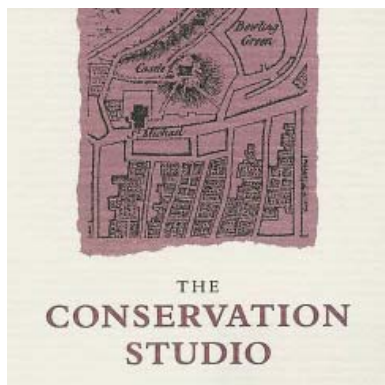




# HITCHIN

## CONSERVATION AREA: CHARACTER STATEMENT 26 JULY 2011

Hitchin Conservation Area was designated in March 1969 and a first review incorporating boundary changes was adopted in January 1998. This document forms part of a comprehensive second review for Hitchin and should be read in conjunction with the conservation area maps. An up-dated register of Buildings of Local Interest for Hitchin has also been adopted on 26 July 2011.



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## 1 INTRODUCTION

As recommended in English Heritage consultative guidance on the Management of Conservation Areas, this Character Appraisal assesses the setting, character and appearance of the conservation area, and also identifies negative features where improvements would be welcome.

To assist the consultants in the preparation of this document, a Stakeholders' Meeting was held in St Mary's Church House, Hitchin, on Friday 27 March 2009. Feedback from this meeting was encouraged and where appropriate, stakeholders' comments have been incorporated into this document. Of note is the valuable contribution made to this document by the members of the Hitchin Historical Society, who have also produced a number of extremely helpful books, noted in Chapter 10 *Bibliography*.

Because of the size and nature of the conservation area, it has been divided into seven 'Character Areas', each of which has a unique character and appearance. An assessment of each Character Area is therefore included in Chapter 7, which also identifies areas for improvements. A summary of the principal issues can be found in Chapter 8, and Chapter 9 deals with the conservation area boundary review which was undertaken as part of this Character Appraisal.

The District Council has already produced a number of documents relating to Hitchin, including the River Hiz Development Guidelines 1994, the Hitchin Town Centre Strategy 2004, the Churchgate Development Area Planning Brief 2005, the Paynes Park Planning Brief 2005, and the Urban Design Assessment for Hitchin 2007. The Hitchin Town Centre Strategy is subject to regular review and one of the purposes of this Character Appraisal is to feed into that review process.



*Stakeholder's meeting, March 2009*



*Stakeholder's meeting, March 2009*

## **2 SUMMARY**

The special interest that justifies designation of the Hitchin Conservation Area derives from a number of architectural, historic and environmental factors, including:

- Large market town with Saxon origins;
- Hitchin is one of the oldest continually inhabited towns in the county and arguably the historic centre of north Hertfordshire;
- One of only five towns in Hertfordshire identified as being of national importance by the Council for British Archaeology;
- The town's long history as an agricultural, market and service centre for the region, as well as some more limited industrial heritage;
- The undulating topography and the location on the modestly sized River Hiz provides the townscape with interest and definition;
- The designated conservation area encompasses the historic town centre as well as public or private parkland and high quality residential suburbs;
- The variety of closed and more open spaces, lined with mainly listed buildings of a relatively modest scale, provides the town centre with a particularly appealing character;
- The survival of medieval burgage plots to the western side of High Street, and to both sides of Bancroft, which in places are reflected by the creation of alley ways, carriage entrances and courts;
- The current pattern of roads and footpaths preserves a network of rights of way over the former medieval open fields that has significantly influenced the development of the town's layout;
- The very high quality of the many historic buildings, the most important of which are The Priory, listed grade I (a former Carmelite priory) and the medieval church of St Mary's, also listed grade I;
- A few purpose-built larger commercial buildings, such as the Corn Exchange in the Market Place;
- The use of timber framing or red brick for many of the historic buildings adds variety and visual interest;
- Priory Park, Windmill Hill and Bancroft Recreation Ground are all close to the town centre and are important open green spaces;
- The late 19th century residential suburb based on The Avenue lies to the east of the town centre, close to the railway station, and provides a number of substantial family houses, built mainly of the local red brick;
- The construction of a town centre Relief Road in 1981 removed through traffic, which once ran along Tilehouse Street;
- From 1993 onwards, the town centre has been partially pedestrianised;
- The high quality environment, and the provision of a wide range of both local and national shops within Hitchin, as well as the regular street markets, makes the town popular with shoppers and visitors.

### **3      *ACTIVITIES, LOCATION AND SETTING***

#### **3.1    *Activities and uses***

The Hitchin Conservation Area covers the historic town centre, which includes a long main street (High Street and Bancroft) which leads northwards from the Market Place. To the south, a more constrained complex of narrow historic streets connects to The Priory with its large area of parkland which stretches as far as Hitchin Hill. Another hill (Windmill Hill), lies to the immediate east of the town centre, and late 19th century houses in and around The Avenue, and a major school of 1908, can be found beyond an attractive open green space which provides stunning views westwards over the town. Victorian and 20th century suburbs lie all around the town, most notably to the north east, where the coming of the railway in the mid 19th century generated the construction of both artisan and middle class housing.

