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

# Newsletter | Autumn 2022

## Welcome to our Autumn Newsletter

**W**e are still looking for someone to coordinate our newsletter so if you think you may be interested then please contact me at [chair@stalbanscivicsociety.com](mailto:chair@stalbanscivicsociety.com).

Huge thanks go to Roy Bellamy for, as always, designing and putting the newsletter together.

Not enough people, members or non members, are clear enough about what the Civic Society is, what it stands for and what it does. For example, we had a stall at the recent history fair and the question we got asked by most visitors was "*What do you do?*" So we want to do some work to clarify this and then refresh our web site, etc.

Our last members' survey was in 2018 and so we plan to issue a new membership survey in January 2023. We think that this will help us to confirm what the Civic Society is for, what you expect from the society in return for your membership fee and what should be our priorities for the next few years. So please look out for the survey and complete it.

**WE NEED YOUR INPUT!**

**Freda Chaloner**

## A rash of garden rooms

**H**ouses in our Conservation Area command a price premium. There are large houses here with ample grounds, but even the small Victorian terraces were usually provided with private gardens where people could plant trees and grow their own plants or vegetables.

Desirability is such that there is now a trend for people (or developers) to buy a house with the immediate intention of extending it or digging out the basement to provide more habitable space than in the original house. Such expansion should be

*Continued on the next page*



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## The unparished areas of St Albans

**T**he District Council has recently completed a Community Governance Review (CGR) consultation on what changes should be made to Parish Councils. That has resulted in some proposed changes to boundaries but there is a glaring omission – what about the unparished area?

Most areas in St Albans District have a Parish or Town Council that has a devolved responsibility to run and make decisions on local assets (such as allotments, parks, community centres) and to lead on development of Neighbourhood Plans which define rules about development in the area.

The centre of St Albans does not have such a Council (so is unparished) which means that decisions on issues that are made at Parish Council level by those locally elected councillors are made by the whole St Albans District Council. Does this matter? If residents elsewhere have their own local democracy, then why shouldn't the residents of the central area?

Currently the unparished area is represented by the City Neighbourhoods Committee (CNC) which has District Councillors and representatives of local Residents Associations and discusses local issues. But critically it currently has no decision making powers and so all decisions are made by the main Council. Is this

enough or is this really just a mechanism for giving information? Can it be changed to make it more relevant?

This issue was touched upon in the CGR but the reasonable conclusion was that this was too complex to be dealt with in the very short timescale for this review. This is not the end however as the council is committed to carrying out this review (and implementing the outcome) in a longer timescale.

A working group is being set up which includes representatives of Residents Associations to consider whether the right answer is to create a Town (or City) Council for the unparished area or whether changes can be made to the City Neighbourhood Committee which will give it the authority to act decisively on behalf of the unparished area.

There are numerous questions – what would such a council have responsibility for; would this reduce the work of the main District Council or produce duplication? What would be the benefits? What extra costs would be involved and what would this mean for levels of future Council Tax? Do we need another layer for this area and if not, is there a democratic deficit in the centre of St Albans? If you have comments or thoughts on this please send to [chair@stalbanscivicsociety.com](mailto:chair@stalbanscivicsociety.com)

**Freda Chaloner**

**A rash of garden rooms *continued***

controlled by planning regulations, with restrictions regarding the Conservation Area, Article 4 Direction (removing some ‘permitted rights’) and local or national listed status. Properties subject to Article 4 (about 1 in 5 in the central Conservation Area) always require express planning permission; if nationally listed then Listed Building Consent must also be obtained. Selling agents and solicitors should emphasise this.

Modern additions may be permitted, but only if they can be viewed as enhancing the ‘street scene’. These rules were designed to protect historic fabric and preserve the special character of old streets.

One area where it is often assumed that buildings may be erected without formal permission is the rear garden, unseen from the public road. A general move to working from home has led to the vogue of a sizeable ‘garden room’ complex for recreation or workspace. The result is a rash of planning applications (even retrospective ones after the build has taken place), where extension to the original property itself would not be permitted.

Government relaxation of planning rules over the past years means that resource-strapped Councils have less control over development even within Conservation Areas. Moreover, no-one has a legal right to the view from their house, so that neighbours’ objections on the grounds of

unsightliness may not count.

We should be free to enjoy our properties of course, but there is a real risk of our patchwork of green gardens being remorselessly covered over with a haphazard collection of nondescript outbuildings on large concrete bases.

The Royal Horticultural Society campaigns against losing garden space and its effects: increased flooding, biodiversity loss, increased urban temperatures and poorer air quality. Chaotic infilling could be mitigated if the Council were to refuse applications wherever there are legitimate grounds to do so and promote clear policy guidance to limit the over-development of a valuable traditional environment.

