.

We are also strongly in favour of including Hitchin Hill in the Conservation Area because of its architectural and historic importance to the town. Hitchin Hill was the first area of urban development away from the town's medieval core. It is important for the precedent it set and for its piecemeal nature, which sprang from Hitchin's pre-Enclosure status and preserved older landscapes into the nineteenth century, much longer than in comparable settlements. The very early development of Hitchin Hill is shown in embryo in Merrett's plans of Hitchin of 1816/18.

We have also recommended the creation of a list of 'Local Detailing' to protect such things as street ironmongery and the Hitchin Urban District Council's first council house/estate plaque in Wedmore Road. We would like to see a small scale review mechanism for the Conservation Area whereby specific updates could be agreed when research throws new light on a particular building or location, or aspects emerge that have fallen through the Review net.

Our chairman says, "We have appreciated the willingness of the Conservation Team and consultants to involve us in this process. We remain willing to offer help in any further ways that might be useful."

## Hitchin's Historic Triangle

The Society is launching a book about the history of this small but significant area on 30th October in Holy Saviour Church Hall, Radcliffe Road. The Triangle in question has as its boundaries Walsworth, Nightingale and Verulam Roads, so is NOT to be confused with the much older Triangle at the bottom of Hitchin Hill where it meets Queen Street and Bridge Street.

The arrival of the railway in 1850 not only brought in a lot of workers for the railway, but also enabled businesses to transport goods more quickly, opening communications with London, Cambridge, the Midlands and the North. This precipitated development between the Station and the town centre consisting of a mix of terraced cottages for workers and larger villas for the middle classes. This influx of people required places of worship, so Holy Saviour Church was built in Radcliffe Road; Walsworth Road Baptist Church was erected on the corner of Highbury Road; and the Salvation Army Hall was built in Florence Street.

The Reverend George Gainsford who founded Holy Saviour Church also established a school, an orphanage and almshouses in Radcliffe Road. The Sacred Heart Convent moved around the area and eventually settled in Verulam Road, so spiritual and educational needs were both catered for.

The community in the Triangle was served by a whole range of businesses, including numerous small shops, and for the first 100 years the area was almost self-sufficient, supplying all the needs of daily life for the residents. Most of all, however, this is a story of a community with a continuous history which is still vibrant today. Sadly some buildings have disappeared, but much has been preserved of this interesting area and the book not only tells the history of the buildings, but reveals a fascinating cast of characters past and present.

Audrey Stewart

**C**an you help? Gillian Gear of Barnet Local History Society has discovered that, at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, three Hitchin boys attended *Church Farm Industrial School* in Barnet: William Harradine born 1888, son of Alfred Harradine; George Abbiss born 1880, son of Jessie Abbiss; and Charles Gascoyne born 1891. As the Hitchin Board of Guardians seems to have funded even more boys from Hitchin to attend this school, who were these other boys? If you know anything about any boys who attended, please let our chairman know so that he can pass on your message to Gillian to help her research into the school.

## Books Added to our Library since January 2010

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

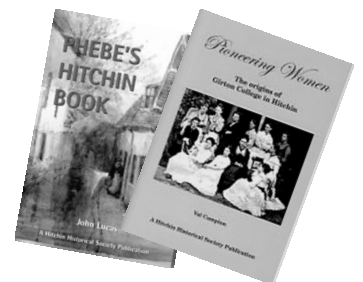
Campion, Val  
Eldrett, Molly  
Hine, Reginald  
Lucas, John  
Madgin, Hugh

Pioneering Women: the Origins of Girton College in Hitchin. HHS, 2008  
Mantles and Matches: a Hertfordshire Childhood. Arthur H Stockwell, 2010  
Hitchin Priory 1317-1539. Carling & Hales, 1918 Ref. only  
Phebe's Hitchin Book: Memories of Life in Regency Hitchin. HHS, 2009  
Hitchin Through Time. Amberley, 2009

### Hertfordshire

Pamphlet

Hertfordshire Boy Scouts: the Story of Harry Hertford, Boy Scout. Celebrating 40 years of scouting. 1948?



## Gatward Bench

You will recall that the Society recently came into possession of two locally-produced cast-iron Gatward frames after member Ken Mansell spotted them at a car boot sale. Research carried out by several members, including Derek Wheeler MBE, revealed that they were once parts of agricultural machinery - axle brackets mounted on a wooden frame between which a roller was mounted. Drawn by a horse, the device was used to break up the soil.



*Council Chairman David Miller with the Gatward sisters, Ana and Lisa, on the new bench*

Gatwards the jewellers was not the only Gatwards business in Hitchin: in the nineteenth century another branch of the family had a foundry behind its ironmonger's shop at the end of the High Street, next to what became the Arcade.

This is where the axle brackets were forged. After much deliberation about what to do with the brackets, the solution came with the coincidental celebration of Gatwards 250th anniversary in the town. The two Gatward sisters Ana and Lisa, who now run the jewellers, were enthusiastic about using the two iron axle frames to create a bench as their celebratory gift to the town. They engaged local sculptors David Boyall and Paul Currell of Arcangel in Bendish - who designed the

Princess Diana 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary 'Field of Flowers' sculpture - to design a bench incorporating detail from a clock recording all seven generations of the Gatward family who have run the business, and commemorating the Society's donation of the brackets.

On a festive May Day in Hitchin Market Place the bench was duly 'unveiled' by David Miller, Chairman of North Herts District Council. If you happen to be near the Cabbie's Shelter in the Market Place, you can see for yourselves the artistic and practical result and even use it to take the weight off your legs.