The town centre provides several national supermarkets as well as a large number of smaller shops, restaurants and cafes, which are all a major draw. Some of these are locally owned and add variety to the goods and services on offer. Although the traditional function of the Market Place has been replaced by the modern street market to the east of the Churchgate Centre, the Market Place is still seen as the 'centre' of the town and has been well landscaped to provide an attractive pedestrian-priority area which is used for a variety of community and commercial events including regular street markets. The bustle and activity of this part of Hitchin contrasts with the peaceful paths and open green spaces around St Mary's Church, which lies just off the Market Place. Windmill Hill and Bancroft Recreation Ground both provide valuable public open spaces, although the way in which they are used varies markedly, with the Recreation Ground being used in a more formal way due to the provision of its tennis courts, bowling green and children's play area. Although the parkland around The Priory makes up a substantial amount of the designated conservation area, because it is privately owned it is not normally accessible to the public. Finally, the leafy suburbs associated with The Avenue are again relatively peaceful, contrasting with the busier traffic along peripheral roads such as Walsworth Road and Hollow Lane. Outside the conservation area, Butts Close is another important open green space which is used for recreation and periodic fairs.



*The Market Place, Hitchin*



*The Churchyard, St Mary's Church*

### **3.2     *Location, landscape setting and geology***

Hitchin lies in the north of Hertfordshire within the Green Belt in the valley on the north slope of the Chiltern Hills created by the River Hiz. The valley was probably created by glaciation and then occupied by the River Hiz. Letchworth Garden City is only a few kilometers away to the north east, separated by a strip of open countryside. Junction 8 of the A(1)M, which provides a rapid link to London, is about three kilometres to the south east, with the large town of Stevenage just beyond. The A505 provides an important east-west road link, and from Hitchin Railway Station trains can be caught to Stevenage, Kings Cross (London), Peterborough and Cambridge. Hitchin is the one of the larger settlements in the county with a population of about 30,500.

Hitchin Hill and Windmill Hill contain the historic town on the east, which was originally developed along the route of the modest stream called the River Hiz. In places this is now culverted but recent improvements to its setting and accessibility have been provided as a result of new development, most notably to the east of Bancroft, where a new Sainsbury's Supermarket was built in the late 1990's. Priory Park lies to the south of the town centre, with Butts Close to the west. Further to the west of Hitchin the land also rises gradually before a steep incline which is marked by the small village of Great Offley. To the north, the ground levels off and follows the course of the River Hiz, which joins the River Purwell at Grove Mill and the River Oughton near Ickleford, the combined river then flowing northwards to the Great Ouse and The Wash.



*View over Hitchin from Windmill Hill*



*The River Hiz, Hitchin Town Centre*

The North Hertfordshire and Stevenage Landscape Character Assessment (2005) identifies three Landscape Character Areas around Hitchin as follows:

Character Area no. 214: The Langley Valley to the south west of Hitchin, with the key characteristics as follows:

- Rolling chalk landform;
- Dominant large scale arable farming,
- Smaller areas of grazing on steeper chalk slopes to the south of Hitchin;
- Woodland plantations concentrated in the north on most pronounced chalk landscape – relatively little woodland cover elsewhere.



Character Area no. 216: Arlesey to Great Wymondley – this lies to the south east, east and north east of Hitchin, with the key characteristics as follows:

- Large flat expansive arable landscape in the north;
- Rolling arable landscape of large scale fields and with relatively few trees in the south;
- Core defined by the urban development of Letchworth and Hitchin.

Character Area no. 217: The River Oughton and Purwell Valleys, with the key characteristics as follows:

- Grazed water meadows;
- Meandering water course with associated ponds and water bodies;
- Linear woodland belts following the water course.

Some of the fields in the immediate landscape around Hitchin retain evidence of ‘ridge and furrow’ – the result of the ploughing in the medieval period when the whole area round Hitchin was divided up into vast open fields (some of these plots were still discernable at the beginning of the 20th century). Because there was no systematic enclosure, the fossilized pattern of open fields is still visible in places today. Within Hitchin, mature woodland can be found in Priory park and Windmill Hill. The Oughtonhead Common Nature Reserve, on the west side of Hitchin, and a smaller but similar reserve on the east side near Purwell Mill, provide valuable local facilities.

Geologically, Hitchin lies on Chiltern Hills chalk with surface alluvial deposits and clay. The name ‘Tilehouse Street’ reflects a local brick-making industry and two important medieval brick kilns have been identified off Paynes Park and Bancroft. Brick making (red and white bricks) continued in Hitchin until the early 20th century. Clunch for building was quarried at nearby Ashwell and Royston and along with flint, is used in the construction of The Priory and St Mary’s Church.

## 4 HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

### 4.1 History of the conservation area

No archaeological evidence has been found of a concentration of population in Hitchin in either the Iron Age or the Romano-British periods, but cremation cemeteries at Bury Mead, to the north of the town, and at Foxholes, to the west, show that there was some settlement in the area, and it is possible that a Roman road ran to the west of the River Hiz, crossing the river at a ford close to modern-day Bridge Street. Although scattered domestic material has been discovered in Hitchin, and Roman tiles and bricks have been re-used in St Mary's Church, no substantial Romano-British structures have been found in the area although a timber framed structure, possibly of the late Roman period, was discovered in an excavation in Queen Street. However, there is greater evidence for Roman settlement in the village of Great Wymondley, a kilometre to the south east of Hitchin.

