A photograph of Hitchin Town Centre, Hertfordshire, showing a market area with striped awnings and a church tower in the background. The image is overlaid with a blue and white geometric design.

Hitchin Town Centre, Hertfordshire

Churchgate Development Area - Final Report
for North Hertfordshire District Council

May 2005

Hitchin Town Centre, Hertfordshire Churchgate Development Area Final Report



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PROJECT CODE
NHDC.HTC
ISSUE DATE
03.06.05

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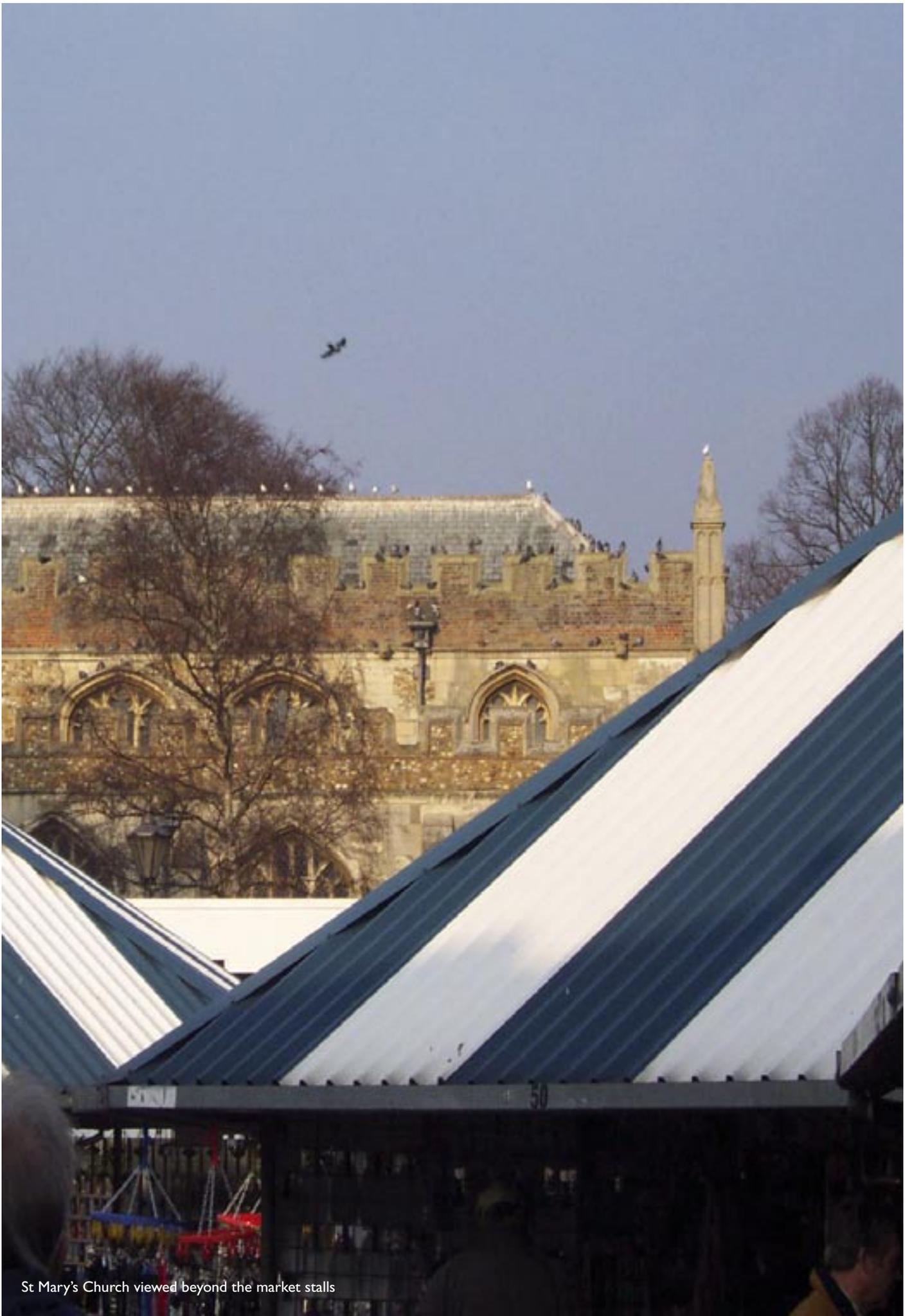
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St Mary's Church, Hitchin

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St Mary's Church viewed beyond the market stalls

INTRODUCTION

The Churchgate development area has been identified by North Hertfordshire District Council as a key site in Hitchin for redevelopment and enhancement. The site provides the opportunity to improve the eastern edge of the town centre, create a better setting for St Mary's Church, revitalise the river edge, refurbish or redevelop the 1960s shopping centre and improve the open market by planning a better integration of land uses and articulating the linkages between them and the rest of the town centre.

A draft planning brief was prepared for Churchgate and its surrounding area in the autumn of 2003 which raised concerns amongst the public, Councillors, and private and voluntary sector organisations about the scale and extent of the development proposed. In January 2005 North Hertfordshire District Council asked John Thompson and Partners (JT&P) to produce a revised planning brief for the Churchgate area (see plan below) with DTZ Pieda Consulting, together with development options.

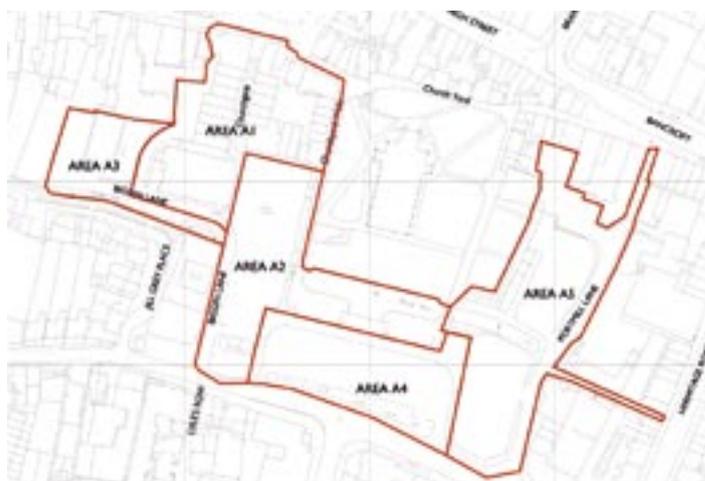


Figure One

The redevelopment/improvement of the site has to meet the key aims and policy guidance set out in the Hitchin Town Centre Strategy and the Council's Strategic Objectives:

- promoting sustainable development of the district to ensure delivery of adequate affordable housing
- protect the environment and conserve the heritage of historic towns
- encourage responsible citizenship and create safe communities with less crime and less fear of crime
- create opportunity for all by promoting sustainable local economic development

TEAM PROFILE

John Thompson and Partners

John Thompson & Partners (JT&P) are architects, urban designers and community planners with substantial experience of residential and mixed-use development and regeneration in both the public and private sectors. We work throughout the UK and other parts of Europe placing particular emphasis on projects which simultaneously achieve physical, social, economic and environmental change. The work ranges from high-density, urban developments in cities and market towns to neighbourhood renewal schemes and the design of large-scale settlements in brownfield and greenfield situations.

DTZ Pieda Consulting

DTZ Pieda Consulting is a broad-based independent consultancy practice which is part of the DTZ Group. DTZ Pieda advises clients in both the public and private sectors in the specialist fields of economics, housing, planning, regeneration, retail and business consulting. The regeneration team within DTZ Pieda Consulting is one of the largest in the country with wide ranging expertise in the regeneration and urban renewal sector. The team has a strong track record and understanding of the complex relationships between the social, economic, financial and physical forces involved in regeneration and brownfield redevelopment.



The Churchgate Shopping Centre entrance from Market Place

BACKGROUND

THE BRIEF

The consultant's brief specified that the revised planning brief be prepared in as open a manner as possible with community involvement. JT&P were asked to encourage all parties to work together and get involved in the development of ideas. At least two development options for the site were to be considered as part of the process.

The objectives of the commission were to:

- a) produce a set of guiding principles for the future development and enhancement of the whole site area;
- b) consider a range and propose at least two viable and deliverable development options;
- c) consider enhancement opportunities for the remainder of the site area that form a coherent part and are linked to the development options proposed;
- d) provide evidence of marketing arrangements that have proved successful elsewhere;
- e) ensure that the proposed development and enhancement opportunities for the site meet the key aims and policy guidance in the Hitchin Town Centre Strategy and the Council's Strategic Objectives.

The piece of work was also to take into consideration various background research projects previously commissioned for the site including Hitchin Town Centre Strategy and key issues arising from the previous public consultation exercises. In addition consultants were directed to work alongside the Council's Development Team and discuss draft guiding principles and preliminary development options with the Hitchin Visioning Group and the Hitchin Market Traders Association.

JT&P were also asked to prepare conceptual sketches of the preferred options for inclusion in the revised Planning Brief.

LAND OWNERSHIP

North Hertfordshire District Council owns the freehold of most of the site. The freehold interest in the existing Churchgate centre is held by North Hertfordshire District Council with a long leasehold granted to Hammersmatch Limited.

SITE DESCRIPTION

The Churchgate Centre provides the eastern façade to Hitchin's Market Place and provides frontage to Churchyard Walk. The shopping precinct was built in 1971 and included an area for the open-air market built over Hitchin's river, the Hiz. The development has been deeply unpopular with its 1960's modernist architecture unsympathetic in character to the buildings and layout of the surrounding buildings in Market Place. Biggin Lane provides access to the market area, rear servicing of the Churchgate, a public car park and the Sun Hotel. The Churchgate centre presents a blank façade onto Biggin Lane and the river.

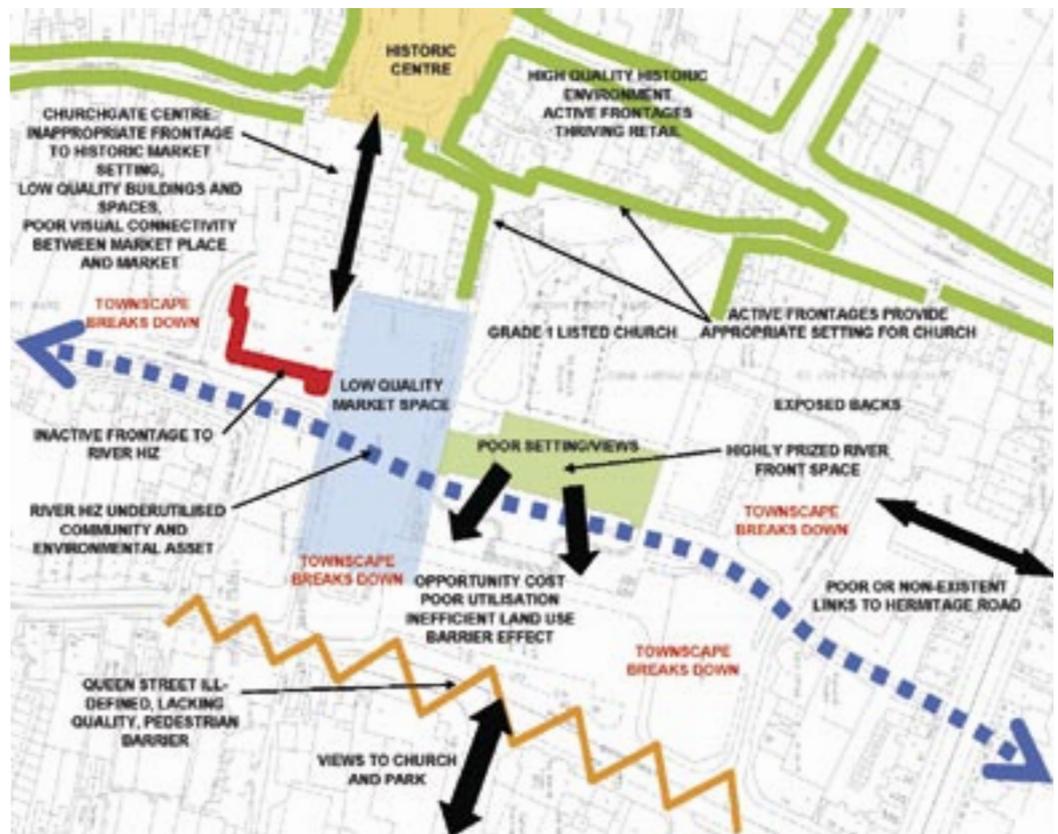
The traditional open-air market adjoins the eastern edge of the Churchgate centre, and expands into the area along the river frontage where plant stalls spill out along the river. The permanent market stalls are outdated and unattractive, but the market is seen as an important asset for Hitchin.

BACKGROUND

The River Hiz flows northwards through the area either within concrete embankments, covered or in a 'tank' with raised water level for amenity purposes opposite the church. The Council's aspirations for the River Hiz are defined in the 'River Hiz Development Guidelines', 1995 which outlines the Council's aspirations to create a walkway along the length of the river in the town centre.

