

St Albans CIVIC SOCIETY

Looking to the future-
with an eye on the past

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Newsletter | Summer 2020

NEWS & COMMENTS

We wave a sad goodbye to Newsletter editors **Eric Roberts** and **Peter Trevelyan**

who have chalked up an impressive length of tenure in the job and seen the Society through some interesting times. Eric will continue as a committee member for the time being. We are grateful for all they have done and wish them both well.

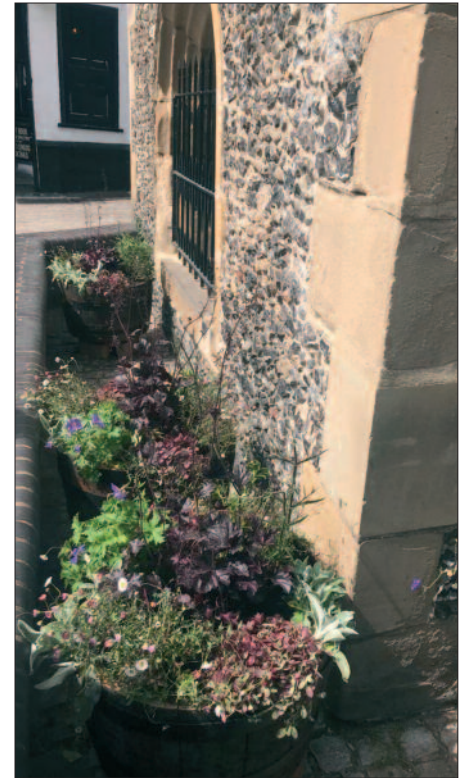
The Annual General Meeting is currently in abeyance due to COVID-19 with the hope a date in September may be possible. Regrettably our speaker meetings, awards evening and proposed autumn visit to Royal Tunbridge Wells and Hever Castle have all been postponed until 2021.

Members not currently receiving the Society's monthly digital **Latest news from St Albans Civic Society** emails are missing out on a lot of information and comment. To be put on the mailing list please contact the Membership Secretary at moraghormiston@waitrose.com.

Fears that the highly commendable, newly-built **commercial units at 40-42 London Road** would remain empty for some time in this present crisis appear unfounded with the news that the Co-op are applying for a premises off-licence.



The **St Albans City Centre Pollinator Project** aims to make the city centre a more helpful place for bees as they go about their important job of pollinating. Strategically-located planters are being introduced to the area, funded by BID. The first can be seen at the Clock Tower.



Where is the Vision for St Albans?

The Council have now announced the winning design for the largest city centre project since the Maltings in 1983 and is to be congratulated for adopting the Civic Society's proposal that St Albans deserves an architectural competition for the large, prominent police station site. It was a brave decision to move away from

the original scheme for this site and to invite three leading architectural practices to submit proposals for a scheme St Albans can be proud of.

The Council took the proposals to the public with well-illustrated, explanatory displays that were taken around the district and made available online. These displays

attracted a great deal of attention and animated discussion on the merits of the three schemes. It was obvious that people valued the opportunity to comment on the responses to the Council's brief and those comments have influenced the Council's selection of the preferred design.

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Where is the Vision for St Albans? Continued

Whilst public input was important in making this decision, a vision for our city suited to the times we live in is just as important. A City Centre Vision statement exists but it is 11 years old. Since 2009 there has been a major change in how town centres are used and a shift in shopping habits resulting in a contraction in retail provision. St Albans has not been immune.

We urgently need a new vision to shape change in St Albans. Where do the Arena, Bricket Road car park and the Council Offices fit into an overall vision for the city centre? Without an updated vision statement it is foolhardy to pursue any new development.

We can see the result of allowing development without having a relevant City Vision in St Peter's Street. Development is piecemeal. There has been no commitment to high design standards, no over-arching view to influence the transformation of BHS into a hotel and there is no basis for managing the uncoordinated proposals to convert Poundland, the adjoining old Poundworld store and three shops beyond into retail units with residential on upper floors.

Until we have a new City Vision, planners



61-69a St Peter's Street

are flying blind and we could finish up with a dog's dinner of a city centre. The Government's recent Building Better, Building Beautiful initiative offers good guidance here. This may be a mixed metaphor but it is not intended as a criticism of planning, rather a lament that there is no masterplan driven by a vision for any part of the city.

We need a new City Vision to outline our goals for St Albans and to frame principles that guide development and planning.

Realising that vision requires public

involvement. There is no doubt that the process of development should be led by people with an understanding of how towns and cities are evolving and who are skilled in landscape and architectural design but equally it is the people of St Albans who have the answers to the big questions: 'How do we want to use the city centre?', 'How do we want it to work?', 'Does it reflect my idea of what the city should be?'. Planning has to deliver a city centre that works in the way people want to use it. If it does this, the city centre will be successful. If it doesn't it won't.