**Robert Pankhurst**

# City Centre Opportunity Site North and City Vision

**T**he City Centre Opportunity Site North (CCOSN) is a project that will consider the redevelopment of the site adjoining the now almost complete City Centre Opportunity Site South and the future of the Arena.

Following discussions between the Civic Society and the Council it has been agreed that consideration should firstly be given to the requirements of the whole City Centre. Accordingly the current work of the project will be both expanded and reduced.

The expansion is that the Culture workstream is now developing a Culture Strategy for the whole of St Albans and the Public Realm and Transport workstream will focus on car parking requirements for the whole of St Albans.

Work on other aspects is currently paused and this is the reduction. There is a



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representative of the Civic Society on each of the workstreams.

Alongside this project, work has begun on a City Vision which will be incorporated into the Local Plan thus giving it statutory authority. A steering group has now been formed to take this forward and is meeting monthly and a wider workshop was held in

October to obtain wider input. I am pleased to report that the Civic Society is a member of the steering Group, which also has representatives from Residents’ Associations.

In the meantime the position of the Arena remains that the Council has not made any decision on whether or not to demolish it. When the Culture Strategy is developed then it should be possible to decide whether or not the Arena can be adapted to meet the needs and in the meantime a Carbon Assessment is planned.

The Civic Society position has not changed – we should await the Cultural Strategy which should help to define the type of performance venue we need and only then should a decision be made on its future.

**Freda Chaloner**

*Almost complete City Centre Opportunity Site South*



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# The Historic Alleyways of St Albans

**B**ack in the Spring 2021 edition of the Society's Newsletter Eric Roberts and Jill Singer penned an article entitled St Albans' Dirty Little Secrets. They were writing about the city centre's passageways and alleys that run across the area between Chequer Street, Market Place, French Row and Christopher Place. The names of these alleys and passageways all have allusions to their historical past: Queen's Way, Sovereign Way, Lamb Alley, Pudding Lane, Boot Alley, the Christopher Inn passageway and Dog Cut. The article went on to bemoan their poor state: many are

filthy and unkempt, covered in graffiti and clogged up with rubbish and wheelie bins. The authors explained that a small combined group from Conservation 50 (which is linked to the Civic Society), the Business Improvement District and St Albans & Hertfordshire Architectural and Archaeological Society were working with the City & District Council not only to clean and restore the alleyways but to celebrate their existence and history. The plan is to resolve the rubbish issue, improve the condition of the alleyways and then, with the owner's and Council's permission,

having identified historical themes and greening opportunities for each alley, ask the community to help fulfil the project.

Though progress has been slow, the Council has established a group to try to deal with the rubbish in the alleyways but it is hampered by the several different companies managing the wheelie bins, fly-tipping and the fact that the Council does not own the alleyways.

Some progress, however, has been made with the Christopher Inn passageway (running from French Row to Christopher Place) with a conservator's report, funded through donations, on a historic wooden bracket. The carving of the bracket represents a succubus - a female demon who would seduce travellers - which was a sign of protection for the inn's guests. The actual conservation of the bracket, however, has been delayed as there are health and safety issues regarding insurance that need to be resolved.

Further north in French Row there is a rather miserable modern passageway (which in a previous incarnation led to the Dog Inn) where the Manager of Christopher Place is commissioning a mural from the local artist Ant Steel who has done several murals in the city, including the portrait of the late Queen Elizabeth II in Christopher Place itself.

It will also be important to provide information which explains why these passages and alleys have historical significance and should be recognised as part of the City's rich inheritance. The benefit of restoring and decorating the alleyways, apart from their aesthetic appearance, will be that they become part of the social and cultural offering of the City, encouraging footfall and engagement with both citizens and visitors.

**Tim Boatswain**

Christopher Passageway



# Railfreight LATEST

**T**he plan for a massive Railfreight depot on Radlett Airfield near Park Street has been with us since 2006. Despite objections from St Albans Council, local residents and the Civic Society, and after two Public Hearings at which the Society spoke, permission was granted for SEGRO to develop. That pledge from former Minister Eric Pickles that 'the Green Belt is safe in our hands' was not to be.

Progress has been slow. So slow that many people will have either forgotten or now be unaware of the threat to the local

environment and possibly their railway service.

In July it was announced that the Gorhambury Estate had sold its land to SEGRO, as had Herts County Council. It is suggested that the latter was disappointing given that, technically, that land was **ours** - the people's. Given the opposition to the plan, might not a better sale and use have been, as it can be developed, for housing and even a new hospital?

Post Covid, with fewer people commuting, the enhanced Thameslink

timetable is probably in doubt. Perhaps the freightliner trains will fit in by day after all? Engineering works to heighten tunnels could prove disruptive. However, with the proposed Free Ports, might not the distribution of goods become different?