Portmill Lane is highway land and runs from west to east forming the northern boundary of the site. Portmill Lane provides vehicle access from Queen Street to the two surface car parks. The car parks are basic with unattractive surfaces, and views across them relieved only by the River Hiz and the backdrop of the church, open space and trees in the churchyard. The western part of the road provides a footpath for pedestrians only. A narrow pedestrian route also provides access to Hermitage Road.

St Mary's Square is another surface car park at the Queen Street level. Queen Street is heavily trafficked and provides an important location for bus stops. Formal steps, with a balustrade which also adorns the western edge of the car park, descend to the river level. Pedestrians can then access the town centre core via footpaths either side of the churchyard. The car park is utilitarian and fails to provide an attractive foreground to the church.



Site Analysis

BACKGROUND

HITCHIN PROPERTY MARKET OVERVIEW

Hitchin's housing market has seen significant growth over the last few years, reflecting national and regional trends. According to the Land Registry, average house prices in Hitchin have risen by more than 120% over the last five years (Oct – Dec 1999 to Oct – Dec 2004). A 35 minute commuting distance to London (Kings Cross) has contributed to the performance of the housing market along with the town's historic charm and attractive housing stock.

Over the last few years there has been a trend towards urban living and mixed-use development. This has occurred due to:

- (a) The cost and difficulty of commuting and the convenience of living closer to one's place of employment. Increasing congestion on the roads and continuing difficulties with the rail transport system. Many people are also working longer hours and this has led to a move back to town centres and locations where people are not forced to depend on public transport.
- (b) The increased use of health clubs and leisure facilities. There has been a significant increase in the popularity of health clubs, gyms and sports such as squash, badminton and indoor tennis, usually played in purpose built leisure centres, and these are usually located in town centre situations where there is a larger catchment area. This is coupled with a decrease in the popularity of sports requiring playing fields, usually located on the outskirts of towns and cities.
- (d) The increase in divorce rates and the trend towards an increased number of single and two person households.
- (e) More British people are adopting the European "café society" style of life. An increase in the number of restaurants and cafés indicates a clear trend towards these activities.

This trend is beginning to evolve in Hitchin with town centre sites coming forward for residential development and new high density schemes being built on the fringes of the town centre.

An entirely retail development scheme of the Churchgate centre may prove unviable at the prevailing rental levels. However if a mixed-use, retail and residential scheme was to come forward the higher value residential uses could cross subsidise the retail element of the scheme. Spin off benefits include creating a more sustainable development and boosting the evening economy.

Caution must be given to the design of the scheme to complement the conservation area status and historic nature of the town centre. Additionally caution will need to be given to the phasing of the scheme to ensure that the market is not flooded with too many similar units.

Currently there 700 units in the residential pipeline to be delivered over the next 12 –24 months. The market needs to be carefully monitored to ensure these units are being taken up at an appropriate rate. It may mean, with the success of these units, the town centre may become saturated with residential properties. Or conversely it may mean that the town will emerge a vibrant mixed-use centre as the trend in city centre living shows no sign of abating.

Other potential development sites within the town centre that may come forward in the short term includes the Brookers and Ransoms sites. Potentially releasing very valuable land to come forward for retail or residential development.

BACKGROUND



Temporary fair ground rides in Market Place, looking up the High Street



Market Stalls running down to the river



The Biggin, the Market with St Mary's Church in the background

BACKGROUND



Scenes from the Market

BACKGROUND



Portmill East car park



Portmill West car park



Church Yard looking towards Market Place

BACKGROUND

HITCHIN RETAIL OVERVIEW

Hitchin is the main shopping and commercial centre in North Hertfordshire. It has a large number of retail and service uses. The centre serves shoppers from across the district and has a relatively large number of comparison shops.

The vision and strategy for Hitchin town centre as set out in the Town Centre Strategy adopted in November 2004, is 'To maintain the quality of the built environment based on its intrinsic historic character, and to develop an attractive, safe, accessible, vibrant and lively centre for the local community and visitors to shop, work and live in'.

In a town centre context, very small units (under 100 sq m) represent 61% of the town's floor space. It is normally the case for a town centre such of Hitchin's size to have a higher proportion of medium and large shop units and a lower proportion of small units, when compared to the national average.

In their 2004 report Nathaniel Lichfield highlighted the possibility of providing better configured and larger sized units in a redeveloped Churchgate Centre. A view which is further supported by local market research. Letting agents have indicated that there is a good level of demand for units in Hitchin, but mainly from local independent retailers, but should modern units be available then national multiples would also show interest. Rental levels are also reasonably high due in part to the lack of available units.

A survey of retail and leisure operators' space requirements over the past two months suggests there is strong demand for units especially in the 140 sq m (1,500 sq ft) range. There are also a number of enquiries for medium sized units in the 200 – 500 sq m bracket. National multiples looking to locate in the town include Tchibo, Barbour, Holland & Barrett, Fat Face and Bang & Olufsen. Leisure operators include LA Fitness, Esporta and Travelodge. Food outlets include KFC, Subway and TGI Friday's.

According to Dalgleish January 2005 (Estates Gazette) prime zone A values in Hitchin are in the region of £700 per sq m (65 per sq ft) Zone A. The prime retail pitch is located on the junction of the High Street and Hermitage Road, Market Place and Bancroft.

Rental levels in the Churchgate Centre are not at this level. However Nathaniel Lichfield have indicated that should new product became available it is envisaged that rental levels would improve and perhaps even exceed the current prime zone A levels as quality retailers look to locate within the centre. This is a point which on the face of it we do not disagree with, but will need further investigation.

Introduction of more medium sized units in the Churchgate Centre could attract national multiples. Displaced local retailers from the Churchgate Centre could find some alternative accommodation elsewhere in the town centre. Alternatively, redevelopment of the old post office sorting site could lead to the introduction of more retail floorspace.

Relocation of the market to a more central location is one of the many comments made by respondents of Nathaniel Lichfield's retail study. Improved utilisation of the historic market square for temporary market stalls would relieve pressure on the current market place and allow a more extensive redevelopment of the Churchgate Centre together with the introduction of other uses – residential which has the potential to cross-subsidise development of the Churchgate Centre.

In order to make the new developments a success, it will be important to ensure that strong pedestrian linkages are created within the new development, to the retail, to the market and linked with the existing pedestrian flows and circulation patterns within the town centre. This also means that anchors need to be located within key parts of the development to draw people into and through the scheme.

BACKGROUND

CAR PARKING

Car parking and accessibility to convenient car parks are important to the vitality and viability of the centre. The Arup study of parking in Hitchin (April 2002) concluded that there is pressure on short stay parking on market days in close proximity to the market. However, there is some capacity on market days in the long stay car park particularly Woodside.

There are a number of conflicting issues which need to be balanced to reach a suitable parking solution for any proposed development which still enables a commercially viable scheme to be delivered.

- loss of car parking through development on existing sites/car parking locations compared with any spare capacity
- the amount of parking required as a result of the new development, particularly in respect of the views of key occupiers
- the land take associated with on site parking provision, given the limited size of the site
- the cost of any new parking provision, in particular the significant cost of any underground car parking that could render the project unviable

A re-branding exercise of the longer stay car parks coupled with changes to a shorter term pricing structure would improve the current long stay car parks' utilisation rate with shoppers. This could be tied in with the potential redevelopment of the Churchgate centre which may eliminate some of the surface car park currently available.

The Arup car parking study was undertaken prior to the Council taking over the management and enforcement of on-street parking. Considerable opportunities exist to review on-street parking in the town centre area and to reduce long stay parking and provide additional town centre parking.



Market Place

BACKGROUND

HITCHIN TOWN CENTRE STRATEGY (2004)

'Hitchin Town Centre Strategy' 2004 provides the context for promoting changes and improvements in the town centre. An important element of this is guiding physical development and maximising the opportunities that will benefit the future viability and vitality of the town centre, whilst emphasising its historic character, its local distinctiveness and the needs of its local community.

The Council considers an opportunity exists for development and enhancement of the area comprising the Churchgate Centre, the market and the car park at Biggin Lane. To include the redevelopment or refurbishment of the Churchgate Centre for mixed-use development including a mix of retail, food and drink, leisure and residential uses. A scheme that is built to the highest quality that will contribute to the historic character of the town.

In addition, the council would like to see the overall enhancement of the areas outlined at Sites A2, A4 and A5 (figure one, page one) to improve the eastern edge of the town centre by:

- improving and upgrading the market;
- opening up and enhancing the River Hiz;
- enhancing St Mary's Square car park with hard and soft landscaping to improve the setting of St Mary's Church; and
- enhancing Portmill Lane East and West car parks Site A5 (figure one, page one) with hard and soft landscaping. Improving the service areas to the rear of the Bancroft shops and improving the pedestrian links to the Garden of Rest, to Bancroft and to Hermitage Road. The provision of public conveniences in the general area will be considered as part of the Churchgate Planning Brief.

HITCHIN CONSERVATION AREA

The site lies within the town centre conservation area and is adjacent to several listed buildings including the Grade II* listed building of The Biggin and the Grade I building of St Mary's Church. Any proposed development must, therefore, respect the character, proportion, scale and materials and preserve or positively enhance the character of the Conservation Area and the settings of these important listed buildings (Local Plan Policy 20, PPG 15 and Section 66 of the Planning (Listed Building and Conservation Areas) Act).

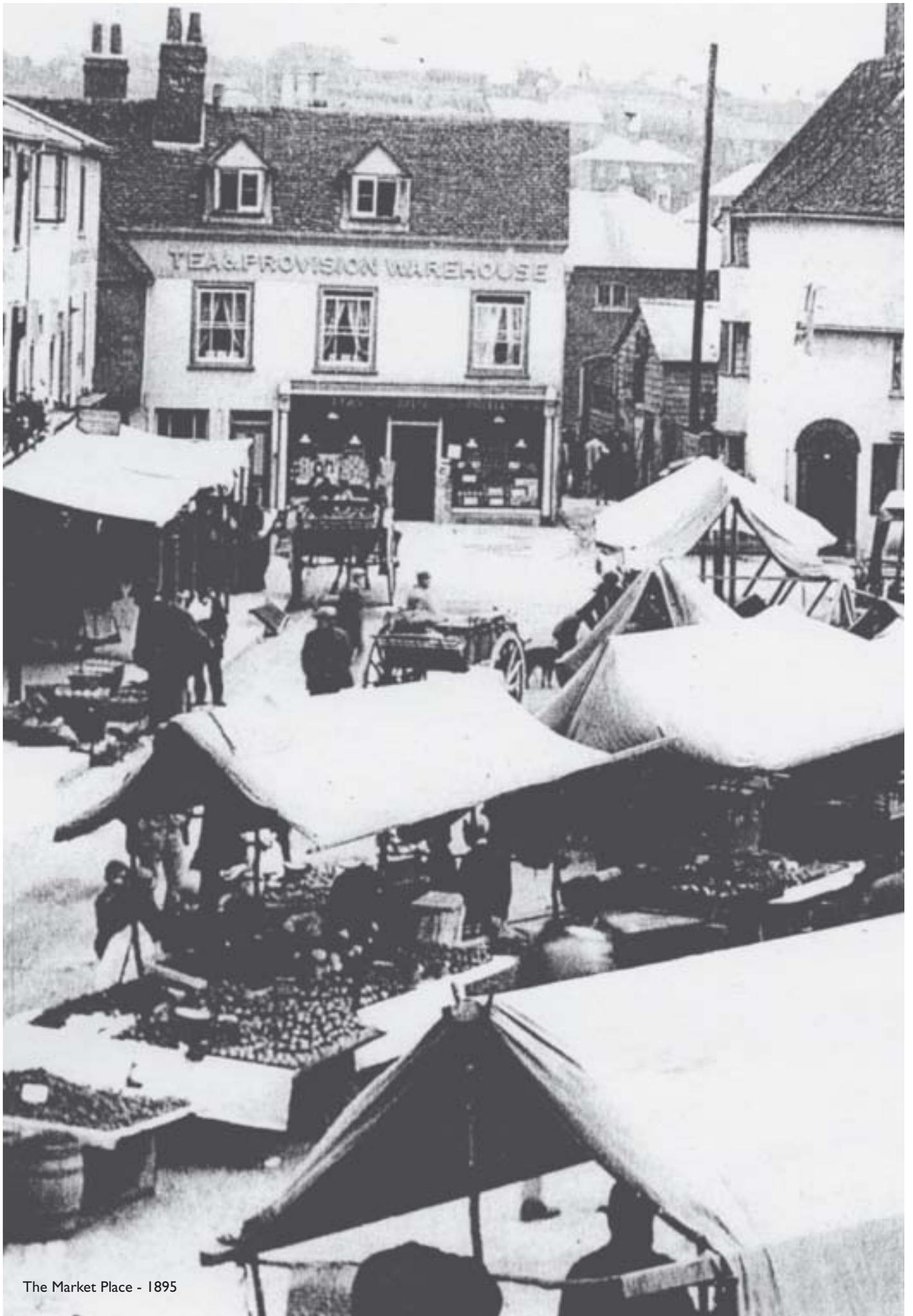
The 'Conservation Area Character Statement for Hitchin' (1998) provides a more detailed review of the town's architectural and historical character. The study indicates opportunities for enhancements within the town centre including the Churchgate Centre currently forming a weak eastern elevation to the Market Place, with little respect for the footprint and massing of adjacent buildings. The River Hiz with the potential for greater visual importance and the market is in need of a significant upgrade.