Peter Newby

Postscript: "By the time you read this newsletter the first stage in a process to draft a new City Centre Vision for St Albans will have taken place: an open virtual conference, organised by the Council, the Business Improvement District (BID), the Civic Society and Conservation 50, will have happened on 26th June. The next stage will involve public consultation, seeking citizens' views about how they would like to see St Albans' city centre in the future."

Tim Boatswain

More trees please!

Trees are a valuable part of our culture, our economy, the environment. They are also home to all manner of wildlife. And they are beautiful. They enhance our sense of wellbeing and improve our mental health. Yet we take them for granted. Imagine St Peter's Street without those beautiful London Plane trees.

Twenty years ago through the efforts of the Civic Society, as part of its Tree Sponsorship Scheme, and in partnership with St Albans Council, 33 trees were planted at a cost of £10,000. Since then the Scheme has raised almost £25,000 to plant trees all over the district. However, it can and must do more.

We know the world needs more trees if we are to combat climate change and this is where you can help. Whenever you want to create a memory or celebrate an occasion how about considering sponsoring a tree or trees? In addition to the tree planting, there is a special Tree Book of Remembrance organised by the Society with optional free entry for any sponsored tree. Each tree and any dedication is captured by an artist to mark or celebrate an event, organisation, anniversary or birthday. It is on display at



the Council Office on the first floor opposite the lifts. They say the best time to plant a tree was 20 years ago; well we did that, and the second best time is now. So be a part of this and please sponsor a tree, make a memory and help create a greener, cleaner St Albans and our planet.

The Tree sponsorship scheme continues to be managed jointly by St Albans Civic

Society and St Albans Council. To find out more contact us through the Civic Society website www.stalbanccivicsociety.net or visit: www.stalbans.gov.uk/sponsor-a-tree. For an estimate or application form telephone 01727 819363 for the Council's Landscape & Trees Section or email: trees@stalbanccivicsociety.net

Mary Conneely



Greening the City and Coronavirus

For the last three years, on behalf of the Civic Society, I have been organising a series of talks for the Council's Planning and Building Control department under the umbrella of the Planning Training programme: annually, three talks for planners and one for councillors.

With the climate change crisis and environmental issues, there is a recognition that our urban areas have lost touch with the natural world, creating health problems for city dwellers. This is a worldwide problem which is only likely to grow worse, if no action is taken, with forecasts that urban areas will have expanded across the world by more than 2.5 billion people by 2050. It, therefore, seemed very appropriate to make the theme of the talks for 2019-20, Greening the City.

If the question is asked, 'why green the city?', the answer in the modern jargon really is a 'no brainer'. Here are the main arguments as to why it is important to green our cities:

- improves the environment;
- ensures rich biodiversity;
- reduces air pollution;
- ensures water storage;
- dampens noise;
- helps cooling down in warm periods;
- essential for mitigating climate change crisis;
- crucial for sustainability.

The next question is 'how do you go about making a city greener?' Here are some key things that need to be achieved:

- electricity generation using renewable resources;
- investment in public transportation;

- encouraging cleaner cars and imposing emission standards;
- pedestrianisation – more walking;
- actions and policies to cut waste, reduce water consumption;
- tree and vegetation planting programmes;
- city government leads by example and encourages grassroots efforts.

The series of talks got off to a good start with a very interesting talk on The Landscape of the City by Johanna Gibbons of J & L Gibbons LLP. Unfortunately, the next two talks had to be postponed because of the General Election. Although there was a session for the councillors, in which John Milligan of Milligan Knight Architects (Trees in the City) and I (Re-greening the City) participated, the postponed talks for the planners could not be rescheduled as we were hit by the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdown.

The Council, as many of you will know, has already recognised the Climate Change Crisis and has set up a cross-party Climate Crisis Response Working Group, which is developing ideas which do include greening St Albans and the District.

Furthermore, I have been invited, on behalf of the Civic Society and Conservation 50, to work with the Council and the Business Improvement District to revise and develop a new City Centre Vision. Much has happened since the last City Centre Vision for St Albans was published in 2009; for example, retail has undergone massive changes due to internet shopping and different spending patterns (as is evidenced by empty shops). St Albans needs to adapt and think to the future if the life of its centre and 'high

streets' are to survive. A key element on any vision now should include environmental issues and greening!

