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Looking to the future-  
*with an eye on the past*

# Newsletter | Summer 2022

## News in Brief

Welcome to the Summer Newsletter, brought to you through the efforts of acting editor Eric Roberts and designer Roy Bellamy with contributions from some members. Which is a timely reminder that **there is need for an editor** as previously outlined in the Spring newsletter. Anyone interested please contact Freda Chaloner, Chairman- chair@stalbanscivicsociety.com or by telephone 07710 498951.

Thank you to all those of you who have renewed their **membership subscriptions** due on the 1 April. Your support is much appreciated and helps keep the Society, and committee, going! If you have not yet renewed, please do. Jan Cropper, Membership Secretary, will be very pleased to hear from you. Details in Membership Matters on the back page.

Some of the **tidying up/enhancing initiatives supported by the Society** in the city have been happening. An article from President Tim Boatswain highlights several of them. Take a look into the Vintry Garden and see the new path with restored grass after the ravages of those erstwhile Christmas Markets trampling. And whilst there, see the nearby new Peace Bench and the superb works in Sumpter Yard. The recent plantings are luscious, lovely and tasteful.

**The Blue Plaques programme** continues with the latest being one for Elsie Toms, politician, historian and Mayor of St Albans (and also one of the four founder members of the Civic Society in 1961), on 11 Normandy Road. See previous article in the Spring edition and to support contact blueplaquesstalbans@gmail.com

Many of the recipients of **the Society's 60th Anniversary Grants** have expressed their appreciation and we are looking forward to seeing more of the projects coming to fruition.

As Mary Conneely wrote last time, there is still an opportunity to **sponsor a tree** for planting this winter season. For details contact Mary on maconneely@btinternet.com

Nominations for **the Society's Annual Awards** for projects, big or small, that have caught your eye and were **finished** in 2021 are still being sought. See Mary's article in this edition.

The Society continues to **monitor the weekly planning and tree work lists** and make comments as appropriate. Liaison over major projects like the Arena's future and Civic Centre Opportunity Site North goes on.

Finally, the **Clock Tower** is open again. Hooray! Volunteers are still needed for the 90 minutes shifts at weekends until the end of September. If you could perform just a few sometimes, please contact Robert Osborne robert-osborne@ntlworld.com or Freda Chaloner- details as previously given. Many Thanks.



*Above: the unveiling of the latest Blue Plaque with Glaudie Law, (left) of 11 Normandy Road, Catherine Newley, Audience Development Manager at St Albans Museum + Gallery and Robert Pankhurst of Blue Plaques St Albans.*



*Middle: the new path in the Vintry Garden. Right: the Mayor opening the Clock Tower and (above) with some of the Clockateers.*





# Celebrating a custodian role

**T**here have been many times when I tell people where I live and from whom I've had a response, which in short, says how lucky I am and how much they love St Albans. On both counts, I can only agree.

However, for those of us who live here and who own a house, especially in the conservation areas, we also have a responsibility. Because in our venerable city it's hard to say we truly 'own' a house or property. We are in fact custodians and we have a duty of care to look after it and one day pass it on to the next 'lucky' generation.

With that role in mind the St Albans Civic Society annually holds an awards ceremony which encourages and celebrates the highest standards of civic design and conservation which enhance the environment of our city. We showcase projects large and small which have been completed and seek out a new building, an extension, shop refit or a restoration project. In short, something that has enhanced St Albans and was completed in 2021.

Last year The Society's Annual Awards Event was held at the Maltings Arts Theatre with an evening enjoyed by our members and those nominated or whose property had been shortlisted. It was both joyous and successful. Our aim was for an event of celebration, that was both interesting and fun whilst including architectural analysis. A time to celebrate the architects, builders, owners and doers who make our city vibrant and yet interesting.

To make things more inclusive, we always encourage nominations from the public who may not be members of the Society. Last year's winner was the St Albans Cathedral's new Welcome Centre. It was worthy of both the Trevelyan Prize and the overall Civic Society Plaque for conservation, restoration and design.