The River Hiz looking towards Portmill Lane



The River Hiz



The Market Place - 1895

3

HISTORY AND HERITAGE

This is a brief snapshot of Hitchin's history that focuses on the growth of the town around the Churchgate Area.

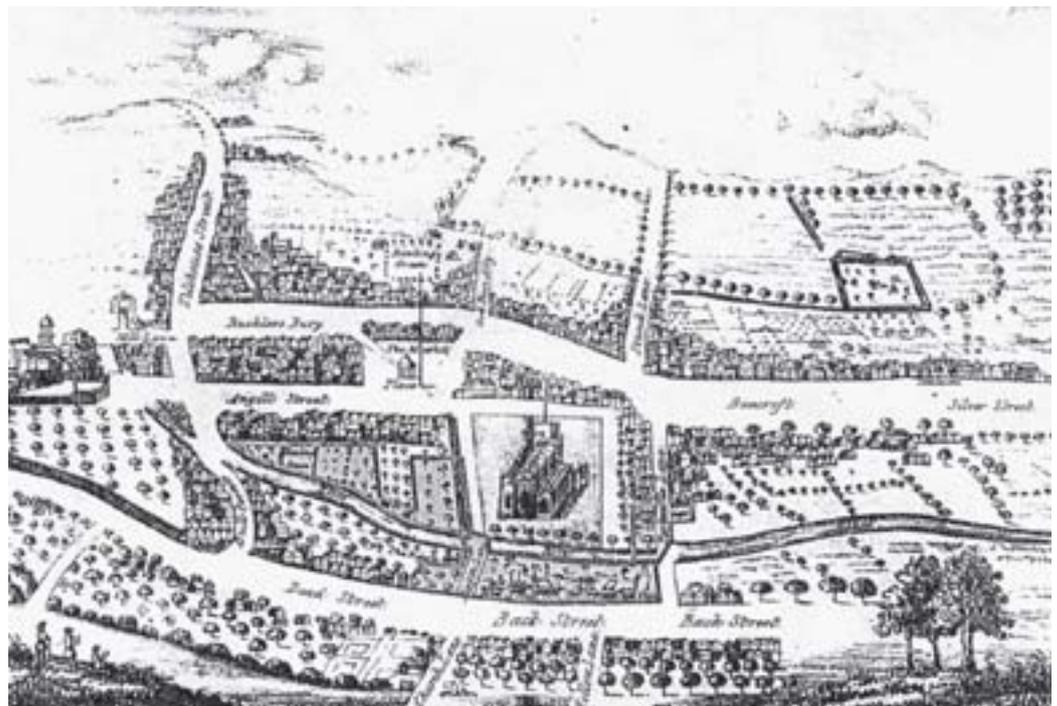
Looking at the church of St Mary's, the remains of the Roman settlement can be glimpsed in the narrow Roman bricks reused in the church tower. These may have come from the Roman farmstead settlements along the River Hiz. Under the nave of St. Mary's lie the remains of a Saxon church, for in 792 King Offa of Mercia founded a church for the Benedictine Community.

Hitchin Market dates from the time of the Normans where it was probably founded along the main street or was possibly a churchyard market. In 1086 the town was recorded in Domesday as being a Royal Manor of 600 inhabitants.

In the Medieval period the town prospered, particularly in the 14th and 15th Centuries, from the profits of wool. It is from this period that the visible structure of the church dates (although embedded within the walls is structure dating from 1200). In the 16th century the Reformation brought changes to Hitchin. The religious houses were dissolved; the existing Biggin Almshouses is on the site of the Gilbertine Priory. The church was renamed from St Andrew to St Mary and the rectory was given to Trinity College Cambridge which still pays for the maintenance of the chancel.

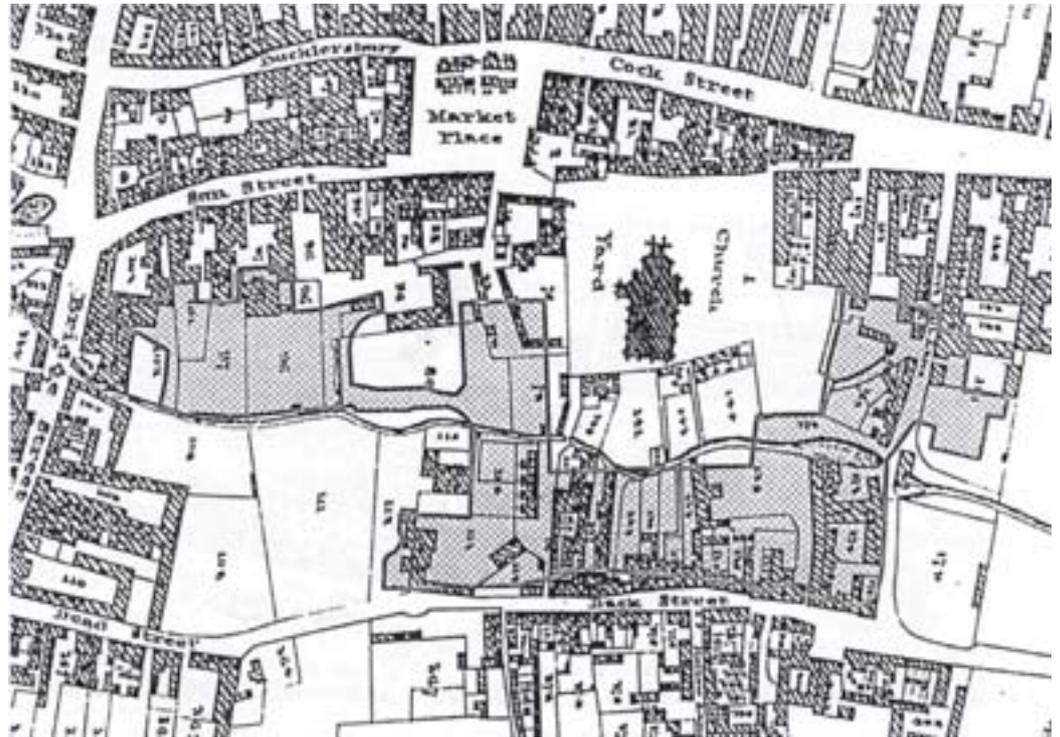
In 1632 the first school in Hitchin was built in Tilehouse Street which served a population of fewer than 2000 people by 1650. A map from 1690 shows the River Hiz flanked by meadows, orchards and plots that back onto tightly knit streets. Back Lane and Dead Lane are reminders that this was a town where the plague visited again in the 17th century.

HITCHIN IN 1690

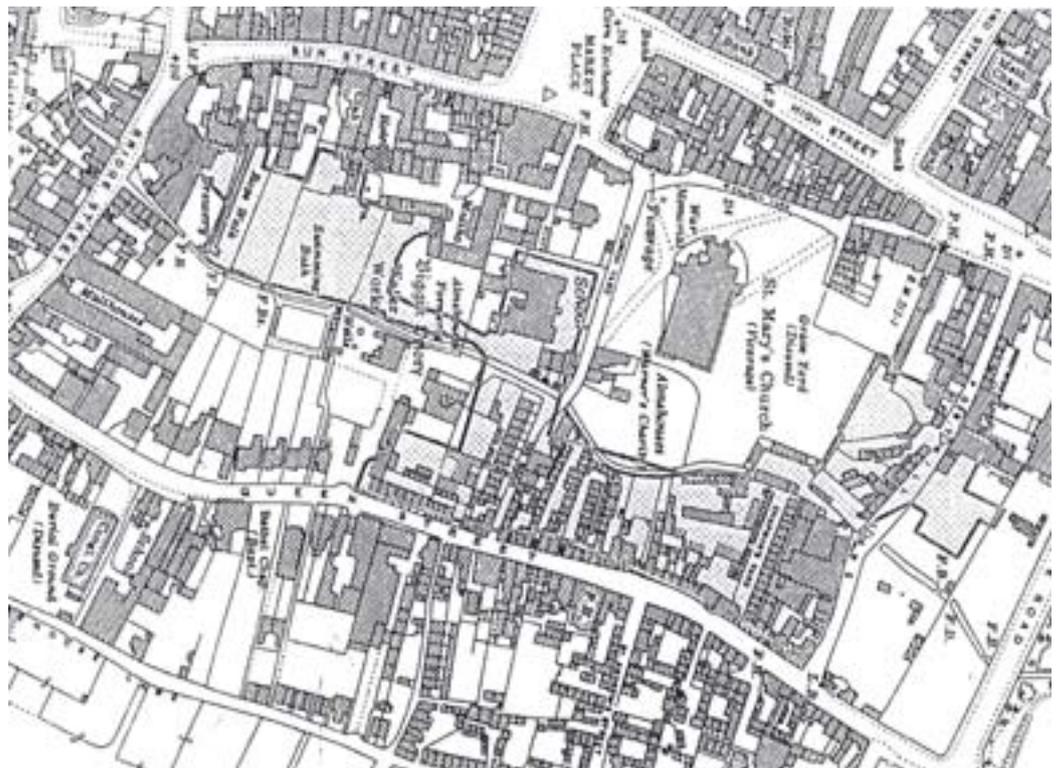


HISTORY AND HERITAGE

HITCHIN IN 1818

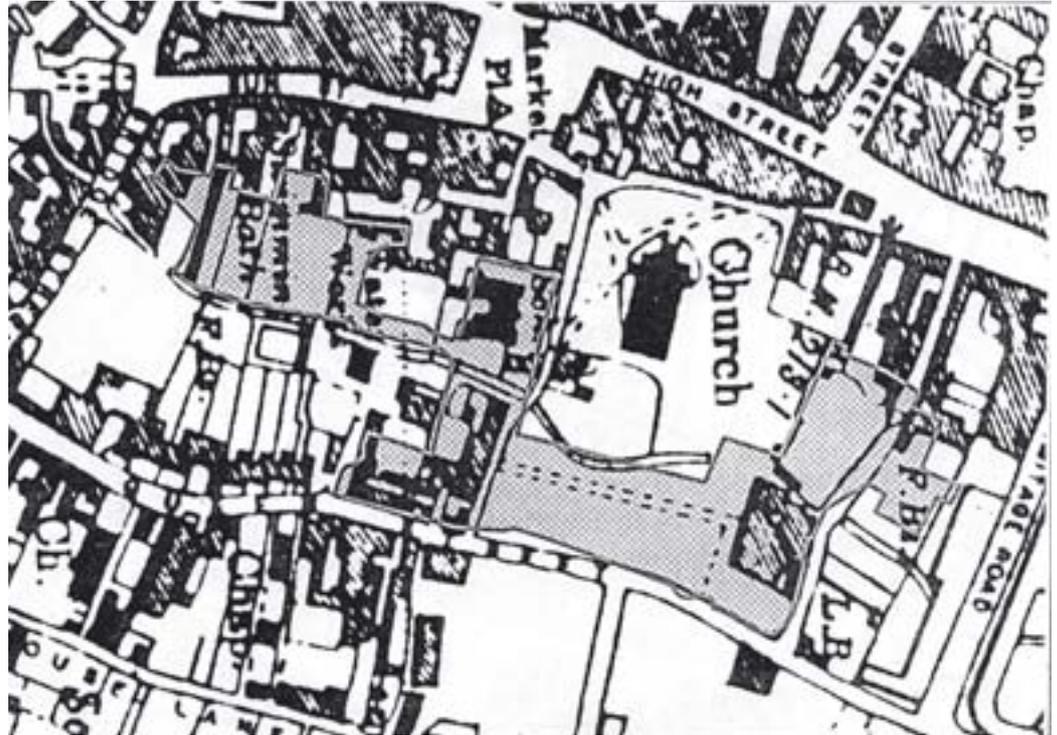


HITCHIN IN 1923



HISTORY AND HERITAGE

HITCHIN IN 1946



In the 18th century road improvements and the stage coaches encouraged the growth of the coaching inns. Fine inns still remain, in particular along Sun Street with stables backing onto the Churchgate and Biggin car park area. The town expanded and this was also increased by the rural labourers coming to the town after the land enclosures.

Up until this time, there had only been one bridge over the River Hiz in Portmill Lane. Then in 1784 a bridge was built in Bridge Street to connect to the Welwyn to Bedford Turnpike Road.

By 1801 there was a population of 3161 within 674 houses. An 1818 map shows development covering the meadows down from Back Lane. The plots are in narrow strips and buildings are shown close to the east end of the church. There was no drainage of sewage until around 1850 and the town's history to that date was punctuated by plagues and disease, especially in slum areas.

