

Statement

- MR CHRISTOPHER PARKER

Statement of Christopher Parker of Keep Hitchin Special

1. My name is Christopher(Chris) Parker, chairman, of "Keep Hitchin Special" which comprises of groups and individuals within the Hitchin Community who wish to voice their personal opinion in order to protect Hitchin as a historical market town.
2. I was also a District Councillor representing the Walsworth Ward of North Hertfordshire from 1984 until 1992, a period of 8 years. I have been interested in council matters since then and regularly attend a variety of Council meetings.
3. My professional status was that of acting Director of Estates within the Health Authority and latterly, before my retirement, a Financial Consultant working with J. Rothschild based in Mayfair, London.
4. Because of my interests and professional status, I feel I am qualified to be able to answer and deal with questions relating to Council Matters that relate to Hitchin and those that have involved Cllr David Leal Bennett.
5. My statement demonstrates a pattern of behaviour by North Hertfordshire District Council when dealing with local community projects and issues that affect the amenities and welfare of Hitchin residents. This will show the areas of frustration felt by local groups, the public and of course Cllr David Leal Bennett when trying to address our concerns.
6. My first recognition of David Leal Bennett (DLB) was when he stood for election in 2012 in the Highbury Ward for North Hertfordshire District Council which, as far as we were concerned, had a massive amount of negativity because of the way North Hertfordshire District Council handled the proposed Churchgate redevelopment with Simons Developments and also the management and potential disposal of Hitchin Town Hall, the town centre being part of his ward.
7. His position as a Conservative Councillor put him in the firing line and therefore the expectation of Hitchin folk was that, as a new councillor, maybe he would sort things out and support the local community. The problems arose with Hitchin Town Hall some six or seven years before David Leal Bennett, as a councillor, was on the scene, when the Portfolio Holder responsible was Cllr Cowley (nee Gibbs), some of these are as follows:
 - a. In March/April 2006, as agreed, the Hitchin Town Centre Initiative presented a plan to manage the Town Hall on behalf of the Community, this failed because North Hertfordshire District Council had been unable to come up with the capital commitment by 31st March 2006 as set out by the East of England Development Agency (EEDA).
 - b. On 8th February 2007 North Hertfordshire District Council advertised the letting of the Hitchin Town Hall by way of an informal tender for up to 40 years in the local Comet newspaper, the tenders closed on 26th February 2007 with the lease due to commence on 1st September 2007. (APPENDIX "A")
 - c. It was on 22nd February 2007 only four days before the tenders closed that the council wrote to all hirers of the Hitchin Town Hall and Gymnasium giving notice to quit, apparently there was no consultation with the community groups using the Hall, Lucas Room or Gymnasium or assistance to relocate them. (APPENDIX "B")
 - d. The three people who tendered were all publicans. Keep Hitchin Special visited all three prospective leaseholders and found their businesses in disarray and also that they lacked financial stability even to a point of being insolvent. This disposal was

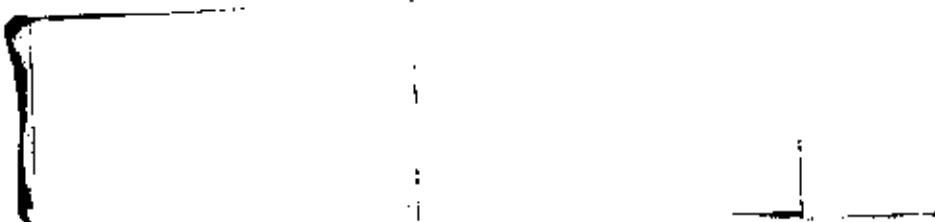
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managed by the current Strategic Director of Customer Services and current Project Executive for Hitchin Town Hall and Museum, Mr Robinson.