Others who won or who were commended included Beaumont Gardens, a joint winner of the Residential category with a conversion of the former Beaumont Works into 58 new apartments. It has proved a great success. We had a self designed house and, in the city centre, some smaller but equally important projects were commended: the distinctive shopfronts of the magical Books On The Hill and the imaginative Flowerbox on George Street were two nominations, both for enhancing the streetscape.

So over to you. Have you noticed a new

building, extension, shop refit or restoration project? Something that has caught your imagination and enhanced St Albans.

Let us have your nominations – for projects big or small. Encourage your friends to do likewise. We welcome all nominations. You don't have to be a member of the society to do so.

The awards ceremony is usually held in the autumn. Details of this will follow later.

Send nominations to stalbanscivicsociety@gmail.com or post to Awards Nominations c/o 19 Brampton Road, AL1 4PP

**Mary Conneely**

## Civic matters waiting to be fixed?

**T**he last two years have been difficult. The city and Country have endured a plague. We all know how it has affected us, mentally and physically. We are not out of the woods yet but slowly things are getting back to normal. We must be optimistic. But the Covid years have left scars and changes in St Albans life. Let's look at some of them.

Gone are the frequent stories of Thameslink delays and overcrowding. Rather it's been tales of sometimes almost empty trains as they have managed to keep running. For a city so dependent on its fast link to London, credit where credit's due. Now so many people are working from home, how will this affect the future level of our services? Likewise with buses?

The city's famous **Charter Markets** have taken a hit. They are often reported to be a shadow of their former selves. Is that because of Covid or the hiatus over the Council's ongoing proposals, plus stalls versus gazebos? Perhaps it's a combination? What is apparent is that there has been an exodus of some of our well-known traders. That's not good for the city's economy and image which depends so much on these historic markets.

There is the on-going debate about the **Arena Theatre** – suddenly closed in the pantomime season. It's all part of the vision for the Civic Centre Opportunity Site North development. Should the Arena be

demolished or not in future plans? And let's not forget that Roman mosaic inside the foyer – sadly hidden under sticky carpet tiles! The debate continues. There is to be a competition to enable the public to express a preference.

**Verulamium Park** still manages to get Green Flag status. Quite remarkable really, considering its flooded, dismal loos permanently closed and now up for demolition. (That's one way to solve a problem!). Likewise the closure of the **George/Spicer Streets toilets**, about which the Society has made a protest. Definitely not a good decision by the Council for a city trying to establish a welcome to more visitors. And there is the on-going saga of the **Park's polluted lakes**. Lucky, then, not to have had heat wave summers in the last two years!

**Pedestrianisation** will continue to be a matter for debate and in need of some positive decisions.

Yet life still goes on in this great city of ours. The Civic Society has endeavoured to be on the case with all these issues and more. It seeks the views and opinions from its members. These will help the committee not only to keep in touch but formulate policies and priorities on how to respond to the various issues and achieve a satisfactory fix.

**Eric Roberts**

*Tell us what you think!*

### AGM

*Members only*

**Thursday 29 September**  
**Jubilee Centre, Catherine Street**  
**7.45pm**  
**Refreshments after**

# Larks return

IT'S BACK! LARKS IN THE PARK WILL RETURN TO VICTORIA PLAYING FIELD ON SUNDAY 10 JULY after having had to be cancelled for the last two (Covid) years. And, as before, the Civic Society will be there giving its support with a stall so as to join in with the fun and games of the day.

Starting from around midday until late afternoon there will be the usual entertainment and attractions to enjoy. For its part, the Society will be bringing back its popular opinion poll inviting people, and that includes youngsters, to name their

favourite St Albans building and, if they had a bulldozer, the one they would set about demolishing! Post-its will be provided for people to write on their choices. What will triumph – and which building gets the chop?

Committee members will be on hand to answer questions and invite people to not only give their post-it opinions, but, if not already a member, to join the Society for FREE either as an individual or family until April 2023. This gives regular news updates about local matters, the Society's newsletters and invitations to any talks, also to the AGM in September at the Jubilee Centre and the Annual Awards Evening in October. These latter events always offer complimentary

wine and refreshments! That's a free membership trial with no strings attached.