In 1850 the Great Northern Railway came to Hitchin on the London to York line with a station one mile from the town centre. A further big improvement was the building of St Andrew's School on the site of what is now Hitchin Market. Hermitage Road was cut in 1875 to improve the road linkages, however, the buildings flanking it were developed much later in the 1920's.

HISTORY AND HERITAGE

**SLUM CLEARANCE
VIEW FROM WINDMILL
HILL , LATE 1920'S**



AERIAL VIEW 1950



HISTORY AND HERITAGE

The population had more than doubled by 1861, had tripled to 10,000 by the turn of the 20th century and by 1931 had doubled yet again to 20,000.

In the 20th century, Hitchin and in particular, the Churchgate area was transformed by slum clearance and the motor car. A map of 1923 shows the Queen Street area of demolition shaded over the intensely populated development on the east bank of the River Hiz. The clearance happened in 1924 -1930 and St Mary's Square was constructed. The design was by Architects Bennett and Bidwell who were based in Letchworth and designed many buildings in the Garden City. The River Hiz was canalised and a raised terrace built. This was eventually to have led to a plaza surrounded by civic and commercial buildings, but this was never completed.

In March 1969 the centre of Hitchin was made a Conservation Area and this bounded the Churchgate site. It was in the early 1970's that the Churchgate Centre was built and the market relocated from Market Place to Biggin Lane.

The building of the Churchgate Centre and the car parks flanking the river were damaging to the centre of Hitchin. The characteristics that make Hitchin the unique and attractive place it is have been eroded in this area by the Churchgate buildings that turn their backs onto poor service areas, deaden the courtyard off the old Market Place and the areas behind the Sun Hotel. This area has lost the sense of surprise and quality of the old lanes and passages and the traditional rooflines.



Hands-On-Planning

4 COMMUNITY PLANNING

METHODOLOGY

Community Planning is a method of participatory planning based on the principle that the ideas and opinions of all participants are of equal importance. It is important that all those who have an interest in the site have the opportunity to be involved so that a consensus across the whole spectrum of the community can be seen to have been reached through the process.

The process is generally focused on a central community planning event which provides a concentrated forum in which everyone can participate equally. Through a combination of topic workshops and hands-on planning sessions around plans of the site people of all ages, backgrounds and with different concerns and enthusiasms can work together to look at problems and potential solutions to development issues.

Through constructive dialogue participants can learn from each other and begin to understand the wider implications of their ideas. The process aims to break down conventional boundaries recognising the skills and knowledge within the community and releasing imagination, positive thinking and collective creativity.

ANIMATION AND PUBLICITY

In the month prior to the Community Planning Weekend (CPW) North Hertfordshire District Council publicised the event with a widely distributed flier. In addition to this the CPW was advertised in the local newspaper. Members of the team met with local businesspeople, schools, community groups, key stakeholders and residents in order to:

- raise interest and enthusiasm in the issues, and
- encourage as many people as possible to come to the Planning Weekend;

On 1st March the JT&P team held two market stalls - one in the Market Place and a stall on the modern market, leaflets were distributed to raise awareness of the Community Planning Weekend and the team talked to passers-by about the project.

In addition to the CPW meetings were held with:

- Market Traders
- The Chamber of Commerce
- Churchgate Retailers
- Hitchin Society, Hitchin Forum, Hitchin Historical Society
- The Minority Ethnic Forum
- Christchurch
- St Mary's Church

COMMUNITY PLANNING

YOUNG PEOPLE'S WORKSHOPS

"Why do they always put the most ugly buildings next to the most beautiful ones?"



"Why don't we have an indoor river!"



Two people from the JT&P team went to local secondary schools: Hitchin Girls School, The Priory and Hitchin Boys School and ran a workshop with members of their school councils.

At all three schools the young people were very aware of Hitchin's heritage and the value it brought to the town, they felt that Hitchin was unique and it was important to retain this special character by ensuring that the number of multi-national chain shops and cafés in the town centre were controlled. They wanted any new development to be sensitive to the character of the historic town centre and felt that Churchgate and other mid-20th century buildings should be refaced or removed as they were out of character and also that the area around the church should be improved and the river made more of.

Many of the young people felt that there were not enough activities for teenagers in the town, particularly girls. The boys wanted to see more shops selling clothes for teenage boys.

COMMUNITY PLANNING

THE COMMUNITY PLANNING WEEKEND

The Churchgate, Hitchin Community Planning Weekend was held on Friday 4 March 2pm-8pm and Saturday 5 March 10pm - 4pm. Over 200 people attended, many staying for the whole weekend. The public event was held in St Mary's Church, Hitchin town centre which is at the centre of the Churchgate Area Project and one of the most important buildings in Hitchin. A grade I listed church it proved to be an excellent venue.

Prior to the public sessions the consultant's team were briefed by Council Officers from North Hertfordshire District Council. David Scholes - Head of Planning Services introduced the session and with Louise Symes - Principal Planning Officer and Norma Atlay - Strategic Director of Finance & Regulatory Services gave some background to the project. Other colleagues talked about market issues, traffic, access & car parking, local business & economic issues.

The team then walked around Hitchin to look at the relationships between streets, buildings and spaces, and the quality of the spaces and urban environment.

The programme for the weekend focused on building a consensus Vision for the Churchgate Area and its relationship with Hitchin and the town centre.

THE PROGRAMME



COMMUNITY PLANNING



Scenes from the Community Planning Weekend

COMMUNITY PLANNING

**PUBLIC SESSION
FRIDAY
2PM - 8PM**

On Friday 4 March at 2pm the doors were opened to the public who were welcomed by the Reverend Michael Roden, Vicar of St Mary's Church. David Scholes, Head of Planning Services, North Hertfordshire District Council introduced the weekend giving some background to the project and outlining the aims of the weekend.

*We don't want to
become any other town
– we are Hitchin*

Churchgate and the Market Workshop

The first workshop looked at Churchgate and the Market facilitated by JT&P and DTZ Peda. The workshop started by looking at problems in the area with participants contributing by jotting ideas and thoughts down on post-it notes. Post-its were then gathered in and read out by the facilitators and then grouped under topic headings to identify key themes. Some topics were debated more fully enabling everyone present to contribute on an equal footing.

After problems, participants were asked to write down their dreams for the area, how Hitchin could be in the future, how it could change for the better. This also provoked wider discussion. Finally participants were asked to write down solutions to the problems identified and to how to make the dreams a reality. They were asked to be realistic about the solutions stating not only who would carry the solutions out, but also how they would be funded.

This process encourages participants to move on from negative criticism to positive ideas, enabling everyone to see where there is consensus and where there is not. It helps people to understand the complexities of the debate as different people bring different experience and skills to the debate and as the format encourages everyone to get involved.

About 80 people took part in this workshop generating a wide ranging debate on a variety of topics. There was consensus that the Churchgate Centre development was not of a quality people would like to see in the town centre and particularly out of keeping with the urban quality of Market Place. Market Place itself was valued for its heritage and visual amenity and still seen as the heart of the town, however people felt that with the removal of the market from Market Place it had little purpose. People were aware that the market was declining and wanted something to be done to reverse this.

The car parks around the church were thought to be a poor use of town centre space and very ugly, visually dominating views into the centre of Hitchin from Queen Street. Finally it was felt that the riverside could be enhanced and could contribute more to the quality in the town centre making it a more pleasant place for visitors, residents and particularly pedestrians.

COMMUNITY PLANNING

The ‘dreams’ and ‘solutions’ discussions focused on how to retain the unique character of Hitchin without remaining stuck in the past. It was acknowledged that the town needed to accept change if it were to continue to thrive. The area around the church, Market Place and the market were identified as central to Hitchin’s character and people wanted to see them work well together as a series of attractive, well-used spaces which supported quality in the town centre.

Key points were:

Issues

- Retaining the unique image & identity
- Decline of market, uncertainty over its future
- Inappropriate development; design and appearance of Churchgate
- Purpose of Market Place
- Dominance and poor design of existing car parks
- Poor access and street surfaces for mobility impaired
- Lack of river walk and urban greening

Actions

- Demolish Churchgate and ensure new design is appropriate in scale and character
- Review the location and design of market - attractive stalls attract customers and traders
- Include the post office within the development area
- Provide sufficient attractive parking to complement trade
- Ensure key views to St Mary’s Church are maintained
- Create a landscaped river walk with access for all
- Continue to involve local people in the decision-making process
- Recognise change is positive and compromise is possible

Hands-On-Planning

Participants then split up into smaller groups to work with architects, urban designers, council officers and other professionals in Hands-on-Planning groups around large plans of the site. Hands-on-Planning is a process in which groups of participants begin to develop ideas that have emerged from the preceding workshops in a more physical form, working around large scale plans of the area. Participants are encouraged to explore the ideas and work out potential solutions. Some groups may walk around the site to gather more information. The Hands-on-Planning groups divided into topic groups to look at the site from various perspectives including: heritage, the environment, the community, the market and the economy .

“It is most important to retain the point of Hitchin and to move forward.”

HOPFI Proactive - This group started by looking at the bigger picture before homing in to central Hitchin. A key desire was to see market stalls back in Market Place. This should be physically and spiritually well connected to the rest of the market via a redeveloped Churchgate with a glazed market hall. New housing would front onto the River Hiz and a new completed river walkway from Bridge Street to Hermitage Road. The group agreed that although certain key views of the Church should be preserved from Queen Street, especially from Hollow Lane, St Mary’s Square car park should be built on with sensitive contextual designed mixed use buildings with car parking underneath and a new public space at St Mary’s Square. The Post Office redevelopment should provide for a strong route through to the Churchyard and the market.

COMMUNITY PLANNING

HOPF2 Davhid - Disputatious/Active/Vibrant/Harmonious. This group looked at community facilities in Hitchin; what was already there and what was needed. They identified Church House and the Town Hall as community facilities which could be put to better use and/or refurbished. They wanted to see more facilities for young people and suggested a Cyber Café in the Town Hall. They wanted the market to be relocated on St Mary's car park making it more visible to passing traffic and creating a foreground to the view of the church.

HOPF3 Heritage - This group started by walking around the site and agreed that the essence of Hitchin was being able to walk around and 'dip' into the town. There was a discussion about what makes the character of Hitchin special like the linking passages, the markets, and the river. They wanted to demolish Churchgate and replace it with the market, to link Market Place with the new market and the river to be opened up where it had been enclosed in a culvert and enlivened with activities by the church. Rebuild a frontage along Portmill Lane and Queen Street with residential use and shops and create passages and paths to link the markets, church, river and Queen Street.

HOPF4 Environment - This group wanted to see a better environment created for pedestrians and visitors to Hitchin, they particularly wanted to see the river opened up with improved pathways and the riverside at St Mary's car park enlivened with cafés. Improved links between the market and Market Place.

HOPF5 Market Forces - This group focused on the market. They wanted to retain and renew the southern half of Churchgate creating an arcaded walkway between the market and Market Place and the eastern side of Churchgate to be demolished to create new buildings of appropriate size and scale to the east to create a beautiful setting for St Mary's church and the market place. In addition they wanted to see St Mary's car park redeveloped with landscaped courtyards and undercroft car parking

HOPF6 - The Churchgate Gang focused on the Churchgate Centre. They wanted to demolish Churchgate and extend the market into Market Place and even up to the High Street. Markets to be 100% demountable. Open up river walk, whilst retaining the key view of St Mary's Church from Queen Street and build an iconic car park on the Portmill Car Park site.



COMMUNITY PLANNING

LOCAL ECONOMY WORKSHOP

The final workshop on Friday focused on the local economy. The discussion focused around retail in the town and particularly on the decline of the market and how to remedy this and how to encourage the kind of independent retailer which helps to give Hitchin its unique character and how to control the spread of multiples in the town.

It was agreed that the market was an asset to Hitchin bringing people into the town and it could be an even greater asset if it were vibrant and good quality. A higher footfall in the market would help other retail business.

The size of retail units and high rents were seen as limitations to the success of retail businesses - there are not enough larger units and high rents price small businesses out of the market enabling multiples to come in. It was agreed that the redevelopment of Churchgate could offer an opportunity to make larger retail units available in the town centre but people wanted reassurance that existing businesses in Churchgate would be supported whilst redevelopment was carried out. Planning gain could be used to subsidise what the community wanted it to, for example protect character/local retail/low rents.

Other key themes and ideas were:

- Create a not-for-profit trust
- Churchgate/Paynes Park/Old Post Office Sorting Office were all opportunities for development
- A mechanism should be devised to ensure a balance of independents and national multiples
- Expansion/development will be needed if Hitchin is to maintain its market position but must be carefully managed

PUBLIC SESSION SATURDAY 10AM - 2PM

Hitchin Town Centre Workshop

The Community Planning Weekend reconvened at 10am on Saturday 5 March with a workshop looking at Hitchin Town Centre. Those who had attended the day before and wished to work further on their ideas formed a hands-on-planning group which worked around plans whilst the workshop took place. This workshop focused on problems, dreams and solutions and used the post it note method. About 50 people took part in this workshop with others coming and going throughout the morning.



