



From the Chairman

When you read this piece, Hitchin Festival will be in full swing. The extremely varied programme, with events to suit many tastes, includes the inaugural Scilla Douglas Lecture, the subject being the East India Company at Home, 1757-1857. Scilla, who was our President, died last year. She had a love of history and of Hitchin, and was an inspiration to those who were privileged to know and work with her; and above all she got things done. The town and all its residents are the poorer for her passing.

The annual Miss Lewis Memorial Lecture is entitled "Aphrodisiacs, Fertility and Medicine in Early Modern England". Miss Lewis was, I believe, a member of our Society, and the last pharmacist at Perks & Llewellyn. The Physic Garden in Paynes Park contains examples of plants whose properties were used in medicines sold in her High Street premises. Many of the items which were available there form part of the collection which was donated to the Hertfordshire Medical and Pharmaceutical Museum Trust, for display in Hitchin Museum in its home at Charnwood House. The Trust

merged a few years ago with Hitchin Historical Society which is now responsible for the collection – see the article on page 2.

Several of our members are involved with the Festival by taking guided walks. Pauline Humphries and David Howlett's subject is Hitchin's Blue Plaques. Derek Wheeler's walks are on Haunted Hitchin, and David has a second subject on the town's railway history. I will be conducting people round Hitchin's historic core. In addition, Richard Whitmore will be presenting more Old Hitchin on Film.

Our next indoor meeting will be on September 22nd when there will be a talk entitled "Jill Grey: Life and Legacy". It will be given by Andy Gibbs, manager of British Schools Museum, Hitchin. Jill Grey collected all manner of items devoted to education, and these are housed at the museum. She served on the committee of our Society, and I knew her well. I look forward to seeing you.

Terry Knight

Alec Worbey

With sadness, we record the recent death of one of our founder members, Alec Worbey. Alec always retained a close interest in the history of the town. Our thoughts are with Alec's family, and especially his brother Brian, who still attends some of our meetings.

The Society's Library

Audrey Stewart, our long-serving Librarian writes:

As previously mentioned in the Newsletter and on the Website, I have now finished as Librarian and hope to announce a new Librarian to take over by September when the Library will next be out on display. During the summer I shall, with help, sort the collection we display at meetings and in future, a smaller number of items will be displayed, but specific books can be requested by consulting the catalogue on the website or the printed catalogue available at meetings.

We have a separate collection of out-of-print books such as many by Reginald Hine and others such as the Henry Wood items kindly donated after the special concert a few years ago. In the near future these will be re-located to Hitchin Library where they will be available to our members only, on production of a membership card. You will only be able to consult them in the Library. They are all listed on the catalogue and marked "Ref."

When further details are available, I'll keep you informed in the News section of the website.

I've enjoyed helping members with making use of our collection of publications and will still be around at meetings.

Perks reborn

Following the closure of Hitchin Museum many of you may have been wondering about the fate of the reconstructed Perks and Llewellyn chemist interior. The collection was preserved in the early sixties by Miss V E Lewis who was the last of the generations of pharmacists at the High Street shop. After over two decades of displaying it at her home, Lavender Barn off Lucas Lane, she donated it to Hertfordshire Medical and Pharmaceutical Museum Trust who erected it at Hitchin Museum. After another twenty years HMPMT merged with Hitchin Historical Society. Museum changes made our ownership of the collection of paramount concern. Throughout, we have had a close relationship with NHDC to conserve and display the bulk of the collection.



The main counter, shelves and drug run underneath have already been removed to the planned district museum at Hitchin Town Hall. The fate of the other fittings and objects was a cause of some anxiety. Although the whole NHDC "museum" project started as a bid for a proper storage facility, it turns out to have become the opposite. The fittings were destined to go into the inadequate garage storage at Burymead or else could have been "handed back" to HHS.

However, a Lady in shining armour appeared with a cunning plan! Ros Allwood, NHDC's Cultural Services Manager, responsible for the new district museum, was driving past Hitchin Lavender when she had the brilliant idea of Perks and its lavender connection being the perfect match. Alec and Zoe Hunter had set up their lavender project as diversification to supply wholesale lavender and maybe a stall in Hitchin Market once a fortnight. We all know how the business has grown into a tourist attraction with 60,000 visitors last season. Alec's son Tim and wife Noel now run the lavender side of Cadwell Farm in Ickleford.

The Hunters were immediately enthusiastic partners in the scheme, it was a marriage made in Heaven! During the winter, plans to convert existing barns were modified to create a purpose-built space for the new chemist display. The fittings at the old Hitchin museum were dismantled with the help of Alan Fleck who little thought when he installed them 25 years ago that he would see them move again. David Hodges facilitated our comings and goings. We were fortunate to have the skilled help of Ray Matcham to figure out where Tony Sharp had put the nails and screws when it was erected. The fittings and tens of boxes were removed to Cadwell Farm in April, with only minor casualties! Alec's plan for the fittings was perfect and, after a couple of days, he and Ray had it all looking spot on for Noel to fill the shelves with an emphasis on the wonderful display of Perks lavender products. We were very fortunate also to have the lavender cart bought from Miss Lewis's family and presented to the museum by the late Ron Perry, antique dealer of Bridge Street.

