



**Hitchin  
Historical  
Society**

Registered Charity No. 280746

# Newsletter

**Issue number 57 – July 2021**

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## **Message from the Programme Secretary**

We are keeping all digits crossed that we will soon be in a position to begin Society meetings again:

*\* Autumn 2021*

We hope very much that we will be able to arrange the monthly evening meetings for September, October, and November this year. The aim is to have some local speakers on local topics. Please, therefore, note the following dates for your diary at 8.00 pm at Church House, Churchyard, Hitchin –

- Thursday 23<sup>rd</sup> September
- Thursday 28<sup>th</sup> October
- Thursday 25<sup>th</sup> November

We do not yet know what, if any, ‘strings’ will be attached to the lifting of restrictions on social contact due later this month. If limits are placed on the numbers that venues can accommodate, we will, of course, be dependent on any conditions set by Church House; if it proves necessary to regulate numbers in advance of each meeting, we will arrange some form of pre-booking system.

Once meeting conditions are clearer, we will also be able to decide whether or not we can go ahead with our December social evening which is tentatively set for Thursday 2<sup>nd</sup> December.

The plan will be to circulate All Members (by e-mail where possible and post if necessary) at the end of August with confirmation and more precise details of the meetings that are planned. If, in the meantime, you have any questions please let me know.

*\* Programme 2022*

If circumstances do indeed allow a move back to normal meetings, we intend to organise a full Programme for 2022 on the usual pattern. Details of this will be ready for All Member circulation with the January *Newsletter*.

Here’s hoping....

*David Howlett.*

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## **Your Society Needs a Membership Secretary!**

Our Society runs through the kind commitment of a number of members carrying out various roles. Some might say that it could not operate without people in key positions and include in that the post of Membership Secretary. You may have missed my appeal in the Annual Report published in February asking if a member would like to take on the membership secretary role.

At that time, I said I would like to hand over the reins by September this year to enable the new Secretary to learn the ropes and for me to give full support for renewal time in January 2022. So now is the time to think hard about taking on this job to ensure the Society continues to function!

It requires the use of a computer able to run an Excel spreadsheet, having email and a printer. The membership database is easy to use, just completing entries in pre-set fields to automatically generate the membership number. With many members now paying by bank transfer the renewal process is quite efficient. Thereafter enrolling new members and producing mailing labels three times a year is not an onerous task. If you are interested and would like to know more, please contact me at [membership@hitchinhistoricals.org.uk](mailto:membership@hitchinhistoricals.org.uk) and I can arrange a time to discuss with you what is involved.

*Peter Moss.*

## Glimpses of Hitchin



A painting of Bucklersbury by the late Hector Connell

The second volume of the "Glimpses of the Past" series of books is close to completion. It includes items from the Hitchin Journal from 1987 and 2008. The contents range from butchers to bookshops; mills to maltings; carnivals to cottages; and from wells to witches, and much more.

If you have wondered what Hitchin used to be like, this book will provide more glimpses into the past.

There will, we hope, be three further volumes in the series, one to be published each year. I have done much of the preparatory work on them already.

How easy would they make buying Christmas or birthday presents?

Details of the second and subsequent volumes' availability will be on the Society's website.

*Volume 1: Hitchin, Glimpses of the Past is still available contact Mike Clarke sales@hitchinhistoricals.org.uk*

*Simon Walker*

*Series Editor*

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### Publications report.

There are two parts of my work – firstly helping with the production of any books and secondly trying to sell them. The production of Glimpses was a learning curve and so the work with More Glimpses has been easier. Hopefully, that will be completed and ready for launch in October. Whether that will be with an indoor event or a stall in the High Street will be decided by the Covid rules (or dice throwing) and a local assessment.

Sales of books have improved this year so far. Release from lockdown has helped. Our best shop sales, and the only one during lockdown, was from Merryfield's in Sun Street. Sadly, with the illness and passing of Rodney Merryfield that has closed. Beth's book stall in the Friday market is taking more books and Waterstones is now selling Glimpses but does not want to stock our other books. That seems very sad considering the hundreds of other titles that they do sell. Hitchin Information stocks various of our books, and we hope that North Herts Museum will do so soon.