COMMUNITY PLANNING

The main topics of discussion reflected the issues raised at the Churchgate & the Market workshop the day before:

Issues

- Hitchin is in danger of losing its unique identity
- Unsympathetic buildings out of character with old town centre
- Poor quality and use of public open space
- Inaccessible riverside
- Lack of leisure facilities, especially for young people
- Shortage of town centre residential accommodation for older people
- Retail units too small & expensive; threat of multiples pushing out local shops
- Tatty, failing, poorly maintained market, invisible from town centre
- Traffic congestion and parking problems for shoppers, visitors and residents
- Lack of cycle facilities

Actions

- Demolish and redevelop Churchgate
- Design and materials must be of high quality and sensitive to Hitchin's unique character
- Make market more visible: retain size of footprint but move towards Market Place with demountable, temporary stalls
- Retain views and enhance setting of St Mary's Church
- Make better use of car parking space; shared use and landscaping
- Uncover the river as it runs through the Market Place
- Improve riverside and create well-maintained river walk
- Provide appropriate town centre residential accommodation
- Appoint someone to oversee delivery of the Vision



COMMUNITY PLANNING

Hands-On-Planning

Participants then split into six hands-on-planning groups to further explore the ideas. Again each group concentrated on a specific theme: the environment, retail, the community, the market, Churchgate, Heritage.

HOP S1 - Linked Spaces. This group focused on the town centre and plotted where the town centre car parks are and the pedestrian routes through to the central area. Their key concept was that the area could work as a series of spaces each with its own character and function - market place, the market, the church, St Mary's Square. Each of these spaces should be enhanced and linked to neighbouring spaces. Temporary stalls in Market Place could lead into the main market. People wanted to see views of the church preserved and enhanced- they asked does the view of the church from Queen Street actually constitute a good view? The group then went on to consider the idea of a "Church Close" i.e. surrounding the church with appropriate buildings.

The Post Office site should also be brought into the equation as its redevelopment could also open up the opportunity to improve linkage with Hermitage Road and across the Churchyard to the market and Churchgate area.

HOP S2 - Make Hitchin Happy. This group looked at community facilities in the town - what was available, what was lacking and where there were opportunities to make better use of existing assets. They particularly felt that Church House, the Bancroft Youth Centre, the Town Hall and school sports facilities could be better used for the benefit of local people of all ages.

HOP S3 - Heritage and All. This group had concerns about preserving both the built heritage, and in tackling the social problems in the area. They felt that any environmental improvements would only be successful if the antisocial behaviour were tackled.

Most people thought that the Market should be relocated back on St Mary's Square. They also wanted to retain the Churchgate shopping area and upgrade it. The Wynd in Letchworth was a precedent. An Arcade could enliven the central shopping area. A river walk, possibly lined with buildings could enhance the west bank of the river. The group agreed there should be shops along the north side of Portmill Lane (on the post office site) and that there should be shops to the rear of Bancroft (to screen the existing backs and the service yards facing the Portmill Lane). An improved public space with car parking could link with the enhanced cloister area. New development at the corner of Queen Street and Portmill Lane could also help to define the lane.

HOP S4 - The Environment Group. This group looked at how the existing environment could be enhanced. They felt St Mary's car park should be put underground and a park created on its roof whilst the Portmill Road car parks should be landscaped to soften and screen the view of the cars. Finally they wanted to see an accessible pedestrian walkway established along the riverside.

HOP S5 - Churchgate in 3 Phases. The group discussed whether Churchgate should be completely demolished or refurbished and decided that there were better sites in the area which could accommodate larger department store type shops (i.e. on the Post Office site). They suggested a phased development of the Churchgate site and minimising the disruption and displacement of the current Churchgate retailers.

The market could be moved closer to the town centre with temporary stalls in Market Place with environmental improvements, and permanent stalls adjacent to St Mary's Church. New retail units would be sited to create a wider circulation space between the shops opening up views of the river and be in similar size to Next with the remaining units refurbished with a new facade to Market Place..

COMMUNITY PLANNING

HOP S6 - Walkways of Discovery. This group looked at the links between spaces, exploring how each space could be given a character of its own and vistas and views used to link space and lead the curious town explorer on a circuit of the key town spaces. An adaptive market would be developed, able to expand and contract to meet consumer demand and distributed around the town centre's key spaces

HOP S7 - The Answer. This group was made up of people who had attended the first day of the Community Planning Weekend and had carried on developing their ideas from the day before - they believed they had come up with 'the answer'. Their solutions echoed many of those which had been raised in other groups:

- Demolish Churchgate and replace with new buildings
- Create a linked series of spaces – some arcaded and some open to the air which can be occupied by market traders
- Maintain, create and enhance important vistas
- New buildings should, in keeping with Hitchin, be of varied heights (max 3 storey) and with alleys, snickets and ginnels
- Create a riverside walk with soft banks to increase ecological diversity
- Some development and open space on St Mary's Car Park to provide an appropriate setting for St Mary's Church

Workshop - The Way Forward

The final workshop of the day looked at the next stages of the process and the points on which consensus had been reached.

Issues

- The market has declined and the market area is an ugly waste of valuable space when not in use
- The town centre has been blighted by unattractive, poorly designed 1960s architecture
- The riverside is an under-used asset
- There is no proper youth centre or adequate facilities for teenagers
- Local government is too distant - there should be better local representation
- Car parks dominate the town centre and are ugly
- There are too few residents' parking spaces
- Parking accessibility for disabled people
- Although there is too much traffic in the town centre pedestrianisation can be death to towns

Actions

- Share use of car park spaces – businesses, residents, visitors
- Make market a flexible space that is a more integral part of the town
- Ensure attractive, sympathetic and quality redevelopment of Churchgate
- Control balance of business; support and encourage independent shops
- Reorganise service deliveries, with distribution of goods in smaller vehicles
- Support an evening economy, make more use of the Town Hall and St Mary's Church as venues
- Keep local people involved in the decisionmaking process
- Make sure there is incremental and appropriately phased development

REPORT BACK

A report back meeting was held on 6 April at 7.30pm in the evening in St Mary's Church. Nearly 200 people attended. The Team presented a résumé of the event, analysis of the outcomes and a series of possible scenarios and Preliminary Options.



By the Riverside

5 KEY THEMES

The following key themes represent a summary of the outcomes from the Spring 2005 Community Planning process which have informed the development of the Churchgate development options.

Retain character and feel of historic market town

"We don't want to become any other town – we are Hitchin".

Redevelop Churchgate Centre

Whilst some would like to see the Churchgate Centre refurbished most people would like to see it redeveloped in a contextual way with mixed uses.

"Recognise that change is positive and can be harnessed for the benefit of all the different stakeholders."

"Anyone considering demolishing Churchgate should go and visit every shop. It's very, very nice!"

"Demolition of Churchgate is essential; refurbishment is a step backwards"

"If Churchgate is redeveloped, where will existing businesses go?"

Support for the Market

There was consensus that the Hitchin market should be supported. Some thought it should be linked or even relocated to Market Place and some thought demountable stalls should be used.

"Make the market stalls more attractive or collapsible or have more markets so it's busy more often."

Varied Retail Offer

Value and support independent retailers whilst creating a balance to ensure Hitchin's future vitality as thriving retail centre.

"How do we sustain local businesses against incoming multiples?"

Efficient Use of Land

Use town centre land efficiently – provide flexible public spaces and build on car parks with undercroft parking and include Post office site in the vision

"Car parking occupies too much of the heart of the town."

Pedestrian Links

Extend pedestrianisation in centre and better utilise the River Hiz and create a high quality town centre circuit.

"There must be a balance between passing trade and pedestrianisation."

"Make the river a place that people know and will remember."

Views

Retain key views while enhancing the setting of the church

"The view of St Mary's is a huge asset to the town"

Town Centre Living

Concept of town centre living supported

"When you get older you can't drive a car – where do you live? – it has to be the town centre."

Community Facilities

Enhance community facilities including for young people

"Where are children from ages 13 to 16 going to go to? The market is used a lot for social activities."

Evening Economy

More balance to evening economy

"The town centre is becoming a no-go area at night unless you are pissed out of your mind!"



Aerial photograph of Hitchin

6 SCENARIOS

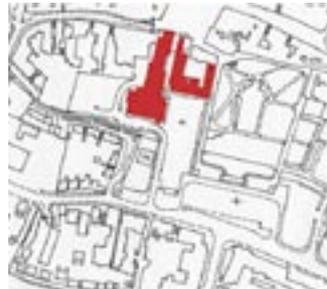
Following the Community Planning Weekend the various ideas that had been discussed in relation to the future of the Churchgate Project Area were distilled into five scenarios and analysed.

The five scenarios were:

1. Do nothing
2. Refurbishment of Churchgate Centre
3. Part refurbishment/part redevelopment of the Churchgate centre
4. Full redevelopment of the Churchgate Centre
5. Full redevelopment including St Mary's and Portmill Lane car parks

Analysis was considered on various criteria including physical, social, environmental and economic viability. As a result plus and minus points were attributed to each option and these are listed below. The outcome of this work confirmed the view that emerged from the Community Planning Weekend that Scenario 4 - Redevelopment leading over time to Scenario 5 represented the best way forward for the town and community

SCENARIO ONE DO NOTHING



Plus points

- No disruption for existing Churchgate shopkeepers

Minus points

- Poor quality building maintained
- Negative environmental impact on Churchgate area including Market Place
- Undermines Hitchin's current retail offer
- Unmet demand for larger retail units
- Negative impact of uncertainty and lack of investment on market
- Declining asset value
- Rising costs associated to managing a decaying asset
- Rents likely to depress even further, hampering future viability
- Business and residential community and political aspirations not met
- Project likely to be revisited in a few years
- Increased potential for hostile unsympathetic development from a third party
- Business and residential community and political aspirations not met

SCENARIOS

SCENARIO TWO REFURBISH THE CHURCHGATE CENTRE



Plus points

- Potential for some improvement to buildings and environment
- Potential for provision of some larger retail units
- End of uncertainty for market in short term but does nothing positive for it

Minus points

- Probable disruption for Churchgate shopkeepers and likely higher rents
- Unlikely to improve asset value significantly
- Short term fix which may prove more costly than it is worth
- A redevelopment opportunity not actioned
- Project likely to be revisited in a few years
- Business and residential community and political aspirations not met

SCENARIO THREE PART REFURBISH THE CHURCHGATE CENTRE/ PART REBUILD



Plus points

- Improvement to buildings and environment
- Provision of some larger retail units
- Possible provision of new housing
- End of uncertainty for market in short term

Minus points

- Disruption for Churchgate shopkeepers and possible higher rents
- Marginal improvement of asset value
- Business and residential community and political aspirations only partially met
- May need to carry out more development in the future
- Project likely to be revisited in a few years
- Business and residential community and political aspirations met only partially

SCENARIOS

SCENARIO FOUR REDEVELOPMENT



Plus points

- Improvement to buildings and neighbouring environment
- Improve the retail offer in the town through provision of larger retail units
- End of uncertainty for market and provision of better facilities and improved links
- Provision of new housing
- Potential to increase the asset value (subject to viability testing)
- Potential to cross subsidise community projects
- Holistic, high quality regeneration and catalyst for other regeneration projects in the town centre
- Potential to set a precedent for change
- Project put to bed
- Avoidance of hostile inappropriate development coming forward from a third party
- Business and residential community and political aspirations fully met

Minus points

- Disruption for Churchgate shopkeepers and higher rents
- Probable disruption for market traders during construction
- Loss of public car parking and displacement of market traders parking