We are now installing security and information panels before the display opens. There will be no admission charge and, although only open for five months of the year, it will be seen by thousands of visitors – not only locals, but from all over the world. We hope you will come and admire what has been achieved.

This scheme will have cost Hitchin Historical Society less than £2000, Hitchin Lavender having funded the new room and utilities. Your committee feel it a job well done in a tripartite cooperative effort between us, NHDC and the Hunters of Hitchin Lavender.

Programme

With half the year gone July is a natural 'stock-take' for the Programme Secretary. The spring indoor meetings were well attended and ranged over railways, the Great War, medieval open fields and squires, all with Hitchin-Hertfordshire slants. The least attended meeting was (as usual!) the AGM where there is always the dilemma of combining the annual constitutional requirements with time for a substantive talk – any suggestions on making the AGM more attractive to members would be welcome.



*Janet Walker expounding the finer points of **Historic Walsworth** (Sunday 3 April)*



*David and Bridget Howlett lead a group in a suburban exploration of **Benslow and Back** (Sunday 1 May)*

Visits began in earnest again with the (supposedly) better spring weather. These have also been well supported with over a hundred members attending events between April and early June; due to unavoidable circumstances we had to postpone Terry's Hitchin's Historic Centre walk until August. On 11th June twenty members attended a new format of event in a Study Day at Maydencroft. This combined some short talks on the manor's past and present with time outside looking at the historic landscape.



*Bob Williams explains the history of Maydencroft using his own model of the house on **Maydencroft Study Day** (Saturday 11 June)*



*David Dingwall's photograph of **The Charterhouse** taken on the Society's visit (Wednesday 27 April)*

Thursday meetings programme for the remainder of this year:

- 22 September: **JILL GREY: LIFE AND LEGACY:** an illustrated talk by Andy Gibbs
- 27 October: **HERTFORDSHIRE'S GRAIN AND MALTING CRISIS OF THE 1630s:** an illustrated talk by Dr Alan Thomson
- 24 November: **THE BEST OF OLD HITCHIN ON FILM:** compiled and presented by Richard Whitmore, Sam Hallas and Tim Ray

Photographs (except that of the Charterhouse) by Bridget Howlett.

Thank you!

Our thanks as ever go to Messrs **John Shilcock** in Bancroft for providing us with commodious accommodation for our 'overflow' publications stock. Thanks again also to **Jenny and Bridget**, who provide us so ably and good-naturedly with refreshments at member meetings and, behind the scenes, wash up everything afterwards too. We are very grateful to them for keeping things running so smoothly and 'refreshingly'.

Some Hitchin Festival highlights:

- Tuesday 12 July **Old Hitchin on Film**, 7:30 for 8pm. Richard Whitmore Studio, Queen Mother Theatre. Yet more archive film presented by Richard Whitmore himself.
- Wednesday 13 July The annual **Miss Lewis Lecture**, 8pm. Richard Whitmore Studio, Queen Mother Theatre. Dr Jennifer Evans speaks on *Aphrodisiacs, Fertility and Medicines in Early Modern England*.
- Wednesday 20 July The inaugural **Scilla Douglas Lecture**, 8pm. Richard Whitmore Studio, Queen Mother Theatre. Professor Margot Finn presents *East India Company at Home; the British country house in an imperial and global context*.
- Sunday 24 July: **Physic Garden Open Day**, 11am - 12:30pm and 2pm - 3:30pm. Garden volunteers will be on hand to show visitors round the garden.

Midland Railway Weighbridge – a request for information



Members of the Society have long been interested in the history (and future) of the Midland Railway weighbridge in Nightingale Road, opposite the old B&Q entrance and car park. The building is on NHDC's Register of Buildings of Local Interest and is in a Conservation Area, but it is not a listed building, so has no other statutory protection.

We have been making enquiries about how many (if any) similar buildings exist in the country. So far as we can ascertain, this may be a unique example of an intact Midland Railway weighbridge office, with integral weighing mechanism. Road vehicles were weighed on their entry into the Midland Railway freight yard, then weighed again on their exit, to determine the quantity of material delivered or removed. The building is currently in a sorry state. If anyone has information about it, please get in touch, as we'd like to know as much as possible if we are to take forward any rescue plan.

Photograph: Simon Walker

HHS Committee and Contacts

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If you have an item that you would like to submit to the newsletter or information for any contributor please email newsletter@hitchinhistoricals.org.uk, or contact any Committee member.

HHS website: www.hitchinhistoricals.org.uk