



High hopes for the High Street

Before and since Miss Matty betook herself to Mr Johnson's shop in Cranford on market day, the 'High Street', both as location and as metaphor for town centre, has figured greatly in urban life, never more so than in Harpenden.

For all the eventful comings and goings of bustling High Street life, it is difficult to think of a time when the very concept was so pressed and troubled, nationally and locally. The Government recently commissioned a report by **Mary Portas** on the general fate of the High Street, whereas, here in Harpenden, the issue has been raised in timely and purposeful fashion. **Mary Portas** recommends that one should 'promote the inclusion of the High Street in Neighbourhood Plans' and that seems to be particularly relevant to the situation here in Harpenden.

The Town Mayor, **Michael Weaver**, intends taking a strong lead on the future of the High Street. **Chris Marsden**, the Society's Chairman, has already begun fruitful conversations with him on the subject, discussing how the **Harpenden Society** might be involved in the whole process of ensuring that the High Street and, by extension, the **Southdown** and **Batford** retail outlets, are thriving assets for the town.

Naturally enough, there is a Cranfordian yearning for yesteryear and a nostalgia for all those specialist family businesses. Understandable, yes, but we are sometimes forgetful that the major reason they disappeared was that not enough of us used them. **The retail trade is not a protected species.** The High Street is largely an unplanned arena for the free enterprise of those who choose to trade. Some may, of course, not be very proficient at trading and the competition may be brisk. Three supermarkets may both take custom from shops and, by attracting people to the area, bring custom to them. It is all something of a lottery.

The character of shops and shopping changes. For example, a fair proportion of Harpenden's population may be tagged as being 'cash-rich and time-poor', that is, exceedingly busy people on high incomes with, by way of illustration, a plethora of food and drink outlets responding to their demand for quick as well as quality provision.

The landlord factor is another conundrum. The length and cost of leases obviously has a marked effect on the shopkeeper's ability to stay in business. Parking – typically viewed as insufficient and expensive – is, as ever, a knotty question, always with its corollary of achieving a rational interplay with the needs of pedestrians. Should the successful 'Farmers Markets' be extended in frequency and coverage, whilst guaranteeing that

they fit into the overall pattern of retail trade in the town centre? It is a complex riddle. When **Chris Marsden** recently visited the local manager of **Sainsbury's** in order to discuss the role of the business in the community, he was told that he was the first person of like status to do so. It would seem that there is room for improved consultation and exchange of ideas all around.

The Harpenden Society, in particular its Economic Activities Working Group, pledges that it is ready to join in any discussions aimed at helping in all these regards. The compact nature of the town and the accessibility of its retail trading venues, especially at a time when the costs of car travel are high and are unlikely to be lowered, are huge attractions. It is a cultural and social as well as an economic challenge.

There is much that might be done to make Harpenden a more interesting and varied place where people might want to spend more time and thus more money. Short-term and longer-term, the vision must be to create and sustain a High Street of colour and vitality at the heart of the town.



(Photo courtesy of Harpendia.com)

The Harpenden in Question

being a series of editorial commentaries on important Harpenden issues that should challenge thought and encourage inquiry and action.

4. Age is an Opportunity



People are not living longer.

Well, 'people' in the sense of a species are not living longer. A few people have always reached the approximate maximum of 115/120 years over many centuries but there is no sci-fi sign of the species breaking that barrier. As it is, there has always been a modicum of older people in the population. Between 1066 and 1914 there was always 5% to 10% of the British population aged over 60. One of the reasons why the fraction of older people in our communities is so high is because the proportion of younger people has dropped. In Victorian times the mean age of the population (the age at which half the population was above and half below) was 24 – now it is pushing 40.

