HITCHIN'S HISTORY: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

An Attractive Town

In 1903 Herbert Tompkins, in his guidebook *Hertfordshire,* noted 'Hitchin is an ancient market town, full of interest, 32 miles N. from King's Cross…'. As Hugh Madgin records today, in *Hitchin Town Through Time* (2014), this is still 'the principal town of North Hertfordshire' retaining that interest.

Hitchin's Origins

The north of Hertfordshire is long settled and threaded by ancient upland routes which may have formed an Icknield Way. Hitchin first emerges as a distinct urban settlement in the late-Roman period, most likely as successor to Baldock which was by then in decline. Hitchin is, therefore, one of the oldest continuously inhabited towns in Hertfordshire. These early origins are attested by mention of a tribe, the Hicce, first appearing in Saxon documents of the mid 7th century although the tribe probably existed as a community long before that.

Traditionally, King Offa of Mercia established a monastery here in 792 but Hitchin almost certainly already had an important Saxon Minster (with an early dedication to St Andrew) and was centre to both a wide ecclesiastical area and a royal estate. The fact Hitchin's market does not have a charter suggests it was in operation long before the Crown began to grant such documents. Hitchin can also mount a convincing case to be Clofesho, the most important hitherto unidentified location for synods of the maturing Saxon church. Amidst the turbulence of the 9th century Hitchin lay near the boundary of the Viking Danelaw to the north-east and Saxon lands to the southwest. This border location seems to have established the town briefly as a defensive Saxon burgh in the early 900s whose ramparts and ditches still influence street alignments in part of the town's historic core. As Kings

A penny of King Offa

Edward the Elder and Athelstan extended the power of Wessex into Danish territory, our area was eventually settled as two counties - Hertfordshire and Bedfordshire - effectively dividing the territory of the Hicce and reducing Hitchin's status in relation to both Hertford and Bedford.

Hitchin as a Medieval Centre

The Biggin

Hitchin remained, nevertheless, a key location at the Norman Conquest and centre of a Saxon Half-Hundred within Hertfordshire. In the Domesday Book (1086) it was recorded that 'Rex Willelmus tenet Hiz' ('King William Holds Hitchin') underlining the town's status as a Royal Manor. Although Domesday entries are hard to interpret, and royal estates often seem under-assessed, the evidence suggests a considerable population here, the largest between St Albans and Bedford. Most likely it was King William Rufus (reigned 1087-1100) who granted the royal manor to the Balliols, a great landed family in the north which eventually provided both an Oxford College and a King of Scots. Hitchin was important to the Balliols because it was close to the Court in London.

Medieval Hitchin, in addition to its market, grew wealthy on grain, wool, cattle, cloth-making, brewing, brick-making, tanning and as a centre of other specialised trades. Although there is no Borough charter there is evidence that Hitchin was indeed a de facto Borough and the town's size, commercial and administrative importance plus place name evidence (Bearton means 'The farm of the Borough') strongly suggests this status. Prosperous consciences were salved by investment in religious good causes. In 1317 Hitchin Priory was founded as a Carmelite Friary and in 1361 a Gilbertine monastery was established, part of which survives as The Biggin today. Rising prosperity was checked by the Black Death in 1349 when perhaps as many as half the

The parish church of St Mary

population of the town died. Recovery looks to be slow but, in time, returned prosperity was reflected in the embellished fabric of the parish church at the hands of local lords and rich wool merchants. Links to London's wealth also helped. The merchants founded a guild, the Fraternity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, marked by the change of dedication of the parish church to St Mary.

Instabilities emerged during the civil Wars of the Roses. In 1452 about 200 Hitchin men joined the Duke of York's rebellious army confronting the Lancastrian King Henry VI and the town suffered in consequence. In 1461 a Lancastrian Army, including Scots and northerners inclined to loot and pillage, passed Hitchin uncomfortably close on the Icknield Way en route to fight the Yorkists at St Albans. Peace was restored, uniting the Houses of York and Lancaster, under Henry Tudor.