SCENARIO FIVE FULL REDEVELOPMENT INCLUDING CAR PARKS

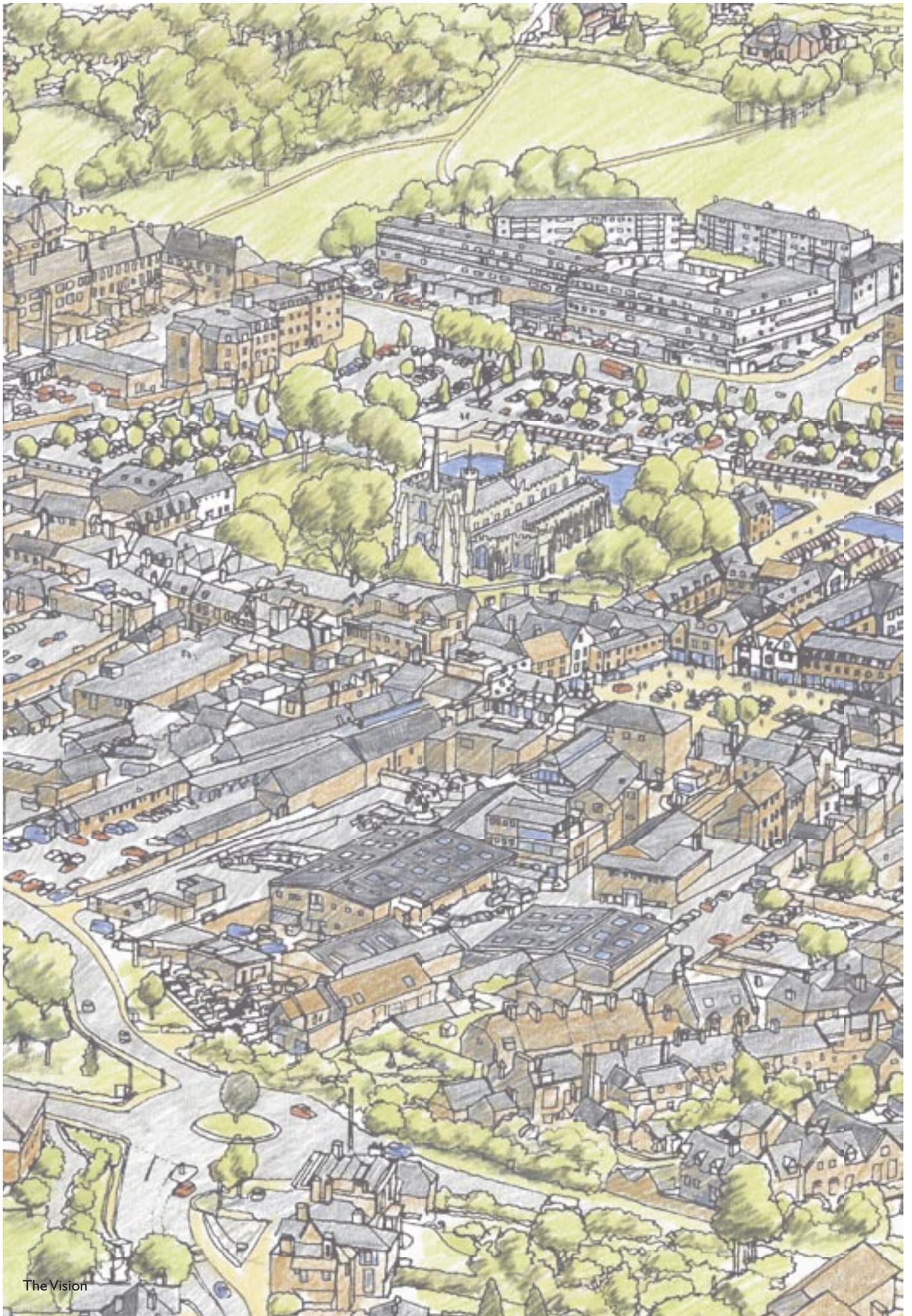


Plus points

- Holistic, high quality regeneration and catalyst/linkage to other regeneration projects around the town centre
- Improve setting for St Mary's Church
- Improve the retail/leisure/community offer in the town
- End of uncertainty for market and provision of improved facilities and better links
- Provision of more new housing
- Potential to increase the asset value (subject to viability testing)
- Greater potential to cross subsidise community projects and environmental improvements
- Avoidance of hostile inappropriate development coming forward from a third party
- Current opportunity to take this holistic approach forward following Community Planning Weekend

Minus points

- Disruption for Churchgate shopkeepers and higher rents
- Potential reduction of town centre car parking numbers
- Probable disruption for market traders during construction



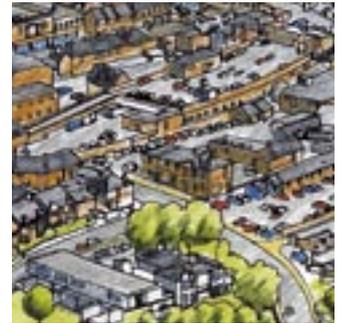
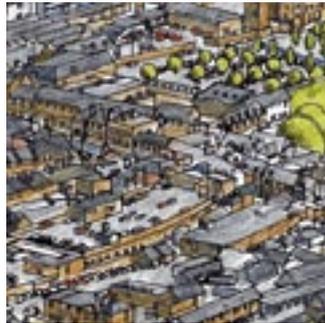
PRELIMINARY OPTIONS

INTRODUCTION

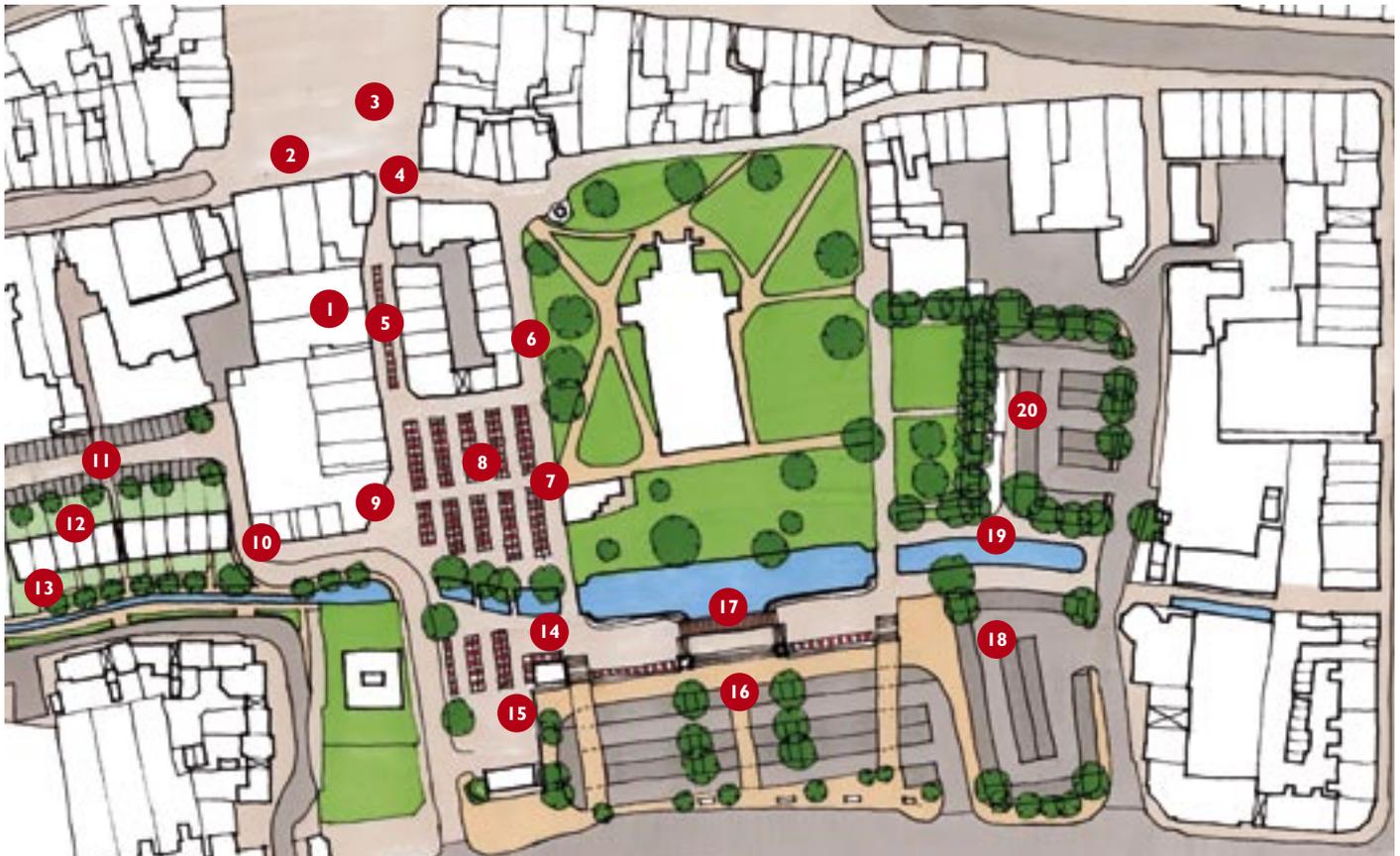
Following the analysis of the 5 Scenarios, Scenario 4 – Redevelopment of the Churchgate Centre was developed into preliminary Options, Option A and Option B.

In addition the longer term Vision set out in Scenario 5 was also explored as preliminary Option C. These preliminary Options were reported back to the community at the Community Planning Weekend Report Back held at St Mary's Church on Wednesday 6 April and discussed in more detail at the Hitchin Visioning meeting on 4 May with key stakeholders.

The following chapter sets out these preliminary Options.



PRELIMINARY OPTIONS



PRELIMINARY OPTION A - Redevelopment of the Churchgate Centre keeping Hitchin Market on its existing site.

- 1 Redevelop Churchgate Centre as mixed use development with residential over ground floor retail.
- 2 New frontage onto Market Place in keeping with scale and character of existing buildings.
- 3 Market Place used for Farmers Markets and special events.
- 4 New link through Churchgate formed between pub and listed buildings to replicate traditional street pattern.
- 5 Frontages along new street designed in scale with traditional frontages and with variety of treatment.
- 6 Townhouses or retail with flats above along Churchyard Walk to bring variety of use around the Church.
- 7 Enclosure to market removed to allow it to address and enliven Churchyard Walk on market days.
- 8 Market located in similar position to existing market but with links along new street to Market Place. Surfacing materials of high quality and design to provide visual amenity when market is not operating.
- 9 Supermarket entrance addressing Market area.
- 10 Shared access to residential parking and loading area in similar materials to market area with subtle delineation of vehicle route.
- 11 Pedestrian route created from Sun Street through to river walk.
- 12 New townhouses on former Biggin Lane car park with pedestrian only access to fronts addressing River Hiz.
- 13 River walk enhanced and complemented by lawns in front of townhouses.
- 14 New section of River Hiz opened up with light bridges over to ensure easy accessibility with smaller market area.
- 15 Car park may be used for trading from vans.
- 16 Car park improved through reinforcement of pedestrian routes, changes of materials and new planting.
- 17 Market along water frontage retained and enhanced by boardwalk link past steps to give better accessibility.
- 18 Car park improved through changes of materials and new planting.
- 19 River walk on both sides of the river improved by realignment of edges new planting.
- 20 Car park improved through changes of materials and new planting and used for occasional craft markets.

PRELIMINARY OPTIONS

PRELIMINARY OPTION A

Redevelopment of the Churchgate Centre keeping Hitchin Market on its existing site.

This Preliminary Option complies with the Project Brief and shows the Churchgate Centre redeveloped as a mixed use development with retail on the ground floor and residential above. The redevelopment includes the introduction of a new street of traditional scale connecting Market Place through to Hitchin Market and allowing glimpsed views through to the Biggin. The new development will allow for a balance of modern retail units to meet demand. New high quality frontages will enhance Market Square, Hitchin Market area and the setting of St Mary's Church. The market area itself will be improved with new quality paving and a range of permanent and temporary stalls which connect to and cross an enhanced and deculverted River Hiz. An area for van trading has been set aside at the Queen Street end of the Market. The Market will also connect through to Market Place which will be used more intensively with specialist markets and other activities. On the site of the Biggin Lane car park new town houses front onto a newly created walkway along the Hiz which will eventually connect through to Bridge Street and to Sun Street. St Mary's and Portmill Lane car parks will be enhanced with new surfacing including improved pavements along pedestrian desire lines and planting which will allow for festival and market uses as well as car parking.



Market Place

The redeveloped Churchgate Centre provides the long awaited opportunity to enhance the eastern side of Market Place with a well designed façade that reflects "Hitchiness" and provides high quality retail and residential accommodation. Market Place should be used more intensively with specialist markets and an extension of the "pedestrianisation days". A new street runs through alongside the Rose and Crown and draws the shoppers through to an enhanced River Hiz.



PRELIMINARY OPTIONS



PRELIMINARY OPTION B - Redevelopment of the Churchgate Centre moving Hitchin Market to Market Place

- 1 Redevelop Churchgate Centre as mixed use development with residential over ground floor retail.
- 2 New frontage onto Market Place in keeping with scale and character of existing buildings.
- 3 Market relocated to Market Place to reinstate historical location.
- 4 Market extends along High Street to extend its influence through the town.
- 5 New link through Churchgate formed between pub and listed buildings to replicate traditional street pattern.
- 6 Frontages along new street designed in scale with traditional frontages and with variety of treatment.
- 7 Townhouses or shops with flats above along Churchyard Walk to bring variety of use around the Church.
- 8 Link through blocks provides glimpse of Church from retail street and better permeability.
- 9 Surfacing materials of high quality and design to provide visual continuity with historic surfaces.
- 10 Supermarket entrance addressing Market area.
- 11 Shared access to residential parking and loading area in similar materials to market area with subtle delineation of vehicle route.
- 12 Pedestrian route created from Sun Street through to river walk.
- 13 New townhouses on former Biggin Lane car park with pedestrian only access to fronts addressing River Hiz.
- 14 River walk enhanced and complemented by lawns in front of townhouses.
- 15 New section of River Hiz opened up with light bridges over to ensure easy accessibility with adjacent areas.
- 16 Car park improved through changes of materials.
- 17 Car park improved through reinforcement of pedestrian routes, changes of materials and new planting.
- 18 Accessibility along water frontage enhanced by boardwalk link past steps.
- 19 Car park improved through changes of materials and new planting.
- 20 River walk on both sides of the river improved by realignment of edges new planting.
- 21 Car park improved through changes of materials and new planting and used for occasional craft markets.