- e. We at Keep Hitchin Special did question why the three bidders were shortlisted and approved to run a community based facility when to the best of our knowledge there was no background to justify this. I do not recall having had a response to this question.
 - f. Our intervention at this time was seen as unwelcome and threats were made that the Council would board the Town Hall up or demolish it.
 - g. On the 20th October 2009 we presented a petition to Cabinet containing 5,089 signatures on behalf of the local community to retain Hitchin Town Hall as a fully functioning community venue protecting the current users of the hall and to consider the transfer this asset to the people of Hitchin for them to manage. This was an attempt to save the Hitchin Town Hall from being boarded up and mothballed, being sold off and/or demolished. (Appendix "C")
 - h. Proposals were drawn up for a District Museum involving North Hertfordshire District Council and the Community Groups working together represented at that time by Hitchin Initiative (formerly Hitchin Town Centre Initiative (HTCI)). We felt that HTCI were being used by the council to obtain planning approval and was proven when the Council's Architects produced proposals to rip up the adjustable sprung dance floor in the main hall and put a mezzanine floor in to house a District Museum. This was seen by Keep Hitchin Special as wanton vandalism and yet another example of lack of adequate consultation by the Council and its officers.
8. On 30th October 2009, Keep Hitchin Special wrote to English Heritage with sufficient information for them to be able to list the Town Hall, Lucas Room and the Workman's Hall as a Grade II listed building. (Appendix "D")
 9. Confirmation was received on 14th October 2010 that the Secretary of State along with the Minister for Tourism and Heritage decided to list the building at Grade II. This scuppered the proposal and the architect had to produce alternative plans.
 10. To my knowledge David Leal Bennett was not actively involved until Hitchin Town Hall Ltd as a non-profit charitable organisation supporting the community was formed.
 11. Local community Groups which included Hitchin Society, Hitchin Forum, Keep Hitchin Special, Hitchin Historical Society, Hitchin Art Club, Hitchin Initiative etc. met in the Sun Hotel and The Priory in Hitchin to discuss the upgrading of Town Hall and conversion of part to the District Museum. This meeting was chaired by Hitchin Initiative and then later by Hitchin Town Hall Ltd by the secretary Rosemary Read and Brent Smith and later by Stephen Pike.
 12. The involvement by David Leal Bennett was one of financial input and a financial model that he had prepared voluntarily, at no charge, enabling the community groups to raise funds to support the project. I spent some time with him looking at his financial projections and found them to be realistic but very dependent on project timing and a good working relationship with the Council. It was at these meetings that some information was not available because of contractual confidentiality, but, frustration was apparent because the Trustees/Directors of Hitchin Town Hall Ltd were not allowed on site to see the progress of work being completed, so much so, that the facilities to make the hiring of the Mountford Hall, Lucas Room, Kitchens, changing rooms and stage areas etc. viable were not as

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originally explained and set out in the Development Agreement (redacted), this affected David Leal Bennett's projections particularly our ability to help with fundraising.

13. The construction of a concrete wall instead of a removable stud partition across the stage also impacted on the inability of Hitchin Town Hall Ltd to use the stage for commercial purposes and help towards fundraising. This we considered might have been a direct violation by the Project Executive, Mr Robinson and Architect to scupper the community proposals. We even obtained advice from the Theatres Trust on the proposed lack of adequate facilities.
14. They wrote to the Chief Executive, David Scholes, with a copy to the Portfolio Holder Cllr Tony Hunter on 25th March 2014 requesting a meeting since, as a statutory organisation to be consulted, they were not even contacted for their opinion on plans for the Town Hall. They mention the stage which has been cut through and the wall that has been constructed in concrete without consultation and the fact that this was of considerable concern to them because it could cause problems for the users and limits the potential use of the hall as a performance space in the future. (APPENDIX "E")
15. The contents of the letter and the concern of the Theatres Trust appears to have been ignored. This indicated that at that time the ability for the Council to work in partnership with Hitchin Town Hall Ltd representing the Community had broken down. All the work that David Leal Bennett has done as a Trustee/Director of Hitchin Town Hall must have appeared abortive to him.
16. We understand that during this period the Trustees/Directors of Hitchin Town Hall, including David Leal Bennett were not allowed on site. This became apparent at the meetings we, as representatives of the community groups, had with Hitchin Town Hall Ltd.
17. Frustration of the Trustees/Directors of Hitchin Town Hall Ltd at our meetings was apparent, there was also one point when it was obvious the relationship between Hitchin Town Hall Ltd and the Council's Project Executive, Mr Robinson, had reached such a pitch that they informed us that they were giving notice that they had no option but to refuse to have any dealings with him.
18. 
19. The majority of dealings Keep Hitchin Special and other groups had with the project were at council meetings. It was at Town Talk and at Hitchin Committee that questions were regularly raised and answered to the best of the chairman's, Cllr. David Leal Bennett's, ability. At the request of the public Cllr. David Leal Bennett insisted that officers were there to explain publically what was happening about Hitchin Town Hall albeit that he absented himself from the room whilst as a trustee/director for Committee meetings.
20. There were several occasions when no report was available and a verbal report was given by the Project Executive, Mr Robinson, but generally this appeared to be unprepared and given off the cuff and therefore there was nothing either the public or Councillors could ask because a written report was not available, information was scant. Members of the public that were present were grateful to Cllr David Leal Bennett for insisting that the public be kept aware and fully informed of the progress of this.