We are also planning a raffle/tombola to help raise funds to support a special tree planting in St Albans to commemorate the Queen's Platinum Jubilee under Her Green Canopy project.

There will be news about the latest Blue Plaques initiative and an update on plans for the city centre with, of course, a chance to express views about things – always a helpful de-stressing opportunity!

We look forward to seeing you on Sunday 10 July 12 - 4.30pm at a real community event for all ages.

**The Committee**

## CONSERVATION 50

FRAMEWORK FOR THE FUTURE OF THE ST ALBANS CONSERVATION AREAS

Back in 2019, with the strong support of the Civic Society, a group of interested parties set up a voluntary organisation to mark the 50 year

anniversary of St Albans' first Conservation Area. It called itself Conservation 50 (C50) and set about organising a series of events: there was an exhibition in St Albans Museum + Gallery; a conference with outside speakers, giving their views on the future of conservation areas; a visual arts competition for local Junior Schools; and the City Guides put on a special conservation area walk.

When all the events were over the group decided, rather than disbanding, to carry on building on its success. Operating under the umbrella of the Civic Society, C50 set out to identify a series of projects that would draw attention to the importance of conserving the heritage of St Albans.

It established a representative group to promote a 'blue plaque' scheme to celebrate the famous people of the city. So far three plaques have been installed: the first on the facade of the Museum + Gallery

commemorates John Ball, who was one of the leaders of the Peasants' Revolt in 1381.

Next, on 25 March Stacey Turner, founder of the mental health charity It's OK to Say, unveiled the second plaque to Nathaniel Cotton, a pioneer in clinical psychology who established his 'Collegium Insanorum' on a site on the corner of what is now College Street. The third was put up in Normandy Road to commemorate Dr Elsie Toms (see front page). There are five more plaques ready to be installed and plenty of nominations in the pipeline.

Another ongoing project is how to clean, redecorate, green and promote the much-neglected historical alleyways of the city centre. While debate is proceeding on the difficult issues of removing wheelie bins and managing waste collections, the alleys have been steam cleaned and, thanks to public donations, measures are being taken to preserve the 16th



century succubus, a wooden bracket at the end of Christopher Inn passageway. It is also hoped to be able to install both a green wall and themed decorations near Christopher Place.

At the Vintry Garden there has been successful lobbying for a permanent path along the muddy short cut across the grass. A new path, in keeping with the existing paths, and incorporating the memorial to those children that died in the terrible coach accident that happened at Ledignan, in France on 29 May 1985, has now been laid.

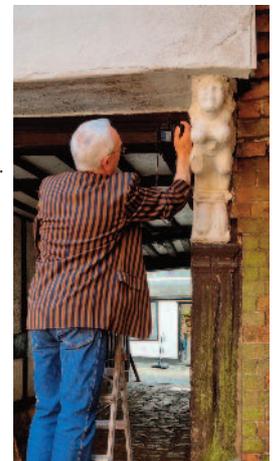
By the Waxhouse Gate passageway, alongside the bench commemorating the centenary of the end of World War I and near the Society's Verdun Tree panel, a Peace Bench has been installed which was paid for by a series of talks that have been part of the Adult Learning programme at the Cathedral. Just recently, the Dean of the Cathedral, The Very Reverend Jo Kelly-Moore held a ceremony to bless the bench. Given the war in Ukraine and the threat it poses to the world, it was a very apposite moment to pray for peace.

C50 is also exploring an opportunity to establish a Conservation Areas Advisory Committee that would help identify and conserve St Albans' heritage within the District's areas.

If you would like to support or help C50 please contact us at c50stalban@gmail.com

**Tim Boatswain**

President of St Albans Civic Society & Chair of Conservation 50



## The Arena's future – a view for discussion

Member Peter Denney recently wrote a long letter to the Herts Advertiser concerning the debate about the Arena's future either for demolition or refurbishment. Here is an extract for you to consider:

**I**t would be a good idea to re-appraise what is being proposed. Not least the suggestion that the Arena be demolished and replaced with a block of offices and a new commercial, 'receiving theatre', to be located elsewhere on the site to enable a central green space to be created to boost the environment. All in the interest of planning taking place for our post pandemic future!