Mail orders trickle in, but there has been a surge in sales after Carriages to Cars was mentioned in a vintage car magazine recently. The attraction of vastly reduced prices also helped!

The most recent event, the High Street stall was a great success. We sold over 80 items but also had a number of good conversations with the passing shoppers. Several asked about the guided town walks, something that Hitchin Information is discussing with us and others. There was a lot of interest in joining the Society, but we wait to see if that translates into actual membership.

*Mike Clarke.*

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### The Hitchin Festival

As part of The Festival The Friends of Holy Saviour Church have organised an entertaining talk, at 7.30pm on Wednesday 21 July. The speaker will be Dr Twigs Way on the subject of 'The Unexpected History of The Garden Gnome'. Full price online ticket - only 1 ticket needed £10.00 + £0.84 booking fee.

*Bob Williams*

*For the Programme of Events please see <https://www.hitchinfestival.co.uk>. Ed.*

## **More Memories of Tilehouse Street**

It was with more than usual interest that I read the recent Historical Society Newsletter (January 2021). As someone who was born immediately post war and spent my early life living in Tilehouse Street several of the articles struck a particular chord and correspond to some family interests which I have recently been following.

I lived just two doors away from Mr Day the basket maker and his wife both of who I remember as a small child. Our house was on the other side of what was the Three Tuns pub which at this time was the home of Harding's newspaper printing presses. When the presses were running, we could hear a low thumping noise through the walls on that side of the house. This was not all that made life noisy in those days as during the 1950's and 60's traffic was very heavy mainly due to the large number of brick company lorries using this route through Hitchin. The construction of Stevenage New Town was in full flow and millions of bricks must have passed along Tilehouse Street on the large red London Brick Company lorries from the brick kilns of Marston Vale to their final destination via Bedford Road, Old Park Road, Tilehouse Street, Bridge Street and Hitchin Hill to Stevenage Road - a straight run through there being no one-way systems at this time. The heavy traffic brought me into regular contact with one of Hitchin's memorable characters, 'Blind Bob' as we affectionately knew him. His frequent bellowing of "*Is there anybody there? I want to cross the road*" would bring me out of the house to his side and see him across the road when safe. He would ask "Is that young French?" (my grandfather's name) and proceed to tell me one of his jokes that he had made up during the long hours standing selling newspapers on the old Market Square.

The HHS film *The Story of Tilehouse Street* was made in 1950, the year before I began attending Queen Street School, so the first half of this film shows my walk to school along lower Tilehouse Street and Bridge Street as it was. These streets retain most of their original features. However, most of Queen Street, notably between the Triangle and the former school, has been redeveloped and has totally lost its original character, which although probably necessary in line with previous clearances has significantly changed this area.



**QUEEN STREET – 1950's**

Local events were significant and none more so than the annual Priory Fete which brought crowds of merry-makers to this part of town. However, in 1952 a very special event took place at what we called the 'top' of Tilehouse Street at the junction with Paynes Park. I refer to the official opening of the Reginald Hine Memorial Garden. I remember being there but do not remember the details of the occasion and was recently quite surprised to see that the photo of the event (shown at the end of the HHS Tilehouse Street film) included the figure of my mother with my younger sister in a pram - a pleasant discovery after nearly 70 years!



***The Official Opening of the Reginald Hine Memorial Garden  
September 1952***

*Guest of honour for this event was Sir David Bowes-Lyon, Lord Lieutenant of Hertfordshire, brother to the Queen Mother who was a frequent visitor to Hitchin in her youth.*