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21. This was not solely about Hitchin Town Hall but other project updates in Hitchin i.e. Churchgate, Bancroft Hall and Recreation Ground, Hitchin Museum and many other areas of concern to local residents. Cllr. David Leal Bennett was seen by many as a breath of fresh air by keeping the Town Talk interesting, allowing time for various voluntary groups and local organisations to make presentations to councillors at Hitchin Committee, being fair, polite and considered by some as the Hitchin peoples champion.
22. Following a letter written by Brian Foreman, Chairman of North Hertfordshire Arts Council, to David Scholes CEO of North Hertfordshire district Council over concerns relating to Hitchin Town Hall he invited Brian to meet him and said he could bring someone along; Brian asked me to attend. The meeting was held in the Council Offices on 4th September 2014 at 10am.
23. It was only on our arrival that we were aware that Mr Robinson would be present. The problem here was that Brian was mainly there because he was complaining about the way in which the Project Executive, Mr Robinson, had managed the Town Hall part of the project. This resulted in a confrontation and Mr Robinson defended himself by saying that some of the issues raised were the fault of Hitchin Town Hall Ltd and we had been given misleading information.
24. However, we remained in no doubt that some meetings had been called at the last minute, the Trustees/Directors of Hitchin Town Hall being unable to attend. Clearly the partnership had failed as vital decisions had taken place without the knowledge and approval of Hitchin Town Hall Ltd.
25. I, along with others from Keep Hitchin Special, attended the Council Meeting on 12th February 2015 when Cllr David Leal Bennett, using advice from The Rt. Hon. Peter Lilley MP and the Chairman of the Conservative Association, said he had a right to stay at the meeting. Keep Hitchin Special have had several individual and group meetings with the Rt. Hon. Peter Lilley MP and found his advice to be invaluable, so we could see no reason why this should have been disputed. Cllr Leal-Bennett was no longer a trustee/director.
26. The issue relating to the recording of the meetings by Cllr. David Leal Bennett raised by the Acting Monitoring Officer Mr. A. Roche appears to be misleading. I was at the meetings when this occurred and Councillors and officers must have seen it but did nothing to raise this issue to the chairman. No attempt was made by Cllr David Leal Bennett to cover it up. In my view the issue of recording council meetings by councillors and public, at that time, had been openly discussed by councillors for at least a year.
27. I have a concern that the leader of the council Mrs L. Needham is of the opinion that the time spent by Cllr. David Leal Bennet as Chairman of the Hitchin Committee is disproportionate to the business of the committee and greater than the four other Area Committees. I have visited all the other four committees and, in comparison, found them to have less business and with few if any members of the public in attendance. A stark contrast to that of Hitchin Area Committee.
28. The fact that David Leal Bennett was elected as chairman of Hitchin Area Committee over the candidate selected by the Conservative Group was welcomed by Hitchin folk. The proposed Conservative candidate very rarely turned up to Town Talk where local issues and grass root problems were discussed and did not appear to contribute freely to matters of the Hitchin Area Committee, remaining silent throughout the majority of the committee meeting.
29. A letter was written in local Comet Newspaper, dated 3 December 2015, by Councillor Tony Hunter the portfolio holder and executive member for community engagement with North

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Hertfordshire District Council. He is responsible for the Hitchin Town Hall and District Museum. This stated that he had written to the relevant community organisations inviting them to a meeting to address questions that had been raised see (Appendix F).

30. It subsequently turned out that the meeting was being held on 21st December at 6.30pm but not all of the community groups were invited. Those that did send nominations in were apparently vetted by the Project Executive, Mr Robinson, and some were refused. Keep Hitchin Special did not get an invitation.
31. The feedback from those that did attend this restricted meeting was that it was obvious that the project was as yet incomplete. In fact, to a point, where some members present felt it was unsafe to view the basement because the stairwell contained no handrail. The kitchen had yet to be fitted out and areas of brickwork in the Mountford Hall was exposed because repairs were in progress. Particularly evident was that during the project there was damage to the adjustable sprung dance floor and that this had not been blended in satisfactorily.
32. Some people were disappointed with the quality of workmanship in Mountford Hall and Lucas room etc. and felt that the emphasis had been on completing the museum at all costs to the detriment of the Town Hall
33. Keep Hitchin Special did respond to the letter from Cllr Tony Hunter dated 10th December 2015 to ensure the public were aware of the difficulty people in Hitchin had in trying to get officers and councillors to listen to their concerns and the history that existed with the project since its inception (Appendix G).
34. The bad attitude of Officers and Councillors regarding lack of adequate consultation and the way in which they have threatened closure, demolition and or boarding up, of the Town Hall in 2006/2007 was once again repeated in December 2014 when they threatened the closure, boarding up and demolition of the Walsworth Community Centre.
35. A demonstration to save the Walsworth Community Centre was organised by local community groups, the public, supported by Keep Hitchin Special and the local newspapers. Walsworth Community Association are hopeful that this closure can be averted. This is seen by us as bullying tactics to enforce the will of the council without giving adequate notice or going through the proper consultation process.
36. I have found David Leal Bennett, as chairman of Hitchin Area Committee, to be courteous and fair also sympathetic to the public and groups making presentations to committee about grants, local issues etc.
37. Although this alleged breach of Code of Conduct might be appear distressing for Cllr David Leal Bennett, for which we have sympathy. We do question what the cost of this investigation is likely to be to the taxpayers of North Herts, what damage this will do to the ruling Conservative Group and what North Hertfordshire District Council really hope to gain from it.
38. We welcome an investigation such as this and feel that this should extend into a full public enquiry to investigate the procedures used by Councillors and Officers, to be open and transparent, when managing the council's various assets and projects in Hitchin i.e. Churchgate, Bancroft, Hitchin Town Hall, Hitchin Museum etc. and the way in which public assets and funds are, and, have been managed.