The name 'Hitchin' appears to have been acquired from the Hicce, an Anglo-Saxon tribe that probably entered East Anglia along the rivers of the Wash and who settled in the areas of north Hertfordshire and south Bedfordshire in the 6th century. The town became established as a central settlement for the tribe, although the extent of the territory probably owes as much to the lands attached to the Ravensburgh Hill Fort (to the west of Hitchin) in the Iron Age as to the Saxon invaders. It is possible that in the 5th century the inhabitants of Baldock (an Iron Age/Romano-British settlement) moved away from Baldock to the area around Hitchin. Either way, there is documentary evidence in the Mercian Tribal Hidage for the Hicce in the 7th century.

Variations on the name include *Hitche*, *Hicce* and *Hicche*. By the 8th century, Hitchin fell within the kingdom of Mercia whose king, Offa, built a palace in the locality in 758 AD, and thirty four years later this same king founded a religious house in Hitchin. In 910 AD a fire destroyed Offa's church and much of the town but another religious house was rebuilt, probably on the site of the present St Mary's Church. This confirmed Hitchin's role as an important Saxon minster, and suggests the early establishment of a manor (later to become a royal manor) to serve the area. At this time, the only other major settlement in the area appears to have been in Ashwell.



*St Mary's Church*



*St Mary's Church*



*St Mary's Church*

Recently, a large, early medieval ditch measuring 6 metres wide by 3 metres deep was excavated at the 'Brookers' site off Paynes Park and is regarded as being of regional significance and potentially of national significance. This ditch may possibly be the remnants of a Saxon defended settlement relating to the Saxon minster.

Prior to the Norman Conquest, the manor of Hitchin was owned by Earl Harold before he became king. By 1066, Hitchin had passed into the ownership of the Anglo-Saxon king, Edward the Confessor, and it was therefore handed over to William I when he conquered England. Hitchin is recorded as being in the King's ownership in the Domesday Survey of 1086, when Hitchin is referred to as 'Hiz'. At this time, the settlement had a population of around 103 households and comprised five hides (an area of land), three mills, plus some woodland. The modern name of 'Hitchin' first appears in 1618 but very close equivalents occur much earlier, such as the use of *Hichene* in 1147.

From the 12th century onwards, the market developed and the town grew, including the construction of St Andrew's (later St Mary's) Church on the site of the Saxon building. No charter was ever granted for Hitchin's market, suggesting that it was established long before the Crown tightened its control of such privileges. A fair was granted to the lord of the manor in 1221, followed by a further grant of fair in the early 14th century. In 1317 local benefactors sponsored the establishment of a monastery for Carmelite monks in the town on the site of what is now The Priory Conference Centre (grade I listed). Later, in 1361, the lord of the manor Edward de Kendale founded a Gilbertine order of canons in The Biggin, close to the church. The building remains today, and is listed grade II\*, although it was substantially rebuilt in c1585 and used as a school, then as an almshouse.

During the medieval period, the town's prosperity relied on wool, and the growing and selling of grain crops. Malting and brewing became the natural by-product of the latter. A fulling mill is recorded in 1268, suggesting that cloth making had also been established by this time. At one time Hitchin was selling fleeces to the continent through Calais, and a cloth making industry started in the town in about 1410. The vast revenues from local farms, some of which were owned by the monks, resulted in the extension and embellishment of St Mary's Church. When the monasteries were dissolved in the 1530s the land and buildings were sold off or gifted to the King's supporters, and by c1546 The Priory was in the hands of the Radcliffe family who rebuilt the main house in 1775, retaining some of the 15th century cloisters. The Quakers were already active in the town by the 1650s and by 1690 they had built a Meeting House in West Alley off Dead Street (now Queen Street), though this was demolished in 1869 after a new meeting house had been built. The influence of local Quakers on Hitchin life was very important throughout the 18th century and peaked between 1800 and 1875.