Hitchin's Tudors and Stuarts

Henry VII's success brought more certainty, solidity and reconciliation to the way England was governed. But the actions of his son Henry VIII, in breaking with Rome to establish an independent Church of England and in dissolving religious houses, initiated major impacts on the way people lived. In Hitchin both the Priory and the Gilbertine house were abolished and their buildings, land and resources sold off. Both monasteries were relatively small and poor but their symbolic end was important and their demise did provide new opportunities. The Radcliffe family soon bought the Priory, holding it into the 1960s; the Biggin was eventually bequeathed by Joseph Kempe as almshouses which it remains today. Trinity College Cambridge took on lands from Elstow Abbey connected with the parish church, a role that also partly survives today. New charities emerged to provide for the poor and for education and town centre sites were redeveloped. In St Mary's a less elaborate form of worship (in English not Latin) became the norm, a Protestant trend eventually consolidated under Queen Elizabeth I; this may be when the statues of the saints on the font lost their heads.

Throughout all these major changes Hitchin retained its status as a key market and commercial centre and its population continued to grow. Local prosperity, even allowing for such changes as the emergence of more middlemen, was reinforced in farming and wool but was also supplemented with the expansion of malting and brewing. By now the town's reputation for barley malt prompted Queen Elizabeth I's reputed retort to a Spanish nobleman who was extolling the virtues of his country's vineyards – 'My Hitchin grapes surpass them, or those of any country'.

Queen Elizabeth's long reign passed into that of King James VI and I. After 1625 James' son Charles I's High Anglicanism and his attraction to the Divine Right of Kings collided with hardening strands of Puritanism and Parliamentary independence which, after a religious clash in Scotland, precipitated the onset of the British Civil Wars. Traditional authority was challenged in a 'world turned upside down'. In Hitchin a rising independent spirit fed Puritanism and republicanism. The town lay on the western boundary of the politico-military Eastern Association which underpinned the Parliamentary cause. At this time St Mary's Church likely lost more of its statues, traditionally Cromwell and key Puritan commanders met at The Sun Inn, Hitchin men went off to fight for the Parliamentary cause and troops mustered at Mount Garrison. Hitchin was lucky enough not to suffer major physical damage during the Civil Wars and being on the winning side probably did its local role and prosperity no harm. Locally, deep dissenting roots were set which survived the Restoration of Charles II and were typified by the local activities of John Bunyan and the organisation of Hitchin's Baptists, Independents and the growing influence of Quakers. These Non-Conformist influences after the Glorious Revolution, the accession of William and Mary in 1689 and the subsequent Toleration Act, were to become of increased importance to the town into the 18th and 19th centuries.

Hitchin's Eighteenth Century: Progress and Prosperity

By 1700 Hitchin was Hertfordshire's second largest town after St Albans. The next century would bring, overall, unprecedented prosperity as rising population, agricultural improvement, better communications and commercial expansion transformed the economy: Hitchin shared in these changes. In 1724 Daniel Defoe observed 'Hitchin is a large market town, and particularly eminent for its being a great corn market for wheat and malt…which is brought here for the London market'. Many of Hitchin's timber framed buildings, dating from the 14th and 15th centuries, had seen refurbishment in the late 17th century and now received classically proportioned frontages of local brick in another wave of improvement. The town developed as something of a health resort with clean air away from London and spa springs at Charlton; the inns prospered and direct coach services were established to London, Bedford, Kettering and Leeds and turnpike roads improved access to Welwyn and Bedford. The droving of cattle for the London market, especially from Scotland (The Highlander still

The Sun coaching inn

survives), also brought new trade. In 1762 William Toldervy recorded a 'large, well built and very populous' town. During the 18th century the Manor Court declined in importance and local government focused more on the Parish Vestry. Non-Conformists, especially Quakers, laid foundations in Hitchin business and services and also became prominent in good works and local affairs more generally. As the century progressed the importance of wool production declined, that of grain and especially malting increased.

Somewhat unusually, Hitchin's large medieval open fields were not 'enclosed' during the 18th century push for agricultural improvement, most likely because a relatively large number of small to middling landholders had nothing to gain by giving up their common rights. These middling sorts, supported by the Duke of Bedford, resisted the interest in enclosure of the larger holders such as the Radcliffes of Hitchin Priory. The largest holders also had key interests, in both land and trade, outside the town which reduced their incentive to force the issue. Some of them did, however, manage to consolidate their larger holdings - removing them from the obligations of common rights - within the workings of Hitchin's surviving medieval manorial system.