There is now a unique opportunity, paradoxically caused by the Coronavirus emergency and lockdown, to expand radically the greening agenda and rebalance the city environment and alleviate many of the health issues that plague cities. These are my key things that should be on the agenda:

- the importance of a move away from car use in the city centre, while ensuring access to shops etc. - free 'short-haul' public transport;
- need for pedestrian space - reclaim the public realm for people - to reduce the risk of infections now and in the future but also for comfort and access - pedestrianisation of the city centre.
- importance of clean air to improve human experience and health - move to sustainability;
- need to support local businesses - a shift to localism providing resilience for the community (in the face of future crises);
- a more socially useful economy that protects small traders and local entrepreneurs;
- quality green spaces for relaxation, congregation and mental well-being - think about an urban forest;
- creating space for wildlife diversity, engagement and relaxation - mental health;
- urban planning based on social needs - so that high streets have a societal objective, as well as a commercial mission, and are not just left to market forces.

As we move into recovery from COVID-19 let's be bold and seize the opportunity to make radical changes to the way our city centre operates and the way we live.

Tim Boatswain

Our city will be different

Coronavirus has changed a lot of things already, and looking ahead there will be further far-reaching issues and situations to come to terms with. Some crucial decisions will have to be made.

A big problem will be our city's retail activity. Some shops will remain closed leaving empty premises. In previous years when stores like Woolworths closed, other brands came forward and stepped in. That's doubtful this time. Many of the closed BHS stores have not been taken. Here we were lucky and a new hotel development is being built. But who will occupy the ground floor retail space and fill the hotel's rooms?

The need for more, and even existing, office space will be questionable.

Lockdown has seen more people working from home. Conferences and business meetings have been conducted online. The trend will continue. What impact will this have on developments like the City Centre Opportunity Site South and other proposals remains to be seen.

Commuting and travel in general will be affected in ways we don't yet know and for a city like St Albans this will have both economic and social implications.

The city's wonderful pubs and restaurants face challenging times. How will they be allowed to open and adapt to the social distancing rules? A need to revitalise tourism will be needed here with a tourism officer and service restored.

Sir John Timpson, founder of key-cutting, shoe repair chain, recently wrote about this subject saying local authorities will need to bring together retailers, developers and local interest groups to reimagine their towns and city centres. Think a mixture of housing, leisure and community services along with surviving retail and hospitality businesses, thus creating a thriving hub.

All this will need planning – looking ahead at least 10 years. The Society suggests the creation of a post-coronavirus city centre tsar to bring things together and co-ordinate how St Albans gets back to work and develops its future. This role should encompass business, retail and tourism. Attracting visitors is going to be vital for the city's future prosperity. Together we can shape the future of our great city – but help is needed.

Eric Roberts



The St Albans Civic Society is now on Twitter. Follow us at [@stalbancivicsoc](https://twitter.com/stalbancivicsoc)



Membership Matters

Unpaid membership subscriptions

Could those who have not paid their membership fee for the year April 2020 to March 2021 please take one of the following actions:

1. Contact their bank to set up a Standing Order, or
2. Pay online through their bank, or
3. Send a cheque.

Bank details:

Name: St Albans Civic Society
Sort Code: 40 40 01
Account Number: 30727989

Address for cheques:

Moragh Ormiston, Membership Secretary,
Thatched House, Abbey Mill End,
St Albans AL3 4HN

Annual Subscription:

Individual: £10
Family (2 or more): £15
Pensioner, student, unwaged: £7

The Society acknowledges with gratitude the support from the following Corporate Members:

- Austin Trueman Associates
- Christopher Place Shopping Centre
- Debenhams Ottaway
- Milligan Knight Architects
- National Pharmacy Association

A sorely missed friend and associate

John Thomson served the Civic Society as Treasurer for nearly two decades, following his career in the City, most recently as Finance Director for Martin Bierbaum. A dour Scot, with a great wit, whilst training as a chartered accountant in Edinburgh, he excelled at rugby and athletics and was President of the Young Mountaineers in Scotland.

John's concern for society and the community in which he lived came to the fore in the choice of charities he supported in retirement and his contributions to them will be sorely missed.

John's family were a key part of his life; with a healthy disregard for authority

himself, he encouraged successive generations to challenge the status quo too. Supporting in every way, he routinely provided the early school run for grandsons Jack and George, whose respective passions for rugby and music delighted him.

A loyal friend, many will miss the discussion and debate over the glass he so much enjoyed himself. The present cruel pandemic has deprived his wife, Diane, and, now three, grandchildren of a much beloved family member, as it has his wide range of friends and associates.

Kate Morris

In order to avoid any possible confusion or misunderstanding members are respectfully asked that, should they be involved in any meeting or activity where they declare they are a member of this Society, they make it clear that their attendance and any opinion expressed does not automatically represent those of the Society's Committee. The Committee can always be contacted for advice, information and update on any matter by any member. Equally, the Society wishes to make it clear that when it is consulted about any item this should not be automatically deemed as leading to consent.