However, the chief factor is that more people are surviving to live what we regard culturally as a normal life-span of 70 or 80 years. Actuarial calculations about expectancy of life at birth have often proved misleading, especially when heavily weighted by high infant mortality. Life expectancy in 1800 was 37 years – hinting that you might shuffle off the mortal coil at that age, but if you made it out of infancy you had a fair chance of living much longer. In 1900 156,000 people died before the age of one. In 2000 128,000 people died before the age of...65. Nowadays only about one in seven deaths takes place before 65 and a good thing too. It is about survival, not longevity. Ours is not an 'ageing society', as it is so often mistakenly called. Ours is, thankfully, a normal society, in which most people live out a natural life-cycle. What we have done is to emerge from a 'premature death' society.

So how should this change of interpretation affect social policy either nationally or locally in towns like Harpenden where about 6000 people are in what is now usually referred to as the Third Age, that is people who have either ended full-time employment and/or whose children have reached years of independence (a somewhat notional term, some may ruefully think?)

Firstly, one should celebrate this marvellous achievement of the majority of people enjoying a normal life-span rather than bemoaning what is sometimes offensively called the 'burden' of old age. Indeed, the burden is much exaggerated, precisely because a key aspect of survival is improved health. Between 1981 and 2006, a remarkably short time, average life expectancy for women in the UK at 65 increased by three years from 17 to 20 years. At the same time, the 'not good' health phase increased by only 20 weeks from 5.0 to 5.4 years. An extra three years of good health against an extra 20 weeks of 'not good' health doesn't seem to be a bad bargain. What has happened is that the average spell of later life ill-health is postponed rather than lengthened. 90% of one's personal NHS budget is, on average, expended in the last six months of life, whenever that time comes.

Secondly, we should acknowledge that, with two-thirds to three-quarters of older people affirming they are in good or fairly good health in survey after survey, they are active citizens,

not passive social casualties. They have much experience and skill to offer society, not least as carers for grandchildren. This is not for a moment to deny that older age, like any age, has its drawbacks and pitfalls. There are certainly older people in our own community who are impoverished, ill and lonely and deserve our watchful succour – but always recall that they may not necessarily be impoverished, ill and lonely simply because they are old.

Thirdly, let us be encouraged by the fashion in which older people have mobilised themselves in Harpenden as elsewhere to ensure the last phase of life is a life-enhancing one. Two examples in Harpenden are the thriving **Seniors Forum**, lucidly described as 'a voluntary organisation set up to help local people of middle age and above to enjoy a full and active life' and with many successes in its relatively brief existence, and the **University of the Third Age**, one of the oldest in the country established in 1982, offering educational and social opportunities to Third Agers. (both have websites) It should come as no surprise that the chairman of the Seniors Forum, the bustling and ebullient **Alan Cox**, is a member of the Health and Social Welfare Working Group, while the chairman of the **U3A**, the humane and civilised **Roy Evans**, is a member of the Education and Leisure Working Group of the **Harpenden Society**.

Muse over the wise words of Longfellow, taken from his poem *Morituri Salutamus*

*For age is opportunity no less
Than youth, though in another dress
And as the evening twilight fades away
The sky is filled with stars invisible by day*

Eric Midwinter

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Published by the **Harpenden Society**, printed by
Dor2Dor, Harpenden and distributed by a much appreciated band of followers.

Memos for Members

Chairman's Electronic Greetings

Chairman Chris Marsden has had a pleasing response to his first emailed message to members. You may be missing out on this and other Society emailed news.

If you are on email and wish to be included on our email list, please forward your email address to membership@harpendsociety.com. We guarantee not to use your email address other than for the single purpose of contacting you on Society business.

The Society's Awards

It is time to think of Harpenden projects or developments completed in 2011 that have, in the words of the Constitution, 'contributed to the visual or social amenity' of our town. So please have a good look round and complete the enclosed form and return it by the end of February so that the results can be announced at the AGM.



2011 Society Award presented to Keith Lunn of Breathing Space by Chris Marsden, Chairman of the Harpenden Society (second left) With Rosemary Horne, Chairman of the Awards committee (left) and architect Clare Butterworth (right) of Clague's Harpenden practice

Post-Festive Endpiece

Members of the Harpenden Society Committee have commented on the pleasure derived from the town's Christmas lights, as tasteful and charming as always. Particular attention was drawn to the skill of the erectors in managing, from what looks like the perilous perch of a crane, to put up the lights so neatly and cleverly. It is a service that should not go unnoticed and we are keen to convey our appreciation to those responsible.