PRELIMINARY OPTIONS

PRELIMINARY OPTION B

Redevelopment of the Churchgate Centre moving Hitchin Market to Market Place

Preliminary Option B was developed to respond to some ideas emerging from the weekend that Hitchin Market could move to Market Place and free up more land for development should Preliminary Option A prove unviable. Consequently, this Option shows the Churchgate Centre redeveloped more extensively, to cover part of the existing market area. This proposal, which like Preliminary Option A has retail on the ground floor and residential above, includes the introduction of a new street of traditional scale connecting Market Place through to the River Hiz and allowing glimpsed views through to the Biggin and St Mary's Church. The new development will allow for a balance of modern retail units to meet demand. New high quality frontages will enhance Market Square and the setting of St Mary's Church. The River Hiz will be enhanced and deculverted. Hitchin Market is moved to Market Place which will be resurfaced and given improved services for the market. On the site of the Biggin Lane car park, new town houses front onto a newly created walkway along the Hiz which will eventually connect through to Bridge Street and to Sun Street. St Mary's and Portmill Lane car parks will be enhanced with new surfacing including improved pavements along pedestrian desire lines and planting which will allow for festival and market uses as well as car parking.

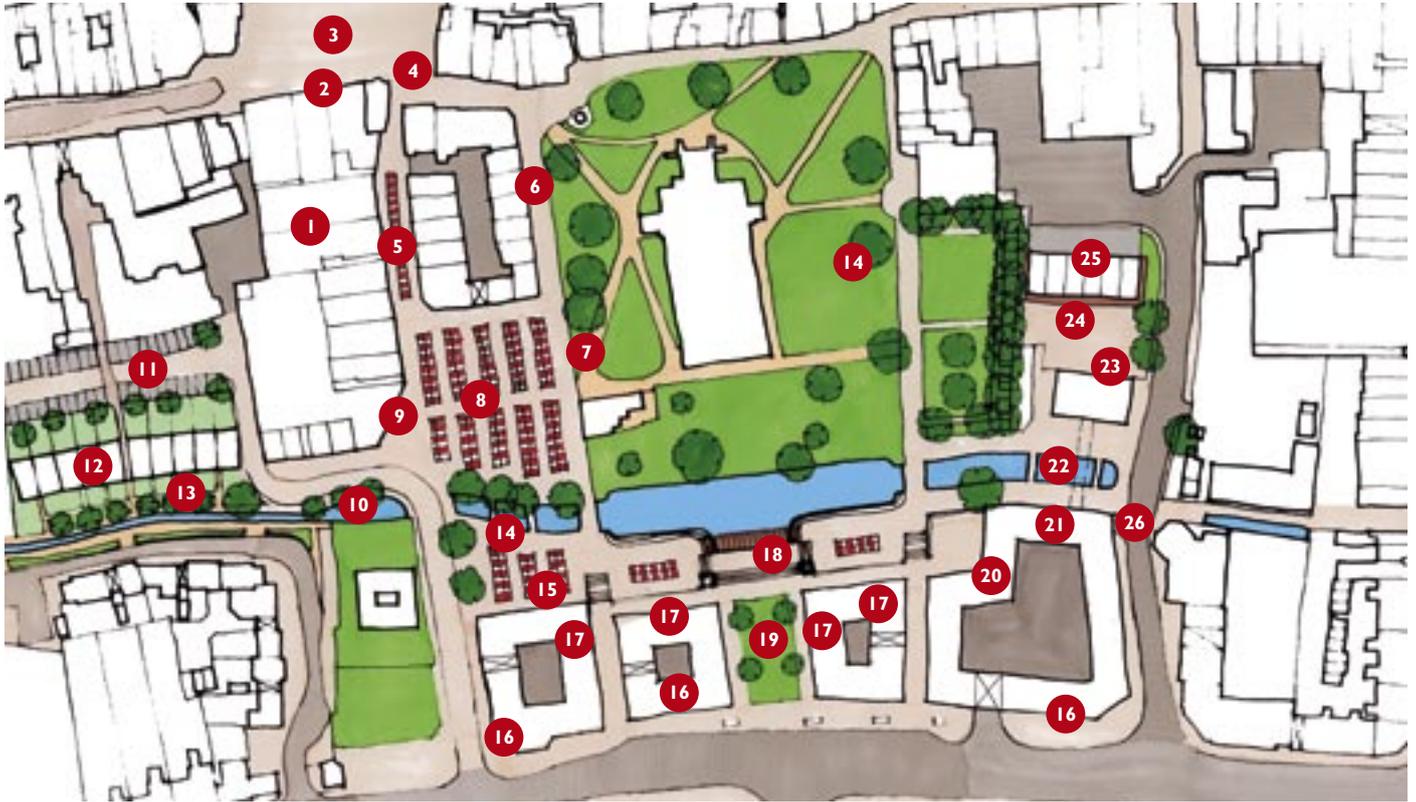


The River Hiz walkway

New town houses along the River Hiz create an attractive setting fronting onto an enhanced River Hiz with a walkway linking eventually from Bridge Street through to Hermitage Road.



PRELIMINARY OPTIONS



LONGER TERM VISION PRELIMINARY OPTION C - Redevelopment of the Churchgate Centre keeping Hitchin Market on its existing site and developing on St Mary's and Portmill car parks

- 1 Redevelop Churchgate Centre as mixed use development with residential over ground floor retail.
- 2 New frontage onto Market Place in keeping with scale and character of existing buildings.
- 3 Market Place used for Farmers Markets and special events.
- 4 New link through Churchgate between pub and listed buildings to replicate traditional street pattern.
- 5 Frontages along new street designed in scale with traditional frontages and with variety of treatment.
- 6 Townhouses or shops with flats above along Churchyard Walk to bring variety of use around the Church.
- 7 Enclosure to market removed to allow it to address and enliven Churchyard Walk on market days.
- 8 Market located in similar position to existing market but with links along new street to Market Place. Surfacing materials of high quality and design to provide visual amenity when market is not operating.
- 9 Supermarket entrance addressing Market area.
- 10 Shared access to residential parking and loading area in similar materials to market area with subtle delineation of vehicle route.
- 11 Pedestrian route created from Sun Street through to river walk.
- 12 New townhouses on former Biggin Lane car park, pedestrian only access to fronts facing the River.
- 13 River walk enhanced and complemented by lawns in front of townhouses.
- 14 New section of River Hiz opened up crossed by light bridges to ensure accessibility to smaller market.
- 15 Retail or food/café frontage addressing market area and river walk.
- 16 Residential frontage to Queen Street with residential over commercial uses.
- 17 Commercial/food/café frontages to new square and terrace overlooking River Hiz and Church grounds.
- 18 Market along water front retained, enhanced by boardwalk link past steps to give better accessibility.
- 19 New square framing view of Church.
- 20 Significant bar/restaurant with access to terrace overlooking River Hiz and Church grounds.
- 21 Community building at upper level with access to terrace overlooking River Hiz and Church grounds. Linked by high level bridge to community building on the other side of the river.
- 22 River walk between community buildings enhanced by bridge links over river to create a public space for special activities including craft markets.
- 23 Community building on former Portmill Lane car park.
- 24 Hard landscaped space used for craft markets and informal parking.
- 25 Live/work units with work frontage addressing hard landscaped area and community building.
- 26 Entrance/exit to new car park under podium level. Car park sub-divided to allow partial closure at night.
- 27 Potential redevelopment of Post Office with strong link to Hermitage Road.

PRELIMINARY OPTIONS

LONGER TERM VISION PRELIMINARY OPTION C

Redevelopment of the Churchgate Centre keeping Hitchin Market on its existing site and developing on St Mary's and Portmill Lane car parks

This longer term vision builds on Preliminary Option A to develop St Mary's and Portmill Lane car parks to create a "Church Close" and form a town centre pedestrian circuit of linked public spaces centred on St Mary's Church connecting to all key areas of the town. The Churchgate Centre is redeveloped as a mixed use development with retail on the ground floor and residential above. The new development will allow for a balance of modern retail units to meet demand. New high quality frontages will enhance Market Place, Hitchin Market area and the setting of St Mary's Church. The market area itself will be improved with new quality paving and a range of permanent and temporary stalls which connect to and cross an enhanced and deculverted River Hiz. The Market will also connect through to Market Place which will be used more intensively with specialist markets and other activities. On the site of the Biggin Lane car park new town houses front onto a newly created walkway along the Hiz which will eventually connect through to Bridge Street and to Sun Street. St Mary's and Portmill car parks will be developed with mixed uses to enhance the setting of St Mary's Church and provide frontages along Queen Street. This development will allow for underground parking accessed from Portmill Lane and a range of mixed uses including community and leisure uses and residential uses. A new flexible space will be created on St Mary's Square and key views will be retained to the Church from Queen Street. Portmill Lane West car park provides the opportunity for a new community building and live/work units to form a new flexible public space linking Cloister Garden through to Hermitage Road following the redevelopment of the Post Office site.



PRELIMINARY OPTIONS

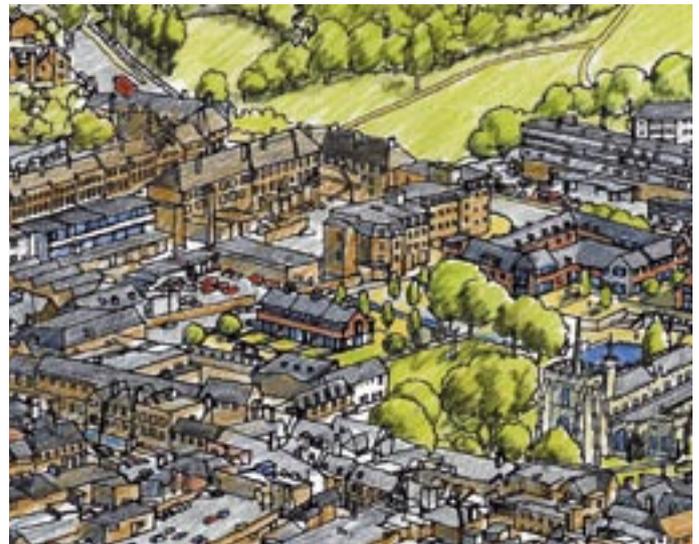


St Mary's Terrace

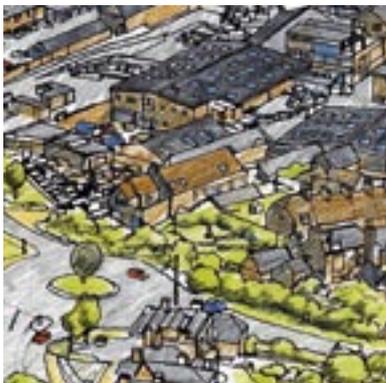
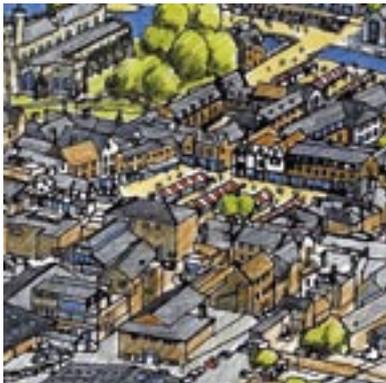
The long term vision proposes the creation of new high quality mixed use buildings looking onto the River Hiz and St Mary's Church. The activity of Hitchin Market spills along the River Hiz and people sit outside restaurants and cafés on the south-west facing terrace enjoying the fine view to the church.

The Portmill Area.

Aerial showing new mixed use buildings on St Mary's and Portmill Lane car parks creating a church close with active uses at ground floor. Portmill Lane West car park has new community and live/work buildings creating a flexible public space linking Cloister Gardens with Hermitage Road through a new mixed use development on the Post Office site.



PRELIMINARY OPTIONS





Existing site

URBAN DESIGN GUIDELINES

The following Urban Design Guidelines have been developed following the Community Planning Weekend to set the framework for future development in the Churchgate area. These Guidelines appear in the Planning Brief for the area.

Introduction

Hitchin town centre is characterised by the curving streets, ginnels and alleyways, buildings and shops right on the back edge of the pavement, the undulating and varied roofline, the rhythm and variety of proportion from the Victorian and Georgian shop fronts, the quality of joinery and details, the two to three storey scale and the creative use of materials brick and render, all characteristics that could be rediscovered and incorporated in the design proposals for the regeneration of this area. The existing Churchgate Shopping Centre does not fit in with the character of the town centre. The redevelopment of the Churchgate area represents a unique opportunity in an important market town to take the best ideas from the past, and combine them with the best ideas from the present for the economic, social and environmental benefit of the of the whole town.

Sense of Place and Character

Importance is placed on building a distinct image and high quality 'sense of place' which respects and complements the surrounding areas. As such, new development should respect neighbouring buildings and respond positively to them. New buildings should enrich the surrounding fabric both visually and physically by careful attention to the scale and rhythms of adjacent buildings, local morphology, adjacent height, massing and local materials.