*Historic inns in Bucklersbury*

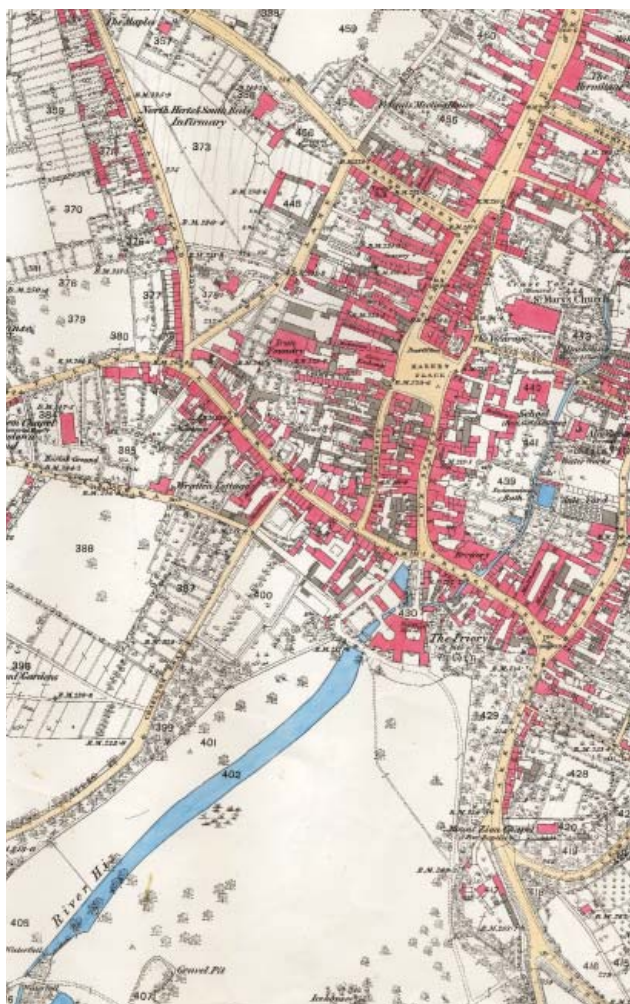


*The Biggin, off Queen Street*



Between 1500 and 1800 Hitchin continued its role as an important market town, with a large number of inns and hotels in the town centre, many of which remain today as listed buildings with their hidden courtyards accessed from the street through narrow carriageways. By 1650 the population is calculated as being between 1,063 and 1,767. By the 1840s this had increased to almost 8,000, but there was little additional land for building with development being largely constrained within the existing medieval street layout. This resulted in huge problems with sanitation and overcrowding, particularly in the Queen Street area where the closely packed houses and cottages created one of the worst areas of slums in the county.

The coming of the Great Northern Railway to Hitchin in 1850 began a period of urban growth, particularly on the east and north side of the town, closest to the railway station. Trading in grain became very important, and a new Corn Exchange was built in the Market Place soon after 1852. Easier movement around the town was helped by the construction of Hermitage Road, which opened in 1875. In 1889 the construction of a new Hitchin Boys Grammar School at Woodlands off Bancroft provided the town with a good local school, and this was followed in 1908 by the construction of a similar school for girls on Windmill Hill. Prior to the construction of both of these schools, the British Schools was founded in 1810 on its current site in Queen Street. The surviving group of buildings provides a good example of one of the few remaining early elementary schools. It includes the Lancaster School of 1837 and the galleried classroom of 1853 (both grade II\* listed). The latter was built following a recommendation by Matthew Arnold. The Girls and Infants School and the Master and Mistresses' Houses on the Queen Street frontage were built 1857 and are grade II listed.



*Historic Map of 1881*



*Historic Map of 1898*



*Historic Map of 1923*



Into the early 19th century local government in Hitchin was provided for by the Manor Courts and Vestry. Hitchin was one of the earliest towns in England and Wales to promulgate a Local Board under Ranger's Public Health Act of 1848, although its operation was soon mired in controversy which was only fully unravelled once the Hitchin Urban District Council was established in 1894, Hertfordshire County Council having been established in 1889.

In 1903 the Livestock Market was moved from Bancroft to a site in Old Park Road and Paynes Park, which was leased from the Masters and Fellows of Trinity College Cambridge for 99 years. A large amount of slum clearance from 1924 onwards was also undertaken, which resulted in the demolition of a substantial part of Queen Street next to the church. Some of the land was subsequently used to create new public spaces, with promenades and fountains opening next to St Mary's Church in 1930.

Other 20th century changes to the town centre include the late 1920s shops along the north side of The Hermitage, and the addition of a number of less attractive blocks of flats and commercial buildings dating to the 1960s and 1970s (including the Churchgate Centre), mainly in Queen Street. During World War II the market moved from its original location in the centre of the town to St Mary's Square, then, in 1973, from St Mary's Square to its present position between the Churchgate Centre and Queen Street.

The south-west Relief Road was completed in 1981, removing most of the through traffic from Tilehouse Street although it did involve cutting through Priory Park. Later, in the early 1990's, the town centre was partially pedestrianised, and new paving and other features were installed as part of a comprehensive enhancement scheme.

Old courts and other buildings on the east side of Bancroft (outside the conservation area) which were once in use as tanneries or for pharmaceuticals have been demolished. Sainsbury's Supermarket and new houses and blocks of flats now occupy this area.

Today, the popular Market Place and the varied shops in the surviving historic streets are further enhanced by the regular markets in the area beyond Churchgate Centre. These comprise a general market on Tuesdays and Saturdays, and specialist markets on Fridays and Sundays.

*The historical development of each individual Character Area is also considered in Chapter 7 Character Areas.*

## **4.2 Development of street pattern**

Hitchin provides a text-book example of how a Saxon burgh, then a Norman town, developed next to a small stream (the River Hiz), the site of the present church being close to the junction of the stream with a possibly Roman road which ran north west to south east and which connected to Great Wymondley. The first settlement developed close to the River Hiz which would have provided a convenient drain from the settlement, with wells being dug to provide the drinking water and the stream forming the back boundaries of the properties facing the market place. These riverside sites were a popular location for tanneries, the last of them, Russells, remained in Bancroft until the 1980s. Recent excavations suggest that the river was diverted in the medieval period to a course nearer the properties in the north eastern part of Bancroft to serve these tanneries. The river was also important as the source of power for a number of mills, such as those at Portmill and the Priory.