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39. As far as I am concerned, Cllr. David Leal Bennett, after having resigned his post as a Trustee/Director of Hitchin Town Hall Ltd in November 2014, had nothing to do with the project or involvement of the Community Group meetings relating to the redevelopment of the Hitchin Town Hall and District Museum other than attempting to arrange a mediation meeting between NHDC and Hitchin Town Hall Ltd
40. All community meetings since then were managed and presented without Cllr. David Leal Bennett being present.

Chris Parker

Keep Hitchin Special

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Appendix A – Advertisement to let of Hitchin Town Hall for up to 40 yrs. February 8th 2007

Appendix B – Letter to all hirers of Hitchin Town Hall giving notice dated 22 February 2007

Appendix C – Confirmation of 5,089 signature petition to save Hitchin Town Hall dated 20 October 2009

Appendix D – Letter to English Heritage applying for listing of the Town Hall 30th October 2009

Appendix E – Theatre Trust letter dated 25 March 2014

Appendix F – Letter from Cllr Tony Hunter to the Comet Newspaper 3 December 2015

Appendix G – Letter in response from Keep Hitchin Special dated 10 December 2015

Appendix A – Advertisement to let of Hitchin Town Hall for up to 40 yrs at £1+ p.a. rent

GOMET, February 8, 2007 – 79


**To Let By Informal Tender
For Up To Forty Years**

HITCHIN TOWN HALL.

- **Net Lettable Area:**
1,117.49 sq m (32,023.58 sq ft)
- **Rental Rate:**
Offers in excess of £1.00 per annum

Please call (01462) 474252 or 474320 for further details and a tender form.

The closing date for receipt of completed tenders is 12.00 noon Monday 26th February 2007.



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APPENDIX B

32 Hatched
Hatched

NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Council Offices, Gernon Road, Letchworth Garden City Hertfordshire SG6 3JH

Telephone: (01462) 474000

Text Phone: (01462) 474200. DX 51517 Letchworth

CUSTOMER SERVICES DIRECTORATE



To all Hirers of Hitchin Town Hall

Our Ref: PC/04
Your Ref:

Contact Officer: Patrick Cartner
Direct Line: 01462 474823
Email: patrick.cartner@north-herts.gov.uk

22 February 2007

Dear Hirer

FUTURE MANAGEMENT ARRANGEMENTS FOR THE HITCHIN TOWN HALL

I write to advise you of the proposed changes that are planned to take place for the management and operation of the Town Hall.

The Council has decided in order to secure the long term future of the Hall that its management and operation should be transferred over to an independent, third party operator.

Our priority is that the Hall should remain a multi-functional building open for a wide range of public and community use, very much as it is now. Any interested operator will be encouraged to explore new opportunities for providing such services.

The Council has to secure 'best value' and has begun a process known as 'market testing' to find out the level of interest that there might be in doing this work. Adverts have been published in the local press and any interested party is welcome to view the property. Any bid submitted will be rigorously examined to ensure that the proposed operator can manage the Hall in a fit and proper manner.

This process will take several months to complete, but by the end of June 2007, the Council will be in a better position to confirm the arrangements that have been made, which are due to come into full effect on 01.10.2007.

In terms of hirings, the following guidelines are issued:

- All bookings made up to 20.09.07 will be honoured in full, provided that the normal booking conditions are followed.
- Any bookings made for the period beginning 01.10.07 can only be provisional at this stage and there is no guarantee that they will be confirmed.
- As a precaution, those hirers who have already made bookings for after 01.10.07 are advised to consider making alternative arrangements for their events.