The Next Meetings

Park Hall, Leyton Road.

8.00pm - 9.15. Light refreshments from 7.30 pm

Thursday 23 February 2012

Members and their friends, as well as members of the public, are welcome to the last open meeting of the season.

'There's a Place for Us...Maybe'

Organised in conjunction with the Harpenden Parents Group a forum of speakers will discuss whether there really is a place for all in Harpenden's primary and secondary schools and what might be done to improve the situation.

Thursday 29 March 2012

Annual General Meeting and Review of the Year's Work

This promises to be an interesting and stimulating occasion. It has been a year of change in the type of structure and the line of purpose of the Society, and the Chairman and members of the Committee will be reporting accordingly.

Given these circumstances, we look forward to a well attended and enthusiastic attendance.



(Photo courtesy of Harpendia.com)

Springs and Roundabouts; Now and Then

The Pleasures of a Natural Reserve

There were one or two gentle surprises in store for the last Society event of 2011 where mince pies and mulled wine were enjoyed.

Oliver Rendell, (below) Secretary of the Batford Springs Volunteers, gave a nicely paced account of Harpenden's only accredited nature reserve. First we learned that Batford Springs is small, just ten acres, urban, with lots of buildings and traffic nearby and completely open to all-comers. Next we discovered that such a nature reserve is decidedly man-made.



Batford Mill's owners had created a mill pond, since refilled, and diverted the course of the River Lea while the actual springs, five in number, were artificially sunk to a depth of a hundred feet and lined with chalk in order to propagate the growth of water cress. The water cress farm fell into disuse by World War II after which time the mill area became an industrial site.

It is nature that is often the foe – witness the struggle with the thug-weeds like ivy and nettle – as the Batford Volunteers valiantly toil to create and maintain a 'managed environment' that is friendly to the flora and fauna and provides the town with such an attractive asset.

It is an asset comprising several elements; the springs, the river, the reed beds, the ancient meadow and the piece of wet woodland. Oliver Rendell told us the ups and downs of this fine venture and his future aspirations - the expected exchange of the land ownership from the St Albans District Council to the Harpenden Town Council and further improvement and extension of the reserve - are decently optimistic. Hope, one might say, 'springs' eternal.

Oliver Rendell, affable in bearing and genuine in resolve, was absolutely the right choice to match the tastiness of the mince pies and the warmth of the mulled wine.

Eric Midwinter

'Yesterday all my Troubles Seemed so far away'

Alan Jackson searches through the Society's archive of 25 years ago.

Concern for the environment was as evident as it is now. The vegetation on the Common was thriving, particularly the harebells, but somebody noticed that a pink Spotted Orchid that had flowered there had been decapitated by the mower! Thanks to advice from the Warren Springs Laboratory at Stevenage the first steps were taken towards the clean-up of the Southdown Ponds.

The Society's Chairman wrote a letter to the Harpenden 'Herald' noting that protest groups were surfacing in Harpenden to oppose 'threats from developers'. He thought their zeal 'a little parochial' and suggested that their members should consider joining the Society and supporting its fight on wider issues because 'as far as development goes in Harpenden their battle is just the beginning'. Hot planning issues which no doubt concerned these maverick groups were the disposal by the National Children's Home of their Highfield Oval property; (below) the redevelopment of the Harpenden Motors site in the High Street; and the redevelopment of 5-17 Milton Road.



(Photos courtesy of Harpendia.com)

The death was reported of Helen Finnie (a Vice-Chairman of the Society) who ran Mary Ellen's Restaurant from the 1920s until 1960, which later became the Inn on the Green.