It is possible that the present form of the town centre was laid out in c1100 (Burleigh and Stevenson) or in the early 13th century (Thompson) when the then lord of the manor, John Balliol, married a wealthy heiress. Although the Balliols were primarily wealthy and important landowners in the north of England, Hitchin was one of their richest manors and provided them with a useful residence close to London. Their work possibly included formalising the function of an existing market area close to the Saxon church. Certainly, the property boundaries to either side of the principal historic streets suggest a coherent plan with a common back boundary and the creation of similarly sized long, thin plots. Similar remodelling had been carried out by Bernard de Balliol between 1130 and 1150 on his estates in County Durham. Another commentator (Fitzpatrick-Matthews) has argued that the layout of Hitchin market place and its burgage plots may actually date to the middle Saxon period, before the early 10th century defenses, identified by excavation on the west side of Bucklersbury. A late 9th or early 10th century date for the laying out of the street pattern may therefore be justifiable.

St Mary's Church is probably located on the site of a Saxon building and it is likely that an informal market developed to the west of the church from Tilehouse Street to Bancroft, running parallel to the stream but at a slightly higher level away from the flood plain. This may have stretched from what is now Tilehouse Street up to what is now Bancroft Recreation Ground, where the width of the road eventually diminished, creating a distinctive long triangle. Until the 16th century, this large space was gradually encroached upon with two blocks of new buildings, creating what are now Bucklersbury, Sun Street, and Churchyard. Encroachments also took place in the Market Place, which were demolished in 1829 and 1856 to ease congestion in the area. The medieval streets were lined on either side by commercial buildings and houses which formed continuous frontages, with back gardens or courts behind, often framed by long thin buildings which stretched back at right angles to the main street. Many of these buildings were inns and these back courts were used for stables, the carriage entrances to these being one of the defining features of the modern streetscape in Bucklersbury, Sun Street, High Street and Bancroft.



*Bancroft*



*Bucklersbury*

A subsidiary road developed parallel to the market place on the east side of the River Hiz, probably from the 12th century onwards. Formerly called Back Street, and at its southern end, Dead Street. Biggin Lane and Portmill Lane connected the market place with Back Street and Dead Street respectively. Their name was changed to the more salubrious Queen Street in the 19th century. Queen Street was also the site of many houses, cottages and other buildings which were located close to St Mary's Church, and which were swept away in the slum clearance of the 1920s.

Back Street had its own subsidiary lane, now Storehouse Lane, which provided rear access to properties on its steeply sloping east side. Another back lane, formerly West Lane, now Grammar School Walk and the northern parts of Paynes Park, formed the rear boundary of the long burgage plots fronting onto Bancroft and the Market Place. Two narrow alleys or lanes linked the back lane to Bancroft: West Alley, formerly Codpisse Alley, and Park Lane or Pound Lane, which was widened in the 1830s and renamed Brand Street. Tilehouse Street would appear to be a late medieval extension to the town, the earliest buildings dating to the 15th century.

Hitchin saw the infilling and some small extensions of the inhabited areas in the 17th and 18th centuries, such as the construction of Lyles Row leading up the hill from Back Street. The main change to the town plan was in the 1720s or 1730s when Priory Park was enclosed and then extended in the 1770s as first Ralph Radcliffe, then his nephew John, used money earned from the Levant trade to turn The Priory into a grander residence. To do this, several buildings were demolished and roads blocked, so a new road, now called Old Charlton Road, was created to the west of the park.

The earliest surviving plan of the town dates to c1750. However, the first, more accurate, map of Hitchin is dated 1816 and was surveyed by Attfield and Neale for the Hitchin Vestry, and copied by Henry Merett in 1818. It was the first plan of the town which had been prepared using modern surveying techniques and shows the long, thin burgage plots and how development was focused on the one main street (now Bucklersbury, Market Place, High Street and Bancroft) as well as a substantial group of buildings to the east of the church on the Wymondley Road. The large footprint of many of these buildings confirms that they were in industrial uses as well as residential. By this time, Tilehouse Street and Bridge Street formed part of the turnpike road from Welwyn to Bedford, the turnpikes being established between 1726 and 1757. The map also shows that some of the fields around Hitchin were still divided into the strips in the medieval way. In 1808 the Vestry paid for a new bridge to be built across the river in Port Mill Lane. This lane was essentially replaced in 1875 when Hermitage Road was built on a much grander scale to connect Bancroft to Queen Street.



*Historic Map of 1844*



Significant new building did not begin in Hitchin until the early 19th century when development began to be added beyond the town centre, mainly along Hitchin Hill in c1830 but also along Russell's Slip. The Corn Market was held in the High Street until 1852-3 when it is recorded that the market stalls extended into Bancroft. The cattle market was held in Bancroft until 1903 when it moved to a site next to Old Park Road. In 1850 the coming of the Great Northern Railway to Hitchin led to much new development and the layout out of new roads, particularly in the north and east of Hitchin. Several improvements were carried out to the road system in the 1870s and 1880s – firstly, the widening and paving of Nightingale Road, which until 1875 was nothing more than a muddy track; and later, in about 1885, the creation of Hermitage Road to provide a new connection from the town centre to the railway.