John Rebaron
Surgeon Treasurer of Customer Services



INVESTING IN PEOPLE

HITCHIN TOWN HALL – Cabinet Meeting 20 October 2009

PETITION RECEIVED STRIKING: –

“We, the undersigned, are determined to retain Hitchin Town Hall as a fully-functioning community venue with its unique hall and stage, gymnasium etc. Local Groups, Councillors and members of the public recognise that this building meets significant local needs.”

“We call upon North Hertfordshire District Councillors to leave the Town Hall as a Community Venue and to consider the transfer of this asset to the people of Hitchin for them to manage, thereby providing the revenue savings envisaged”.

We present this petition to you containing:-

5,089..... signatures

We hope you will recognise that this represents a significant proportion of the local population and trust you will be sympathetic to their wishes

RECEIVED WITH THANKS

SIGNED Paul Miley DATED 20/10/2009

DESIGNATION. DEMOCRATIC SERVICES MANAGER.

APPENDIX D

KEEP HITCHIN SPECIAL (Caring for our Historic Market Town)

30th October 2009

Dear Ms Martin

Re: Application for Listing of Hitchin Town Hall c1900

Further to our recent telephone conversation with your office this is to confirm that we have serious concerns regarding the conversion of our Town Hall into a Museum by North Hertfordshire District Council and the proposal put forward and accepted by Councillors on Tuesday 20th October 2009.

Our interpretation of the feasibility study by Buttress Fuller Alsop Williams Architects (copy of report included) is that this proposal will:

- alter the front of the building by removal of leaded glazed windows and the insertion of two glass display panels, the removal of the entrance doors and replacing these with fixed glass panels, the construction of a glazed side entrance with garish sign above providing a new entrance to the Town Hall, Gymnasium and Workmen's Hall
- alter the red brick side wall with the insertion of three new doorways to provide entrances into new toilets.
- damage the interior of the building by removal of the balcony at the rear of the hall, loss of the sprung dance floor, removal of the stage and the construction of a steel mezzanine floor across the entire hall and stage area.
- mean the removal of upper window/s to the hall to install new doors to access a new steel and glass walkway or link corridor across the roof from a new lift and stairwell through to the new mezzanine floor and the Lucas Room on first floor (the name of the Lucas Room has altered to a Community Room)
- mean large structural alterations to install a physic roof garden and terrace using precast concrete units with possible reinforcement to the existing roof structure, rebuilding of the kitchen wall strengthening and possible underpinning of the wall between the bar and kitchen etc.

Details of the structural alterations can be seen on pages 26 and 27 of the report

A petition with over 5,000 signatures was presented to the Cabinet on 20th October 2009 in the hope that the Council would retain this building for community use and not proceed with the conversion to deface this historic building. Once altered we feel this will never be able to be restored to bring it back to how it is today. These alterations would be an act of legalised vandalism

The New Town Hall is the most dominant feature in Brand Street and its frontage in a symmetrical design is important in maintaining our civic pride. This building is in a conservation area. The District Council completed a review of the conservation area and buildings of local interest in Hitchin in July 2009 using consultants from "The Conservation Studio", 1 Querns Lane, Cirencester, Gloucester. Included in the Buildings of Local Interest document (enclosed) is Hitchin's New Town Hall (see page 8 Ref. 16) which states:-

Built 1900-02; 1900 in Roman numerals on pair of stone pilasters. Queen Anne style with some Art Nouveau details. Red brick, stone quoins, tiled roof with central turret. Two storeys, plinth, wooden modillioned cornice. Central entrance arch, ornamental lanterns, flagstaff and carved roof pediment; copper roofed wooden cupola astride roof ridge. Seven flush two-light lattice casements with wood mullions and transoms. Built by Fosters (local builders) and designed by Geoffrey Lucas and E W Munford (relations of the Quaker Lucas brewery family). An important building, the quality of which is important both architecturally and visually in this area. Of Civic importance as Hitchin's second Town Hall

The photographs provided with this application indicate the strengths of the buildings interior and exterior. The key features of the main hall are the original gallery, proscenium arch stage, curved arch ceiling, semi-circular windows complimenting the ceiling and one of the finest sprung dance floors in the country. To get upstairs there is a wide sweeping staircase and at the top of these stairs is the magnificent Lucas Room with its ornate fireplace and heraldic crest above, one of the very best features of this building.