The public were invited to report overhanging trees or hedges, pot-holes and other obstacles on specially printed District Council Report Cards available from Harpenden Hall. After completion they could be dropped through the letter box of the main door and a daily courier service would take them to St Albans. All done in seconds with a few clicks on the appropriate website today, of course, but am I right in thinking that despite this revolution in communication we actually have rather more pot-holes than we did then?

(Alan Jackson is the committee member who is Convenor of the Public Order Working Group)

The Red House-A Brighter Future as a 'Wellness Centre'

All of us, old and young, have a stake in the sort of public health issues that affect our everyday well-being. What better place to unify and augment the kind of advisory and minor treatment base we require in Harpenden than a revived and refurbished Red House?

The Harpenden Memorial Hospital, endearingly known locally as 'the Red House', has long been a heartfelt issue in the town. It still offers some services to the people of Harpenden but, welcome although they are, there has generally been a lingering sense that the Red House does not provide the full scale services of which such a site, with so proud a place in the story of medical and social welfare in the town, is capable. There are even rumours that some of the remaining services could be removed elsewhere.



The newly-formed Health and Social Welfare Working Group of the Harpenden Society unhesitatingly chose for its first task a brief study of the situation of the Red House. The Group is pleased to announce that it has begun circulating of a paper on the subject entitled 'Red House Revivified'. In so doing, it has been heartened by the encouragement of various authorities and concerned individuals.

The proposal is that the Red House should become a 'Wellness Centre', its purpose the comprehensive provision of advice and services aimed at the prevention of illness. It proposes that this should be established and administered by a partnership of the NHS, the local authorities, including the Town Council, relevant charities and the people of Harpenden. The idea is that it would be a one-stop shop and walk-in centre for advice and preventative and allied treatments, and that it would also act as the basic information source of a directory about all the many sources of help and welfare that are available in the town.

The Health and Social Welfare Working Group is very conscious of the fact that many deaths and much illness are the result of social causes. Every year some 120,000 deaths are caused by smoking, 31,000 premature deaths are caused by obesity and 33,000 deaths are alcohol-related. Indeed, three-quarters of all British deaths are the result of cancerous and circulatory problems, many of them the consequence of wrongful life-style choices. It is not alarmist to speak of these as epidemics. The Victorians were faced with an entirely different set of epidemics, such as cholera and typhus, mainly the result of poor sanitation

and the like. Thus their public health concerns were about fresh water and proper sewerage. Such has been the success of these programmes that only 2% of British deaths are now caused by fevers.

Today the call is for advice and treatments that address the social constructs of everyday life. There are centres elsewhere in the country that concentrate on the provision of cross-disciplinary services, that is where the NHS, the local authority social and welfare services and charities involved with such issues collect to provide assistance;

- the supply of user-friendly services in a warm and welcoming environment, with refreshments and other social amenities on tap;
- the involvement of lay people and users in the running and volunteer staffing of the facilities.

It is the strongly held view of the Working Group that the Red House is compellingly situated to adopt such a fundamental role:

- it is well-known and well-liked
- it is reasonably accessible and is a bequest to the community
- it is, above all, there – it is available.

This is our vision. Our first hope is to stimulate debate. Our second hope is that the debate will quickly lead to the undertaking of a feasibility study. This would examine what all this would entail in terms of the physical needs of the buildings themselves, what the clinical and allied aspects might be, how the 'Wellness' Centre might be organised and administered and what the financial requirements would be.

It is an ambitious proposal but few in Harpenden would disagree that the Red House merits such decent ambition.



(Photos courtesy of Harpendia.com)

The full proposal has now been launched. The Health and Social Welfare Working Group commends it to the Society's membership and looks forward to finding many members in full support of this plan.

For and on behalf of the Health and Social Welfare Working Group. **Report by Eric Midwinter**

The Memoirs of Society

John Davis has been doing further industrious work on the Society's annals

in the February 2011 Newsletter, I reported on a (self-inflicted!) project just completed of going through the Society's old records from 1989 as far back as seemed to be available and reducing them to a combination of a written summary based on that information with a few attached reports and documents and transferring them to the County Archivist for safe keeping. In a sense, it seemed a pity that those records mainly petered out at around 1960 - though it did thankfully put a limit on the exercise.