Hitchin's Nineteenth Century: a classic country Market Town

Hitchin remained one of Hertfordshire's largest urban centres in 1800 with a population of about 3,000 being surpassed only by St Albans, Hertford and Ware and Watford. By 1850 it had some impressive densities of 'infilling' and notorious slums; overcrowding was particularly severe by then as the population had reached

Market Place including (to left) the Corn Exchange

over 7,000 through rapid natural increase and migration resulting from labour saving agricultural changes in the surrounding areas. As a long established local centre Hitchin also benefited from an increased national momentum for greater administrative efficiency and centralisation and for economic specialisation. For example in 1834 a gas works was opened and Hitchin was designated centre of a Poor Law Union for a large portion of northern Hertfordshire; in 1840 it acquired a local hospital; and in 1846 became home to Ransoms' new factory for pharmaceutical products. In the 1820s a 'New Town' was founded at Hitchin Hill but otherwise it was another twenty years more

before major suburban development expanded beyond the old town centre core, hastened by the gradual fading of the medieval ways of managing the use of the manorial lands and by the coming of the Great Northern Railway in 1850 to a site about a mile to the north-east of the town. In 1848 the town became one of the first to adopt the provisions of the new Public Health Act to establish a Local Board of Health tasked with providing town-wide water and sewerage services; the Board was not an unalloyed success but did sow seeds that later produced more effective municipal government.

Although not fundamentally transformative the railway boosted Hitchin's economy by playing to its existing strengths as a key local centre. Grain and malt production could now reach wider national markets, as symbolised by the new Corn Exchange; lavender and other pharmaceutical plants increased in importance. Traditional market and service functions were reinforced by Hitchin's emergence as a railway junction, first for Cambridge and then for Bedford and the Midlands; the town's Great Northern and Midland Railway Goods Yards served a wide area and railway servicing functions gradually employed larger numbers of townsmen in steady and relatively well paid jobs. Local engineering, particularly for agriculture, notched up a gear and regional expansion - such as in Luton straw hat manufacture (which demanded much plait) - stimulated suppliers in Hitchin's hinterland.

From the mid century Hitchin's relative place in the county pecking order fell back as other urban populations, especially to the south in areas nearer London such as Watford, grew quickly. But the town's local importance was maintained in economic, administrative and social terms such as by becoming a newspaper and entertainment centre. After 1894 Hitchin acquired its own Urban District Council, became the centre of both a large Rural District Council area and was created a separate Parliamentary Division.

After the 1880s, and in spite of still fragmented landholding patterns, good quality suburban housing – with 'mod cons' of running water, gas, electricity and soon even some telephones - began to spread, especially to the northwest and east of the historic core. Later in the century times were often difficult - such as the impact of agricultural depression and the fading of the straw-plait trade for Luton hats - but overall material conditions improved despite the persistence of pockets of real poverty, most notoriously along Queen (or Back) Street. There were also new openings in smaller scale industrial output (such as ironworking and boilers, a modernised gas works, carriages and cars and modernised flour milling) and in consumer products (such as lavender cosmetics, sweets and processed meats). By 1914 Hitchin was a classic middle sized provincial market town with strong roots in its past but real prospects for steady future improvement.

Modern Hitchin: War and Welfare

The outbreak of the Great War came as a shock although, after a sudden burst of unrest – 'The Hitchin Riot of 1914' involving almost a thousand townsfolk sparked by raised food prices and alleged profiteering by local grocers W B Moss - the war was generally taken in the town's stride. With a long history of Local Volunteers, and more recently a new Territorial Army base, Hitchin's military role was expanded. A large camp for the Royal Engineers was quickly built on Bedford Road and recruiting stepped up for the Hertfordshire and Bedfordshire Regiment. Almost from the start Hitchin suffered its share of casualties drawn from families across the town. Civilians were soon aware of Belgian refugees, there was alarm in 1915-16 as the threat of potential Zeppelin raids dawned and, after 1917, wartime shortages were felt on the home front.

Peace was greeted with relief but also some tension over how returned veterans would be provided for. An immediate wartime impact was the massive increase in central government involvement in daily life and the Urban District Council was soon tasked with considering Hitchin's future needs – the processes of organised town and social planning had begun. An obvious first move was provision of good quality public housing to replace decayed and overcrowded accommodation

Council housing at High Dane

mainly on Queen Street. This area was redeveloped as a civic piazza – St Mary's Square – and HUDC housing estates were laid out, initially at Sunnyside and Westmill, from the 1920s. Thought was also given to the encouragement of new local industry; this became especially important once the post-war boom gave way to bust and the 1930s Great Depression. It is interesting to note by now how Hitchin views differed with some determined locals not wanting to sacrifice the town's 'historic charm' to larger scale industry. In a way this dilemma was defused by the development of the new Letchworth commercial area which provided modern light industrial employment nearby without any immediate impact on the town.