If ever there was a recipe for an economic and environmental disaster that must surely be it. Starting with the Arena: here is a building, Locally Listed by the Council, by an eminent architect, in a prime location in relation to St Peter's Street, which has served the community well. It has been commercially successful for over fifty years, despite being inadequately maintained and ill-served by later additions. The theatre is now in need of more care and renovation to cater for our current demands, as well as those for the foreseeable future, not demolition!

A recent study of a similar building in Derby, also threatened with demolition, showed that the carbon/environmental cost of demolition and new build would be over two and a half times more than that of the most wide-ranging renovation and re-modelling of the retained building! Naturally this would also be reflected in the relative construction costs of the two approaches. Surely a lesson there for the current proposals.

What is really needed is not a new theatre but a new vision for the existing building, a transformation of the Arena, retaining the essential fabric and external character of Gibberd's design, but extending it and radically altering and renovating the interior. It should retain its present use as a multi-functional space but be extended to become a cultural hub, not only in the evening but throughout the day. To quote Chelmsford's aim for their City Theatre "the whole building should be an enjoyable, inspiring and creative space that serves our



community throughout the day and night". Additional functions could include provision for art and pottery classes and, in particular, there should be facilities for young people such as a recording studio and a computer gaming centre.

What is also needed is a management team with cultural vision, working within an over-arching Council cultural policy, to ensure co-ordination/co-operation across all of the city's cultural sections, particularly with the Museum + Art Gallery and the local theatres.

The 1990 extension to the front of the building should be removed entirely, as should the bridge from the Council offices and accompanying ramp, restoring the clarity of Gibberd's scheme and enabling the creation of a suitably landscaped civic square. Thus providing the opportunity for outdoor performances, community functions, temporary specialist markets, sculpture displays, even concealed fountains and a winter skating rink (as at Somerset House).

The Council's proposal for a linear park in front of the Civic Offices is, if not unfeasible, highly unworkable and extremely expensive, given that most of it is on top of their proposed underground car park. Instead the existing area should be sensitively re-levelled, landscaped to eliminate steps, railings and walls and planted with trees, and the service road south of the Arena changed to a shared surface area, with access only for local premises vehicles, re-landscaped and tree-

lined down to Bricket Road. The whole to provide a green perimeter to the rejuvenated Arena and a link to the landscaped area of CCOS South.

As a 'light touch' alternative to the present proposals for expensive, limited underground parking (150 cars), the possibility of retaining, thoroughly upgrading and extensively 'greening' the existing car park (302 cars), should be considered, together with the building of two floors of apartments, or offices, above. It is perfectly feasible structurally to bridge over the existing construction, and certainly much cheaper, and environmentally sensible, than building an underground car park with a tree-lined area on top.

The possibility of the Council moving in to the offices in CCOS South could also be considered. This would enable the existing building to be fully refurbished and sold on, with the option of a limited area at the west end being taken down to enable the creation of a landscaped link between the currently neglected and inaccessible Rose Garden and the newly landscaped area north of the Arena, with its link to St Peter's Street. 📍

**Peter Denney is an architect and member of the Society's Design Advisory Group.**

*Comments and opinions of others are sought as the Society considers the best way forward.*

## Membership Matters

### To join or renew membership

Subscriptions remain unchanged and are renewable on **1 April** each year.

Individual	£10
Family (2 or more)	£15
Pensioner/Student/Unwaged	£7
Residents' Association	<b>Free</b>
Corporate	£50

To join or check payment details please see the website or contact the Membership Secretary, Jan Cropper, tel: 01727 844363 or email membership@stalbanscivicsociety.com or post to 7 Upton Avenue, St Albans AL3 5EW

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

- Austin Trueman Associates
- Debenhams Ottaway
- Milligan Knight Architects
- National Pharmacy Association

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.