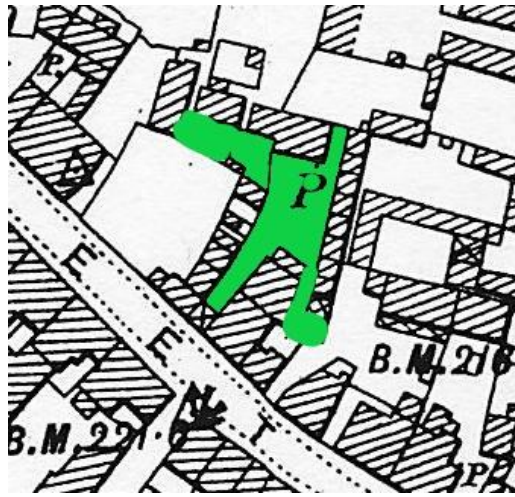
The January Newsletter also included a photograph of Tim's Yard, a relatively recent connotation of what is really Halls Yard. There is a tantalising view of the old row of cottages in the yard in the HHS film and is very much how I remember the yard from childhood when some of my family lived here. However, a more atmospheric view of the same scene but 50 years earlier is provided by the artist E A Phipson which reminds us that really not much had changed for almost two centuries prior to the demolition of the cottages.



***HALLS YARD by E A Phipson (around 1900)***

*Edward Arthur Phipson (1854-1931), or Evacustes A Phipson as he liked to be known, was a prolific watercolour artist. His love for old buildings is reflected in the subject matter of his paintings. Phipson travelled widely and his paintings record the old architectural features of towns and villages across the country and also in Europe. The Hitchin Museum had this painting in its collection along with a further nine more of Hitchin buildings and street scenes. A much larger collection of paintings of other Hertfordshire towns is held by the St Albans Museum*





**HALLS YARD - 1898 OS Map**

*This section of the 1898 OS map of Hitchin shows the location of the nine cottages in Halls Yard and the position of the shared water pump. Several of these along with the larger house on the opposite side of the yard were occupied by members of my family from the 1880's until demolition.*



**HALLS YARD**

*From HHS film "The Story of Tilehouse Street" 1950*

Just up Tilehouse Street from the Halls Yard entrance is the large Georgian house, once belonging to the Wright family and pictured in the HHS January Newsletter as part of the 'Hitchin Trafalgar Ghost' article. The 'Wrights' was a name that I heard frequently at home as we lived with my grandmother who had been '*in service*' with this family who were held in respect due to their kindness. Being '*in service*' was the most common occupation in the country at the beginning of the twentieth century whether as a maid, cook, gardener, butler, groom, or handyman. As a boy I remember the house being occupied by three elderly sisters: Madelaine, Queenie, and Veronica the latter being a JP. There had been a younger brother, Lance, who was killed at the Somme in 1916. For most of the 19th century the house was owned by Francis Lucas who was a barrister and later a banker and became a widower in early middle age. One of his daughters Anne married a solicitor Frederick Wright and together they lived in her father's house and raised their family as described above. Throughout this time the household maintained several domestic staff some of whom were resident.

As Reginald Hine pointed out and as described in the HHS film, Tilehouse Street is rich in history both in the variety of its buildings and the stories of the people who have lived there and is held in great affection by its many residents past and present.

*Brian Kettleborough*

## HHS Gift Membership

Do you know someone, a friend, someone in your family who shares your interest in local history? You already know from our Newsletter, Hitchin Journal, numerous publications, talks at monthly meetings and outings to places of historic interest that membership of Hitchin Historical Society is one of the best bargains around Hitchin. Here is an opportunity to share that bargain. We are offering members a chance to give an HHS membership to a friend or loved one, with the added bonus of a free gift – for you or the new member. You can choose from either of two of our most popular books:

- The Hitchin cabmen’s shelter: its rescue, restoration and return to the town.
- Bridewells of Hitchin – A History of Local Imprisonment.

All you need to do is email us at [admin@hitchinhistoricals.org.uk](mailto:admin@hitchinhistoricals.org.uk), and give us your name, the name and address of the person to whom you wish to gift the membership, and the free book you would like to claim, and we’ll do the rest, including getting the membership fee from you!

As an added bonus, this gift membership will last right through to the end of 2022.

Go on, share the fun: you know it makes sense.

*Phil Rowe*

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Thank you to everyone who has contributed items for this newsletter.

If you would like to submit an article for the newsletter, please email me. However, I cannot guarantee every suggestion will be used.

*Pamela Skeggs*

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## HHS Committee and contacts

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**Chairman** Vacancy.

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\* Co-opted committee members \*\* By invitation

This newsletter is published 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 to publish the results of such research.

HHS website: [www.hitchinhistoricals.org.uk](http://www.hitchinhistoricals.org.uk)