Two other public buildings in Hitchin Town Centre have undergone dramatic changes with the internals of the Corn Exchange (1853) in Market Place becoming a café and the Old Town Hall (1840) becoming a night club both are Grade 2 listed. This strengthens the case to preserve the New Town Hall also in Brand Street as it is the only public building left.

Under the Public Health Act of 1848 Hitchin became an administrative parish and a Local Board was established on 19th March 1850. The board was subsequently reformed in 1873 after a series of problems which lead to the creation of The Hitchin Urban District Council under the Government Act of 1894. The trustees of J.H.Tuke and W.O.Times who became Clerk to the Council. W.O.Times had also served on the Local Board and was eventually to retire in 1925 after 52 years service in local government. The twelve original members met in the Old Town Hall and it was decided to build a New Town Hall to mark the event as the building they were using was not considered satisfactory. It was not possible to use it for important town events like theatre productions due to size and lack of fire exits etc. The New Town Hall would be much larger and more suited to the Councils and needs of the townsfolk.

The land on which the New Town Hall was built originally housed a workshop which belonged to the Baptist W.H.Jelly a tinplate worker. In 1897 members of the Quaker family Frederic Soebohm a British economic historian and barrister of the Hermitage, William Ransom a philanthropist and botanist also a contemporary of Charles Darwin, was a highly influential figure in early research into the analysis of botanicals and Alfred Ransom offered to donate the site opposite the Old Town Hall (now a nightclub) for the building of new assembly rooms. The Council accepted this offer and amid a great deal of controversy. This was completed by Fosters (local builders) costing £7,300 the building not only provided the hall but council offices as well. The New Town Hall was built and opened on the 16th March 1901 by Mrs. Hudson who was the wife of the Hitchin MP; the opening was a landmark in Hitchin's history attracting a large crowd and attended by the bicycle troop of the yeomanry.

The Town Hall has HUDC (Hitchin Urban District Council) the date 1900 and the armorial bearing the Hertfordshire County Crest with Stag and ornamental features at the front (see detail photographs). Of interest is a photograph from 1910 (enclosed) showing celebrations outside the Town Hall during the ceremonial proclamation of George V.

We believe that this fine building deserves to be considered for listing because not only is it of importance historically but it is of national importance architecturally. The New Hitchin Town Hall was we understand, to be the first major building designed by Thomas Geoffrey Lucas (Geoffrey Lucas) 1872 - 1947 since qualifying and being elected ARBA on 4th December 1899 at the age of 27yrs, he then went on to produce designs for the Garden City in Letchworth realising the ideas of Ebenezer Howard, the Romford Garden Suburb at Gidea Park and amongst others his church work in a completely medieval idiom. The New Hitchin Town Hall was also the later work of Edward William Mountford (1855 - 1908) as a Fellow of the Royal Institute of British Architects and President of the Architectural Association he went on to design the Old Bailey 1900 - 1907 before his death in 1908.

We hope that you will be able to consider this application at the earliest opportunity. A final decision will be made by North Hertfordshire District Council on 3rd December 2009 to approve the commencement of the conversion to a Museum which will alter the architectural integrity of this building forever

Yours sincerely

Chris Parker - Chairman
Keep Hitchin Special

p.s. We apologise for not having brought this to you before now but details of the proposals to alter the Town Hall in this way have only recently been confirmed by the Council's consultants.

There is an alternative to these proposals which has been discussed with The Arts Council for North Hertfordshire, Hitchin Initiative and the Town Centre Manager, Hitchin Historical Society, Hitchin Forum, Hitchin Society, Hitchin Art Club and ourselves to create a community trust to manage the Town Hall complex, this would enable the building to remain without these alterations and continue to be a facility for community use.

CONTENTS

Letter to English Heritage Re: Application for Listing of Hitchin Town Hall c1900

Application for Amendment to the List (HP01)

Maps showing location of Hitchin Town Hall O.S. grid TL1829

Brief History of The Old and New Hitchin Town Hall with a photograph in 1910 during the ceremonial proclamation of George V (from "Hitchin a Pictorial History by Richard Field)

Legal Documents

- Dated 2nd August 1899 – Alfred Ransom Esq. & Others to The Hitchin Urban District Council. "Conveyance of hereditaments at the corner of the Grammar School Walk and Brand Street Hitchin in the County of Hertford"
- Dated 2nd August 1899 – William Onslow Times and The Hitchin Urban District Council Land for buildings for public offices and meetings
- Dated 5th March 1934 - Francis Ransom Esq. and Another to Hitchin Urban District Council of Hitchin "Conveyance of The Gymnasium, Hitchin in the County of Hertford"

Architects

Thomas Geoffrey Lucas (1872 – 1947) (Wikipedia encyclopedia)