*Corn Market*



*Hermitage Road*

Because the fields and agricultural land around Hitchin was never formally enclosed, the strip field system survived well into the 19th century, and when the town expanded (eventually) after the 1850s, the new streets and building plots reflected the medieval layout, particularly the provision of footpaths which are more common in Hitchin than in many other historic settlements. Until World War 1, when the road was improved, Wymondley Road was still a deeply incised rural lane, bounded by the characteristically high banks which marked the ends of the medieval field strips where the plough was turned.

In the 1920s, the Council demolished most of the historic buildings in Queen Street as part of a slum clearance scheme, and created the new lake and promenade, with a new market place, between St Mary's Church and Queen Street. Portmill Lane was downgraded to a service road and The Hermitage was finally developed with rows of smart new shops. Another major change came in the early 1980s, when the new Relief Road was built, cutting through Priory Park but removing most of the through traffic in Tilehouse Street.



## 5 SPATIAL ANALYSIS

### 5.1 Relationship of buildings to spaces

The relationship of buildings to the spaces in the Hitchin Conservation Area is very varied according to the historical development and uses within each part of the conservation area. It changes particularly from the densely built-up areas in the medieval streets in the south and west to the more open late 19th century development in the residential suburb around The Avenue. It also provides examples of purpose-built commercial streets (Hermitage Road) and more open public spaces such as the Market Place, High Street and Bancroft, where the width of the roads reflects the former market functions.

In the south and west, where the streets are narrow (Tilehouse Street, Bridge Street, Bucklersbury and Sun Street), the buildings are mostly listed and sit on the back edge of the pavement. They are almost all two or three storeys high and together provide a complex, closely contained streetscape of great quality. This high quality continues around the Market Place and up High Street into Bancroft, but there is much more open space, so each building can be more individually appreciated. The more hidden churchyard is accessed from the Market Place or High Street by narrow pedestrianised lanes (Churchyard and Munts Alley) which provide pleasant pathways through to the church and to the market and car parks in Queen Street. Here the closely packed urban character of the older part of Hitchin has been lost due to the opening up of this area in the late 1920s, although the civic spaces and promenades which have been provided in their place have some character. There are some historic buildings but they are fragmented and their settings compromised by the widening of the road and the provision of large blocks of new buildings in the 1960s and 1970s. Views back towards St Mary's Church from the public car park, over the 1920s lake, confirm the significance of this building within the town and the major contribution made to the special interest of the conservation area by the church, its graveyard, the many trees as well as the modest but important historic buildings which line the pedestrian links into the Market Place or High Street. Black squirrels are a popular attraction in the churchyard.



*The Market Place looking towards St Mary's Church*



*View up Windmill Hill*

From Queen Street there are also important open views up the hill, over the green open spaces of Windmill Hill, where the trees all but hide the large Girls School which is located beyond the summit of the hill. At this point, the late 19th century suburb, based on The Avenue, has a more leafy, sylvan setting, with large detached or semi-detached houses set in spacious gardens, or grouped together in short terraces. The provision of front gardens and street trees, many of them planted in the late 19th century when the estate was developed, provide a pleasantly suburban quality to this part of Hitchin.

The northern section of Bancroft, where it curves eastwards around Bancroft Recreation Ground, has a mixture of both modern and historic buildings on the western side, including a row of a grade II listed cottages (Nos. 1-4 Nightingale Road) with a distinctive early 19th century red brick front elevation. The only building on the eastern side is the long row of single storey grade II listed 17th century almshouses. At this point, the dense, urban character of the conservation area changes to a more suburban character, due to the varied buildings and the visual effect of the green spaces associated with the park. At the northern tip of the conservation area, around the junction of Nightingale Road and Grove Road and beyond the conservation area boundary, the character changes again with the commencement of long terraces of artisan cottages or houses, developed in the mid to late 19th century after the railway was built.

## **5.2    *Trees and hard and soft landscaped open spaces***

The most significant trees are marked on the individual Townscape Appraisal Maps for each Character Area. Because of the high number of trees, many of which are in private gardens, it has not been possible to record every tree. It should therefore not be assumed that the omission of a tree or tree group means that it is of no importance. All trees with a trunk of 75mm diameter at 1500mm above ground level in the conservation area are automatically protected and notification is required to the District Council to lop, top or fell them.



*Trees make a major contribution to the special character of the conservation area (Hitchin Boys Grammar School)*



*St Mary's Church*

From the north, the principal open spaces in the conservation area are:

#### Bancroft Recreation Ground

Bancroft Recreation Ground lies on the northern edge of the conservation area at the top of Bancroft. Created in the 1920s, it retains the character of a municipal park with a children's play area, bowling green, pavilion and bandstand. There are many mature trees, though not as large or impressive as the trees in Priory Park or Windmill Hill.

#### Windmill Hill

Windmill Hill is a public open space which is notable for the mature woodland around the former quarry (The Dell), used in an informal way for theatrical productions in the past. The open grassy hill provides stunning views across the town to the west and a pathway connects to the Girls School which lies just beyond the summit.

#### St Mary's Church and Churchyard

This area is a notable green open spaces with large trees surrounding the church. To the north, The Garden of Rest is an open grassed area which is enclosed by a brick wall with some mature trees around its edge. This provides important pedestrian routes particularly linking St Mary's Square with the Town Centre.