Building Heights and Density

The site must have a consistent, high density character although the scale and massing should vary accordingly to integrate with surroundings. The existing height and roofscapes of surrounding buildings should determine the scale and massing of new development across the site. In some areas it may be necessary to moderate the mass of a building or group of buildings to step up or step down to its neighbour. This will also reflect the distinctive varied rooflines which characterise much of Hitchin Town Centre. Buildings of 2, 2.5 and 3 storeys are considered appropriate across the site.

Permeability and Accessibility

New development should integrate with the historic urban grain of Hitchin and provide a permeable and legible layout to draw people through the area and add to the network of streets and spaces. The pedestrian movement within the town centre is an essential component. Full consideration must be given to the movement needs of all sections of the community including those with impaired sight and mobility. The network should reinforce existing routes and further opportunities to link the development with the secondary retail areas along Sun Street and Hermitage Road.

Flexible and Active Public Realm

The development should seek to improve and add to the public realm with a seamless connection of active streets, spaces and paths. In particular new development should seek to strengthen the link between Market Place, the River Hiz and onto St Mary's Square car park via the creation of new public realm of the highest quality. Routes into and through the new development should be aligned to provide visual connections to the town centre which will naturally lead pedestrians to and from Market Place. In addition signage and street furniture should be sited with care and designed to the highest standard.

URBAN DESIGN GUIDELINES

New buildings should present a continuous active 'front' to this network of streets and spaces and this will be achieved in large part through predominantly retail uses. Opportunities exist to enhance the functionality and vitality of these areas by incorporating uses which can 'spill out' into the space (such as cafés, food/flower stalls).

The opportunity should be taken, in accordance with the River Hiz Development Guidelines, to enhance and 'soften' the River Hiz, open it up where it is presently culverted and establish a river side walk as far as is possible for eventual linkage to Bridge Street and Hermitage Road.

Movement and Transport

Priority should be given to measures that promote the accessibility of the town centre amenities by public transport, bicycle and foot whilst acknowledging the need for vehicular traffic to support commercial, residential, market and retail uses in the neighbourhood. Secure cycle storage should be provided for residents and cycle hoops or racks located in well-overlooked spaces should be integrated into the public spaces. Creating a pedestrian environment that encourages movement through the site and links to public transport is a vital element in the sustainability strategy and is also essential for the viability of the market and retail area.

Safety and security

Maintaining a continuity of frontage and visual surveillance onto the street, areas of public realm and open space is a basic requirement of creating safe places. The ground floor of much of the development will be active during the day with shop frontages. Predominantly residential mixed uses on first floor and above will create activity and natural surveillance outside shop opening hours. Frequent entrance doors will help spread this activity through all parts of the development.

URBAN DESIGN GUIDELINES

In areas with ground floor residential development making these frontages 'active' adds interest, life and vitality and can be achieved with careful attention to the following elements:

- setback distances should be minimised to increase the ability of a building to interact with the street;
- frequent doors and windows, with few blank walls;
- narrow frontage buildings, giving vertical rhythm to the street scene;
- enlivening edges through the architectural detailing of buildings to reflect existing lively and varied frontages, hanging baskets, window boxes may also be used;
- lively internal uses visible from outside, or spilling out onto the street; and
- the use of transparent glass for windows, where privacy allows, rather than mirrored or frosted glass that only allows occupants to benefit from views out.

Quality of design and materials

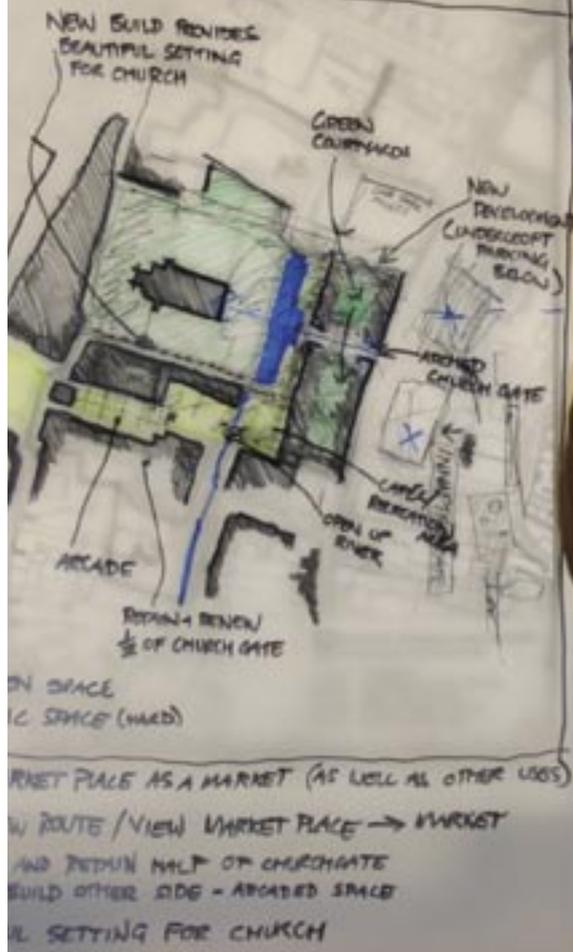
High quality building design and detailing and the creation of attractive public realm are important to achieve a successful, robust and lasting scheme. The new development and landscaping should be built of the highest quality materials to contribute to the historic character of the town. Note and reference should be made to traditional typologies and details to give the scheme local character and enhance the setting of existing buildings and features in particular the Biggin, the River Hiz, St Mary's Church and Market Place.

Phasing

The phasing of construction will be particularly important in this busy town centre location where the continuing viability and functioning of the town centre is of prime importance, in particular the retail sector including Hitchin Market. Applicants will need to demonstrate a creative and rigorous approach to the efficient management of the construction process while ensuring minimal disruption to the environmental quality and amenity value of the town centre and the continued operation of Hitchin Market

MARKET FORCES

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9 FINAL OPTIONS AND THE WAY FORWARD

FINAL OPTIONS

The redevelopment of the Churchgate area represents a unique opportunity for Hitchin to take the best ideas from the past, and combine them with the best ideas from the present for the economic, social and environmental benefit of the whole town. This aspiration is met by Preliminary Option A - Redevelopment of the Churchgate Centre which meets the requirements of the project brief. Following the presentation of the Preliminary Options at the Community Planning Weekend Report Back on 6 April, More detailed viability assessment work has indicated that at the time of writing Option A is likely to be deliverable. Given this, Preliminary Option B, which did not meet the requirements of the project brief and was throwing up operational difficulties for the market and the town centre, was dropped. However, to cover other eventualities in relation to the viability of Option A, a new alternative option, Final Option B - Refurbishment of the Churchgate Centre, has been included as part of this Brief. Final Option B differs from Final Option A only in relation to the Churchgate Centre. The Brief for the Market Area, Biggin Lane Car Park and St Mary's and Portmill Lane Car Parks are the same for final Options A and B

A further meeting with the Hitchin Visioning Group on 4 May to discuss progress revealed strong desire to incorporate a refurbishment option in the Draft Planning Brief. Option B – Refurbishment of the Churchgate Centre has also been viability assessed and will form part of the Draft Planning Brief. It is believed that the inclusion of these two Options means that the Draft Planning Brief will be widely supported.

Of the two Options it is our firm opinion that Final Option A is the preferred and most likely Option for the reasons set out under Scenarios 2 and 4 above and because it represents the community, business and political aspirations of Hitchin. Furthermore, the Community Planning Process revealed a longer term Vision for the town centre which can build on Option A.

THE DRAFT PLANNING BRIEF

A Draft Planning Brief has been prepared for the Churchgate Project Area to set out planning principles and a robust urban design rationale to guide and allow for the high quality redevelopment and enhancement of the site. The Brief has been guided by the outcomes from the Community Planning Weekend and will convey the hopes and expectations of the local community. The Brief has been prepared in accordance with requirements set out in the North Hertfordshire District Local Plan No 2 with alterations 1996 and the Hitchin Town Centre Strategy 2004 which provides the framework for guiding the overall development and growth of the town centre over the next 10 years.

The brief will:

- provide relevant planning policy and urban design guidance against which proposals for the development of the site will be assessed;
- provide details of the land use, design, layout and range of densities of the development;
- provide details of and expectations for access to the site and circulation within the site for pedestrians, cyclists and vehicular traffic;
- demonstrate how the site meets national and local policy guidance on sustainable development; and
- encourage an innovative design response to the site.

NEXT STEPS

This document has been prepared by JTP specifically to stimulate further discussion about the future development of Churchgate Development Area. During March 2005 the views of many organisations and interests were sought through the Community Planning Weekend, in order that future development proposals take account of the needs and aspirations of local people in Hitchin. The Draft Planning Brief has been prepared in light of this document outlining specific design principles for the area.

FINAL OPTIONS AND THE WAY FORWARD

During the summer of 2005 the Draft Planning Brief will be consulted on and then reviewed in the light of comments received. In the autumn the final version of the Planning Brief will be put to Hitchin Committee for approval and then onto the Cabinet for adoption and then the full Council for final adoption.

Parking

A key issue for the town centre is parking and it is strongly recommended that whilst rightfully promoting the development of key sites to enhance the town centre the Council should embark upon the process of renewing its comprehensive parking strategy within the context of an integrated transport approach. This is especially important for the southern end of the town centre. In particular, consideration should be given to the role on street parking can make to the overall short-term car parking capacity associated with development.

Hitchin Market

The project brief asked for the retention of Hitchin Market in its present location. Although there was some consideration about moving the market to Market Place it is strongly believed that Option A represents the best solution for the market. This Option opens up the culverted section of the River Hiz and reduces the size of the market whilst allowing for flexibility to expand perhaps to neighbouring spaces such as Market Place if required. Similarly there was discussion relating to getting rid of permanent stalls and having a fully demountable market. The Options in the Development Brief refer to a proportion of the stalls being permanent and a proportion being demountable with an area left over for temporary and van traders towards Queen Street. Permanent stalls can be very expensive to install and it is now up to the Council to develop a viable strategy with Market Traders based on the rationalised layout set out in the Options.

Churchgate Traders

A key concern throughout the process has been the future of the Churchgate Centre traders. It is recommended that work is started now through the Hitchin Town Centre Initiative to consider acceptable ways of supporting the traders, minimising the impact of redevelopment/refurbishment of the Centre and looking into possible mechanisms for finding alternative affordable premises and potentially accommodation within any new development.

Phasing

The phasing of construction for either option will be particularly important in this busy town centre where the continued viability and functioning of the town centre is of prime importance. It will be for the site developers to advance proposals for the phasing of the construction and they will need to demonstrate a creative and rigorous approach to the effective management of the construction process while ensuring minimal disruption to the environmental and amenity value of the town centre and continued operation of the Hitchin Market. It may be possible for part or all of the market to trade from Market Place, compress into the existing site or move onto St Mary's Square car park during the construction phase.

In both Options, the Churchgate Centre construction work could be undertaken in one phase or in two or more phases. If a single phase approach is adopted, the Council may have aspirations to retain a route through from the market area to Market Place during the construction phase. In the latter case it should be possible to retain a route through the Centre throughout the construction process in any event.

For both options Biggin Lane car park could be used as a site compound with the advantage that

FINAL OPTIONS AND THE WAY FORWARD

the improvement works to the market could be begun early and theoretically the new Churchgate development/refurbishment and the market could open up simultaneously. Alternatively, if the Biggin Lane site came forward earlier, this would mean that the west part of the market area could be used as a site compound and the market operation concentrated more toward the Queen Street frontage. Improvement of the market area would then begin once the new Churchgate development/refurbishment was completed.

Enhancement of the car parks would fit in and around the construction works and the need for temporary market locations.

Working towards the longer term Vision

Stage 1 – Churchgate and Hitchin Market

It is hoped that the Planning Brief will see quick progress towards the redevelopment of the Churchgate Centre and investment in Hitchin Market. This stage would also include the possible development of Biggin Lane car park and the enhancement of St Mary's Square and the Portmill Lane car parks.

Stage 2 – Post Office Site and Portmill Lane West Car Park

It is recommended that the next stage in working towards the longer term Vision should be the redevelopment of the Post Office site, tied in with development and enhancement on the Portmill Lane East car park, perhaps incorporating Church House. This would be popular and provide the opportunity to create strong and important linkage through to Hermitage Road, close up the backs of the Bancroft shops, create a flexible public space for parking, art markets, music events etc and a potential new community building next to the River Hiz.

Stage 3 – St Mary's and Portmill Lane West Car Parks

The final stage would be the development of the St Mary's and Portmill Lane West car parks to provide underground parking with high quality and active mixed use buildings above allowing for the retention of key views to the church and creating new ones. The development would enhance the setting of St Mary's Church by completing the "Church Close", recreate a strong frontage to Queen Street and provide a flexible public space on St Mary's Square and create a circuit of activity and interest with a range of high quality uses that will keep Hitchin vibrant and competitive over the coming years whilst preserving and enhancing the 'Hitchiness' so much appreciated by all the community.