1. Biographical summary
2. Summary of Lucas's known work
3. Sources
4. References

Edward William Mountford (1855 – 1908) (Wikipedia encyclopedia)

- Life
- Notable Buildings
- References

DSA Architect Biography Report

Thomas Geoffrey Lucas
Edward William Mountford

6 June 1872 – 3 October 1947
22 September 1855 – 7 February 1908

Hitchin Town Hall (Extract from District Council Website)

Proposed Register of Buildings of Local Interest in Hitchin (NHDC - July 2009) with Hitchin Town Hall on Front Cover and detail on Page 8 Ref 16

Photographs:

- Front of Town Hall viewed from Brand Street
- Side of Town Hall viewed from Grammar School Walk
- County Crest and Hitchin Urban District Council (HUDC) with date 1900
- Close up of Crest showing Hertfordshire Stag etc.
- Cupola – showing quality of timber cupola and copper domed roof a view from RHS Facing West
- High and low level windows to hall – cast iron guttering heads
- Window and roof detail to the front
- View of main hall, stage and sprung timber dance floor taken from underside of balcony
- Internal roof light, arches and cornices in corridor

PTO

Photographs (contd.)

Ornate feature at high level (shows leaf, corn, roses etc) one of several each side of hall
Internal window at high level
External view of high level window to main hall with leaded arched roof etc.
View of Town Hall roof and windows at rear
Down pipe and roof detail towards front of building
Rear fire exit from stage area of Town Hall
Side entrance to bar and Workmen's Hall through Arch

Extract from Unicorn Ceilidhs website photograph showing how the sprung dance floor is adjusted

Hitchin Town Hall Museum Feasibility Study – Report to Cabinet dated 8 October 2009
by
Buttress Fuller Alsop Williams Architects

Photographs & artists impression of Hitchin Town Hall before and after the proposed conversion

25 March 2014



Mr David Scholes
Chief Executive
North Hertfordshire District Council
Council Offices
Gerrion Road
Letchworth Garden City
SG8 3JF

Dear Mr Scholes

Hitchin Town Hall

I am writing to remind you of The Theatres Trust's remit and to request a meeting over the current position with Hitchin Town Hall.

The Theatres Trust is The National Advisory Public Body for Theatres. The Theatres Trust Act 1978 states that 'The Theatres Trust exists to promote the better protection of theatres' and defines a theatre as 'any building or part of a building constructed wholly or mainly for the public performance of plays'. It delivers statutory planning advice on theatre buildings and theatre use in England through The Town and Country Planning (Development Management Procedure) (England) Order 2010 (DMPO), Articles 16&17, Schedule 5, Para (w), that requires the Trust to be consulted by local authorities on planning applications which include 'development involving any land on which there is a theatre.'

As we understand it, Hitchin Town Hall has a main hall which has been used for theatrical performances and this space therefore falls within our remit. We are therefore concerned that we were not consulted on plans to develop the Town Hall, and, specifically, on the recent planning application.

We understand that Hitchin Town Hall is in the process of being re-developed by an innovative partnership between North Herts District Council and Hitchin Town Hall Ltd, a charity specifically set up to save the Town Hall for the community and to manage it on a 125 year lease. The partnership has enabled two additional buildings to be purchased, and the scheme has attracted funding from the Heritage Lottery fund. The intention is to provide an expanded and updated home for two local museum collections, whilst still retaining the main Hall for a wide variety of community and performance use. This seems an extremely positive and exciting development which would provide the people of Hitchin and the area with increased access to cultural provision under one roof.

We understand that a feature of the scheme is that part of the stage area would be required for additional museum storage but that it had been agreed as a condition of the contract between Hitchin Town Hall Ltd and the District Council, that any separation which was required in order to effect this would be constructed so that it could be removed in future. This is an important principle since access to the entire backstage area would be required for large theatre productions, and by ensuring that it was possible to remove the wall, the hall could revert to a more traditional theatre space should circumstances change in future. We understand that listed building consent for these alterations was obtained on the grounds that this wall functioned as an acoustic screen, and was 'ultimately reversible to recreate the full stage capacity'. Had we been consulted on this planning application, we would have recommended this very condition.

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However, we now understand that the stage has been cut through and a wall has now been constructed in concrete, and that this was done without consultation with Hitchin Town Hall Ltd. This makes it extremely unlikely that it can easily be removed, and could cause acoustic problems for audiences and users of the Main Hall. This is of considerable concern to us, as it could cause problems for users once the building re-opens, as well as limiting the potential use of the hall as a performance space in future. It also seems to be in direct contravention to the agreement between Hitchin Town Hall Ltd and North Hertfordshire District Council, which can only be of concern, given that the partnership is just underway.