#### Market Place

The Market Place is Hitchin's primary open space, and is roughly square in shape with streets leading off each corner. It is surrounded by mainly listed buildings apart from the east side where the Churchgate Centre was built in the 1970s, demolishing a number of historic buildings and courts which are shown on the older maps. The Market Place has been resurfaced using traditional setts and a carefully restored cabmen's shelter stands on the northern side.

#### Priory Park

This forms the setting to The Priory Conference Centre and is not normally open to the public. However, there are views into the park from the public footpath which starts in Hitchin Hill and follows the line of the bypass (the A602) around the park to its junction with Old Charlton Road. There is a further, and much larger, section of parkland beyond the bypass, which is not in the conservation area. The park contains a large number of trees, including some important 'specimen' examples dating to the 18th or 19th century. The park also retains remnants of 18th and 19th century landscape features, an icehouse, the listed stables, other outbuildings and a bridge over the River Hiz. The river flows through the park and has been dammed to create a long artificial 'lake' which is visible from the bridge which crosses it close to the main house. The area of the former Kitchen Garden has been developed with large blocks of offices and houses.

### **5.3     *The River Hiz***

The River Hiz flows in an approximately south west to north east direction, and the early settlement used it as a boundary to the burgage plots on the east side of what is now Sun Street, High Street and Bancroft. St Mary's Church is located close to where the old road to Wymondley crossed the river (which is not much more than a stream), probably at a ford. To provide both water and power, over the years the river has been culverted, dammed, and diverted, as well as serving as a general drain to Hitchin, before the provision of a proper drainage system in the 19th century. The Carmelite monastery (now The Priory Conference Centre) was sited to take advantage of the location next to the Hiz, and the



present form of the river dates from c1770 when a fashionable natural-looking lake was formed by the landscape designer Nathaniel Richmond using a dam which was hidden by the now listed flint bridge. A pond still exists next to the entrance to the The Priory. From here the river meanders slightly, passing first The Biggin, another monastic site, then continuing in a culvert to emerge in the lake, created in the late 1920s to the east of St Mary's Church. The river then passes into a culvert below what is left of Portmill Lane, once the location of a large mill, and Hermitage Road. Just to the north of Hermitage Road, the river bends sharply to the north, which is probably the result of medieval intervention to bring the source of water closer to tanneries which were once located on the eastern side of Bancroft (the 1925 Ordnance Survey Map shows two large complexes of buildings facing the river at this point, called Lavender Distillery and the Whinbush Grove Leather Dressing Works). The river then bends back to its original course just outside Sainsbury's. Further north, the river meanders around the eastern boundary of Bancroft Recreation Ground. It then rejoins its original course on the north side of Nightingale Road, before joining the river Purwell at Walsworth. Later, these rivers converge with the river Oughton (which lies to the west of Hitchin) to become the river Ivel. At this point, well outside the town centre, the river has been dammed and diverted to create what were presumably historical mill leats or fish ponds.



*The River Hiz*



*The River Hiz near Bridge Street*

Today the river within Hitchin has in recent years been much improved and walkways provided. Firstly, in Bridge Street where a new development has recently been completed. Secondly, around the back of The Biggin and the adjoining housing development (Jill Grey Place), where the setting of both the new and old buildings has been enhanced by new landscaping, including new trees and a private pathway. Thirdly, around the eastern side of St Mary's Churchyard, where the 1920s improvements included damming the stream to create a lake in front of the church. This lake, with its ducks and swans, provides one of the defining images of Hitchin for the visitor arriving at the adjoining car park. Fourthly, as part of the new Sainsburys Supermarket car park and the adjoining residential development in Whinbush Road, where the river has again been 'tidied up' and new walkways and planting provided. This is the section of the river which was diverted in the medieval period. The provision of a riverside walk through the whole of Hitchin is a long term goal, which is in part set out in the River Hiz Development Brief, published in 1995. This includes the provision of a riverside walk from Bridge Street to Hermitage Road and beyond to Sainsbury's and residential development across the river.



## 6 THE BUILDINGS

### 6.1 Listed buildings

There are about 300 listed buildings in the Hitchin Conservation Area, of which two are listed grade I (St Mary's Church and The Priory) and there are eleven grade II\* listed entries on the register. The remainder are listed grade II. These buildings are all marked on the Townscape Appraisal Maps for each Character Area.

A listed building is one that is included on the Government's *Statutory List of Buildings of Special Architectural or Historic Interest*, published in the case of Hitchin in c1947 and reviewed and republished in 1974. Some buildings were listed before this date and some have been added since, or existing listed buildings upgraded. These buildings are protected by law and Listed Building Consent is required from North Hertfordshire District Council before any works of alteration, extension or demolition affecting their special character can be carried out.

### 6.2 Buildings of Local Interest

North Hertfordshire District Council currently maintains a *Register of Buildings of Local Interest* (BLIs), more commonly referred to as 'locally listed' buildings, many of which lie within the Hitchin Conservation Area. This was first compiled between 1997 and 1998. Some of the buildings date to the late 19th or early 20th century and are interesting examples of local vernacular styles or materials. They may also have particular significance for their association with local people or a local historical event, or have social or political significance. Examples include the imposing 1908 Hitchin Girls' School on Windmill Hill, as well as the more modest row of late 19th century shops which face Arcade Walk off the Market Place. The criteria for selecting BLIs is given in the *Register*.