Recently another batch of old records has come to light going back from the early 1970s (so overlapping, and filling out, the earlier years covered before) sporadically to the Annual Report for 1947. The latter reported that the Society had resumed its activities after the War with a meeting in November 1946 where the name was changed from the Harpenden and District Preservation Society to its current abbreviated version and the Constitution amended to include "the promotion of the general well-being of the people of Harpenden and its environs". Interestingly the newly elected committee "included representatives of . . . other local societies" and discussed horse riding and parking on the Common (plus a change . . .), reversion of the Small Public Hall "to its proper purpose" (unexplained) and pollution of the River Lea. The membership was 164, mainly having joined before the War and efforts were made to increase that number by leafleting and sponsoring a schools quiz on Harpenden resulting in 150 entries being received.

Subsequent reports included extensive and critical comment on the early 1950s Harpenden Development Plan (mentioned briefly in the earlier project), the disappointment at the loss of the old Church Green cottages (where the row of shops with flats above now stands) but also a very successful Society-sponsored litter-collecting campaign by a local school. As before my summary of those years with attached Society Annual Reports and Committee Minutes, along with extensive newspaper cuttings (photocopied to secure their integrity), have been lodged with the County Archivist in Hertford and a copy retained in the Society's own files.

Any member wishing to delve into the past can peruse the records at County Hall by first contacting the Archivist on 0300 123 4049 or the Secretary.

John Davis is Convenor of the Society's Environmental Services Working Group

The Boundaries of Decency

Eric Midwinter has concerns about our parliamentary boundaries

How many times have you been to Hitchin? My answer would be three times in 36 years – as opposed to dozens of visits to nearby St Albans every year. This musing was prompted by the recent proposals of the Boundary Commission on electoral divisions. Its laudable aim, one aspired after by reformers back to the 19th century Chartists, is arithmetically equal constituencies. This results in Harpenden and Hitchin being combined, although it is difficult to see any genuine social or allied link with that fine township. Parts of mid-Bedfordshire are added as far as Shefford and Silsoe, just to vary the mix.

The problem is that this strict mathematical formula, whilst sound in itself, risks losing the organic sense of community and belonging that should characterise a political entity. Harpenden, as part of the St Albans District Council area, with St Albans directly linked by short road or rail rides, would and did fit more snugly into that mould. Much is made nowadays, and rightly so, of local autonomy and responsibility and the need for people to engage more enthusiastically with the political establishment but that depends substantially on the citizen's cultural perception. Constructing artificial slabs of 'constituency' territory that have negligible common denominators cannot but impede that process, but how does one balance the numerical and the social imperatives?

One idea put forward is to return to the use of the county boundaries in so far as we, for example, all recognise we live in Hertfordshire and the county provides many of our important services. Herts elects some ten MPs. There could be a county wide election, which would maintain the need for fairness as regards numbers – and then the ten MPs could be appropriately allocated to serve areas in which some wider – not too wide of course – numerical variation would be permissible to ensure that they fitted more realistically into the civic perception of what constitutes a recognisable political entity.

Some areas have not yet recovered from the widespread local government reorganisation of the early 1970s, when there was that same urgency to create rational and arithmetically correct chunks of administrative territories. It has been long forgotten that the Redcliffe-Maud Commission which recommended these major changes had funded large scale research that was comprehensively ignored. The research demonstrated very convincingly that people could only identify sensibly and comfortably with just a few streets around their own home – and yet 'economies of scale' led to an insistence on large, artificial blocs of local governmental boundaries. Localism is, in civic terms, extremely local. We should not neglect that truism.

It's just a personal viewpoint and to be honest there is not much that can currently be done about it. However I would be interested in readers' reactions to this critique.

Check out the Society web site for up to date news
www.harpendensociety.com