I would therefore like to meet with you and see whether there is a way forward to ensure that the Main Hall can continue to play a role as a performance space in this new development.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,



Rebecca Morland
Theatres Adviser
The Theatres Trust

Cc: Cllr Tony Hunter, Portfolio Holder for Community Engagement and Rural Affairs

APPENDIX F

10

OPINIONS

The record is open on town hall project

In your latest report on the Hitchen Town Hall project (Comet, November 19) and recent letters on the same subject from Jane Clarke and Bill Sallicke, concerns are expressed about the suggested 'secrecy' concerning the town hall - in fact we have published minutes of each and every one of the 47 project board and associated meetings on our website.

The minutes from March of this year and a limited number of others are redacted simply because they focus on unresolved or potential disputes which may entail legal proceedings.

These minutes will be published in due course and will help dispel the myths currently circulating.

The increases in costs have been publicly reported and, as set out in those reports, many are as a result of failures by Hitchen Town Hall Ltd to do as they have promised.

It appears to me that Hitchen Town Hall Ltd is now seeking to walk away from its debts to the council and others, leaving council taxpayers to pick up the bill.

Despite claims that 'building a wall across the stage and repositioning the café' effectively destroyed Hitchen Town Hall Ltd's business plan, both matters were explicitly envisaged in the legally binding development agreement. The directors of Hitchen Town Hall Ltd were so keen for the council to enter

It does seem as if some may have got hold of the wrong end of the stick, although I can see how this might have happened.

As the building nears completion I am sure that it will provide an exceptional facility for local residents and visitors alike.

I have written to the relevant community organisations to invite them to a meeting to address the questions they have raised and for which the majority of the answers are already in the public domain.
Councillor Tony Hunter,
executive member for community engagement, North West Essex Council

APPENDIX G

Thursday, December 10, 2015 | COWLEY

Join the debate: Email news@thecowley.net or write to The Cowley, Bank House, Primett Road, Steyninge SG1 3ER.

Town has no voice on this crucial issue

Councillor Tony Hunter (Letters, December 3), who represents Royston, is a relatively new member of North Harris District Council's cabinet.

Hitchin Town Hall is one of his responsibilities, but he may well be unaware of the difficulty people in the town have had in trying to get officers and councillors to listen properly to their concerns on this important issue.

The whole project has been dogged with problems which date back to 2007, when local user groups were given notice to quit and the town hall put out to tender.

Publicans wanted to turn the building into a nightclub but this attempt to sell off the town hall failed because we presented the council with a 5,029 signature petition to save it.

The next step was to attempt to rip up the sprung dance floor of the Mouniford Hall and install a mezzanine floor to house a district museum pushing the user groups into a modified gymnasium.

Luckily we were able to get English Heritage to list the town hall which prevented this mutilation



■ Not long now: the Hitchin Town Hall refit is nearly complete, and soon the doors will be thrown open.

was a trustee of the Gymnasium and Workman's Hall Trust he was unable to speak, vote or make any decision on the Hitchin Town Hall and Museum and had to leave the council chamber when it was discussed.

Decisions instead were made by four councillors from Letchworth, two from Royston and one from Codicote.

Policy decisions relating to Hitchin Town Hall were therefore made by councillors from outside the town, which hardly appears democratic.

Councillor Hunter is intending to invite community organisations to a meeting to address questions like why the project is nine months late and 30 per cent over budget.

We understand he wants to hold this meeting on Monday, December 21.

How inconsiderate, giving short notice and proposing a date when people are busy preparing for Christmas. We suggest he makes this a public meeting, on a date in January or February.

Chris Parter,
chairman, **Keep Hitchin Special**

want to put the blame on HTHL for what others see as the council's failures, including changing the specification for the refurbishment which now prevent the hall being let for local functions and to groups as envisaged.

The directors of HTHL have kept the community groups regularly updated as the project progressed and we thank them for this.

It seems there is something inherently wrong with the representation at council on matters affecting Hitchin projects like this.

We had a Hitchin representative, Councillor Bernard Leveswell, as a cabinet member but because he

from happening.

At this time we were fortunate to have a group of local professionals and business people who were prepared to work with the council, setting themselves up as a charity.

As far as we are concerned this body, Hitchin Town Hall Ltd, has had great difficulty getting the council to involve them in the decision making process of the project to refurbish the Mouniford Hall and Lucas Room.

As a result, the building is considered not fit for purpose or suitable for groups to use as originally proposed.

Councillor Hunter appears to