European war returned in 1939 and the town's military role increased once more. For Hitchin's civilians the impact was probably more immediate than in 1914 – for example swift rationing, provision of Anderson shelters, blackouts, the arrival of evacuees, involvement in the Home Guard and Air Raid Precaution networks. Townsfolk were also near enough to be conscious of the Blitz on London and experienced locally some sporadic bombing. Many Hitchin people again served in the Forces although the impact of this seems more varied than the inertia of the Western Front between 1915-18; a particular local cost was the significant loss of Hertfordshire and Bedfordshire men in the fall of Singapore in 1942. The Second World War eventually involved even more state direction of the economy and social life than the First and this was reflected by the significant changes in attitudes to work and welfare that emerged after 1945.

Hitchin Today: Holding its Own

In 1945 Hitchin remained the key market, administrative and commercial centre of northern Hertfordshire although that role was being modified by the growth of Letchworth and would soon be more seriously challenged by the designation of Stevenage as a New Town. The state planning that brought the New Town also designated Hitchin as a mature settlement not in need of major expansion. This raised the old worries of the town being 'left behind' in the expected post war manufacturing and service boom but once again also deflected possible difficult development pressures, this time to Stevenage.

Hitchin did, nevertheless, see important expansion after 1950 but this was mainly focused on small scale light industry and significant suburban housing, both private and public. The population of 20,000 (1951) had increased by almost 50% by 1971. Robust employment regionally and the improvement of both road and railway links made Hitchin an attractive and convenient place to be. Hitchin's retail and service roles continued in rude health and adapted fairly well to the new more prosperous consumer based economy. Not all changes were easy to make within the framework of a traditional market town but most were accommodated – some by design and some by default - without destroying Hitchin's distinctive and attractive historic characteristics.

There were some problems. After the 1970s traditional manufacturing faded and Hitchin lost several such businesses but, as no one dominated the town's economy, their places have been filled with other functions. Pressures for centralisation and cost cutting in sectors such as administration and health care mean that the town has lost some key functions – such as its hospitals, elements of local government, justice and education – to bodies controlled much more remotely and often less effectively from outside the town. The decline of genuine localism has posed significant challenges but, so far, Hitchin has developed its own civic and voluntary mechanisms to cope. Overall, therefore, the town has preserved its attractiveness, interest, functionality and local identity as a basis for its life in times to come.

Informing visitors today
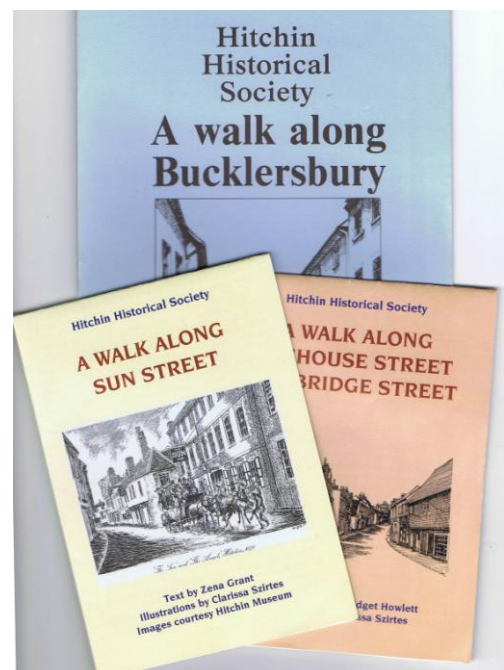
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A brief list of further reading –

- Reginald L Hine, *History of Hitchin* 2 vols (1927, 1929) – the classic account, if a somewhat literary and at times conjectural history. Hine produced several other works on aspects of the town's history.

- Anthony M Foster, *The Book of Hitchin* 1981 – a useful overall survey with key illustrations.

- Anthony M Foster, *Market Town: Hitchin in the Nineteenth Century* – a detailed and informative look at Hitchin for the century concerned.

- Alan Fleck & Helen Poole, *Old Hitchin: Portrait of an English Market Town from the camera of T B Latchmore and others*, 1978 - its combination of key studies and linked illustrations puts flesh on the town's nineteenth century life.

- Keith J and Tony Fitzpatrick-Matthews, *The Archaeology of Hitchin from Prehistory to the Present,* 2008 – a succinct, broad and accessible survey.

- Many other books dealing with aspects of the town's past can be found in the Society's Library Catalogue and its List of Publications – links here:

  https://www.hitchinhistoricals.org.uk/about-us/library/

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