*Stephen Bradford-Best*



*Ken Mansell tries out the seat*

### News in brief

**Film Archive**—Our team is about half-way to completing the film "Images of Wartime Hitchin", compiled from various sources at the East Anglian Film Archive. Richard Whitmore says, "This is the most complicated picture editing job we have attempted so far."

**Memorial to Sir Henry Wood**—The Society hopes to place a commemorative plaque to Sir Henry in St Mary's Church. He died in Hitchin and his funeral was held at the church on 24th August 1944, 66 years ago. The BBC Symphony Orchestra has indicated its willingness to perform in the church, in a concert of music associated with Sir Henry, if and when a plaque is unveiled.

**Archaeology**—Local archaeologists are trying to time the completion of their study of St Mary's Church to coincide with the end of the Conservation Area Review.

**Shilcocks**— our warm thanks once again to Messrs John Shilcock in Bancroft for their generosity in providing such superb accommodation for our 'overflow' book stock.

### Titmore Cottages

In July 2006 we reported that the Planning Inspectorate had refused permission for the demolition of these cottages in Queen Street.



They were never candidates for 'listed building' status, but because they were the work of brothers George and Walter Jeeves in around 1909, possibly even built with Hitchin bricks, we felt these little Edwardian houses were worth preserving - especially important when so much of the townscape has been turned into apartments.

So it is with very great pleasure that we can report that Neil Thompson is now restoring them and we hope these cottages, once restored, will be included in the Local List.

### UK School Museums Group 16th Annual Conference at The British Schools Museum, Hitchin

*Saturday 25th September, 10am – 4.30pm*

Members of Hitchin Historical Society are invited to join the UKSMG Conference this year as part of the special bicentenary celebrations. The programme will focus on the life and work of Joseph Lancaster: Eileen Wallace – 'Educating the Lower Orders – Some 19C attitudes and solutions'; Terry Ransome – 'Joseph Lancaster – so much done, so much more to do'; Yvonne Limbrick – 'Lancaster's teaching methods in a monitorial schoolroom'; Yvonne Furniss – demonstration of monitorial lesson; an additional speaker on British and Foreign Schools Society is to be arranged.

Booking in advance only by 27<sup>th</sup> August:  
£25pp to include full day conference activities, morning coffee, two course buffet lunch and afternoon tea. Contact 01582 882179 for programme and booking form.

*(Ed: HHS members may take guests)*



The Newsletter is published twice yearly by **Hitchin Historical Society**, a registered charity dedicated to informing the public of the history of Hitchin and district, and undertaking research into the origins and development of buildings, organisations, crafts, trades and other aspects of historical interest, and publishing the results of such research.

## Reg Bonfield

With the Churchgate re-development a major topic of discussion once again I thought members might like to see two photographs that came to light recently showing the east side of Market Place in 1971 shortly before it was replaced by the present shopping precinct.



*Reg Bonfield and his mother 1960*

They were taken by the late Reg Bonfield (1910-2009) formerly of 33 Lancaster Avenue, who died last November in his 100th year. Reg left Hitchin in the 1960s to live in the West Country but occasionally returned to his birthplace to record changes in its townscape for his collection of slides.

These two are a particularly valuable addition to our archives because they provide a shocking illustration of that notorious decision to destroy the town's oldest department store and adjoining premises like Newman's fruit and vegetable shop. Also in the collection we found a record of the photographer himself taken in the 1960s shortly after Reg and his mother left Hitchin. Are there any among our members who remember him?



*Spurrs under demolition in 1971*



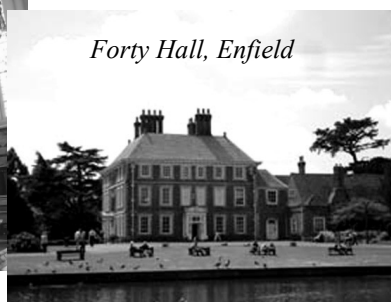
*Richard Whitmore, Film Archivist*

## Recent Society Outings

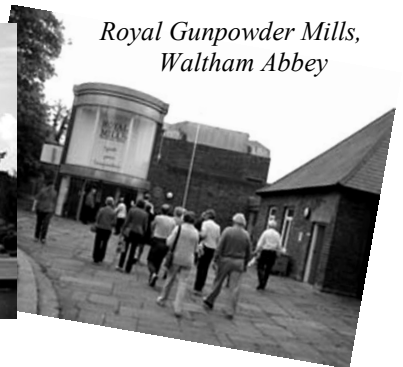
(Photos courtesy of Stephen Bradford-Best)



*St Bartholomew's Church, London*



*Forty Hall, Enfield*



*Royal Gunpowder Mills, Waltham Abbey*

## HHS Committee & Contacts

**President** - Priscilla Douglas

**Chairman** David Howlett

**Secretary** Leslie Mustoe

**Treasurer** John Skeeles

**Programme** Stephen Bradford-Best

**Journal** Simon Walker\*\*

**Membership** Val Campion

**Publications** Scilla Douglas

**Newsletter & website** Zena Grant

**Publications (sales)** Pauline Humphries\*\*

**Distribution** Vicki Lockyer

**Librarian** Audrey Stewart

**Film Archivist** Richard Whitmore

**Pharmaceutical Trust** Phil Rowe\*\*

**Liaison**

(\*\* co-opted members )

*Website: [www.hitchinhistoricals.org.uk](http://www.hitchinhistoricals.org.uk)*