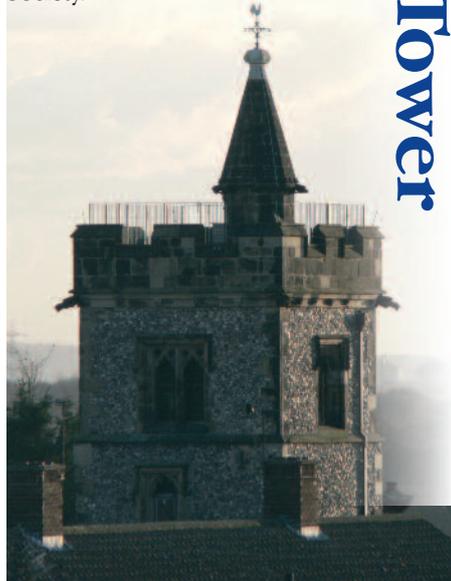
Could this become some giant juggernaut park by default? The omens are not good. At least the Civic Society tried, as did SADC, past and present MPs and many local residents.

**We shall see!**

**Eric Roberts**

As usual volunteers from the Civic Society open the Clock Tower for visitors at weekends sharing this voluntary activity with members of the St Albans & Hertfordshire Architectural & Archaeological Society.

## Clock Tower



This year has seen a total of 4983 paying visitors to the Clock Tower over the weekends from 11 June to 9 October, which is roughly half the visitors we had in 2019, the last full season of opening pre-Covid.

Unfortunately opening was delayed this year from the usual Easter date due to the roof repairs so we lost eight weekends from the start of the season but added in a couple by staying open into the first two weekends of October. Many thanks to all those volunteers who help keep the Tower open. We appreciate your continued support and help which also contributes to the Society's funds. The thank you party for the Clockateers will take place next March at the Verulamium Museum.

*There is always scope for more volunteers willing to cover a 90 minutes session on a Saturday or Sunday so if you could spare some time to help at the Clock Tower next year please get in touch.*

When the repairs were made to the roof, the toposcope was put back the wrong way round! Given how badly worn it is, this is less of an issue than it might otherwise have been, but it needs replacing. It is hoped that the Museum Service will be able to meet the cost of this and we await an update. It would be good to have information boards on each side of the roof platform but for now the cost of these is too expensive and so we have to be content with a readable version of the toposcope.

**Robert Osborne**

## ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

At a well-attended meeting held on 29 September, our Committee were re-elected and details are shown below.

Freda Chaloner	<i>Chairman</i>
Robert Osborne	<i>Secretary</i>
Jon Bulloch	<i>Treasurer</i>
Jan Cropper	<i>Membership Secretary</i>
Mary Conneely	
Peter Newby	
Robert Pankhurst	
Michael Fookes	<i>Co-opted</i>
Fiona Couper	<i>Co-opted</i>

We said thank you to two long serving and hard working committee members:

**Eric Roberts and Jill Singer.**

In recognition of their contribution to the Society, we have decided to plant a tree in their names. Eric oversaw the tree

sponsorship scheme for many years and if you are not familiar with that you can find more details on our website at [www.stalbanscivicsociety.com/city-issues/trees](http://www.stalbanscivicsociety.com/city-issues/trees)

As well as the main committee, there are three advisory groups covering planning, design and awards. The membership of these and their terms of reference are shown on our website at <https://www.stalbanscivicsociety.com/about-us/committee>

Can you help? We are keen to hear from people who would like to get involved with roles such as organising speaker evenings, helping put the newsletter together, assisting with clock tower, arranging visits. If you would like to find out more then please contact Freda or Robert on [stalbanscivicsociety@gmail.com](mailto:stalbanscivicsociety@gmail.com)

**Robert Osborne**

### The Charter Market - an update

It is disappointing that the historic Charter Market continues to languish in a sorry state. A decision was made in February to do a procurement exercise for a pilot of mixed stalls and gazebos to be facilitated by external contractors. Although this pilot was to start at the beginning of September we know that it didn't. It turns out that, unbelievably the procurement exercise didn't start until 1 September and there don't seem to be any clear reasons for such a long delay.

The closing date for bids was 30 September and we are told that bids were received which are now being evaluated. It is expected that the meeting of the Regeneration and Business Committee on 17 November will consider the outcome of the tendering exercise and if possible will make a decision on a successful bidder. The hope then is that the successful bidder will introduce the new stalls and gazebos before Christmas.

There is a host of potential issues that may delay this optimistic timetable – will the tenders be found to be satisfactory and, assuming a successful bidder is appointed, when will they be able to start? And will there be delays in buying the stalls and gazebos (no orders have yet been placed)?

Further information should be available after 17 November but it is all very sad for the market and the longer the delays the harder it will be to get back a thriving market.

**Freda Chaloner**

### 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](mailto: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.