*Hitchin Girls' Grammar School (BLI)*



*Arcade Walk (BLI)*

In conjunction with a review of Hitchin Conservation Area and with the assistance of the Hitchin Historical Society, the District Council has reviewed the existing Register of Buildings of Local Interest (BLI's). A total of 96 buildings are now included in the Register. There is presumption that all locally listed buildings will be retained, and the District Council will also assess applications for alterations or extensions to such buildings particularly carefully.

### **6.3     *Positive buildings***

A number of unlisted buildings in the Hitchin Conservation Area have been identified as being 'positive' buildings and these are marked on the Townscape Appraisal Maps for each Character Area, along with the listed and locally listed buildings.

The criteria for the selection of 'positive' buildings is that they are buildings of townscape merit which are considered to make a positive contribution to the character and appearance of the conservation area. Commonly they will be good examples of relatively unaltered historic buildings where their style, detailing and building materials provide the streetscape with interest and variety. Most importantly, 'positive' buildings contribute to the special interest of the conservation area, often forming notable groups which help to define the streetscape within the conservation area.

Hitchin Conservation Area is a Designated Heritage Asset with regard to PPS5 : Planning for the Historic Environment. Most importantly, both BLIs and 'positive' buildings contribute to the special interest of the conservation area and both categories of building are themselves regarded as Non-designated Heritage Assets. Policies HE2, HE7, HE8 and HE9 of PPS5 are of particular relevance as are paragraphs 15 and 83 of the accompanying English Heritage Practice Guide.

## **7 CHARACTER AREAS**

The Hitchin Conservation Area has been divided into seven Character Areas according to each area's historical development, the layout and appearance of the streets, open spaces and buildings, and the various uses and activities within each area. These are as follows:

Character Area 1: Bancroft north and Bancroft Recreation Ground

Character Area 2: The Town Centre

- Character Area 2a: High Street, Bancroft south and Brand Street
- Character Area 2b: St Mary's Church
- Character Area 2c: The Market Place, Bridge Street, Tilehouse Street and Upper Tilehouse Street

Character Area 3: Queen Street and Hermitage Road

Character Area 4: Windmill Hill and Walsworth Road

Character Area 5: The Avenue, Highbury Road, Wymondley Road, Chiltern Road and The Chilterns

Character Area 6: Benslow Lane, Trevor Road and part of Radcliffe Road and Verulam Road

Character Area 7: Priory Park and Hitchin Hill

### **7.1 Character Area 1: Bancroft north and Bancroft Recreation Ground**

#### General description

This part of the conservation area contains the continuation of the possibly Saxon road out of the former market place to the north, and is bounded on its eastern side by the River Hiz. It is less intensively developed than the town centre, with a high proportion of 20th century development. Historic maps confirm that in the 19th century the site of the Recreation Ground was osier beds and nurseries, diagonally crossed by a path known as 'Gas Path' which led to the Gas Works at Starling Bridge, where the River Hiz flows under Nightingale Road. Whilst this area now has a more formal managed character it nonetheless remains an important open green space in this part of the town.

The land was purchased in 1924, when the Council was also beginning work on the Queen Street area. Today the Recreation Ground provides a children's play area, tennis courts and a bowling club, all well used and supported. The pavilion, clubhouse, circular bandstand and boundary wall, gates and gatepiers are all considered to be buildings/structures of local interest. Of special interest is the Recreation Ground boundary wall which is constructed using Hitchin iron slag. Similar walls can be seen facing Hollow Lane, in Walsworth Road and facing Hitchin Hill.



*Bancroft Recreation Ground*



*Skyenner's Almshouses*

In this part of Bancroft (north), some significant historic buildings remain, most notably the 17th century Skyenner's Almshouses (nos. 68 - 83 consec.) which comprise two brick-built single storey ranges dated 1670 and 1698. These are listed grade II and sit back slightly from the road behind a contemporary brick wall which is broken in two places by entrance arches containing a sunken stone panel commemorating the charitable gift. Nos. 1-4 Nightingale Road (Frythe Cottages) are a terrace of grade II listed, red brick fronted houses with a steeply pitched tiled roof and Gothic front doors with leaded light casement windows. They are important in views northwards along Bancroft. The Roman Catholic Church, a locally listed building, is another historic building of merit. Otherwise there are a number of modern buildings of no special interest in commercial uses on the western side of the road.

Positive features:

- Attractive recreation ground with popular facilities;
- Spacious layout with long views along the street;
- A small number of historic buildings of which the 17th century Skyenners Almshouses are the most important.

Important views:

- View 1: View southwards down Bancroft taking in the grade II listed Skyenners Almshouses, with their front boundary wall and entrance gates;
- View 2: View past nos. 1-4 consec. Nightingale Road (listed grade II) towards the junction with Grove Road, marked by the locally listed Roman Catholic Church of Our Lady and St Andrew;
- View 3: View into Bancroft Recreation Ground, taking in the bandstand, trees and pavilion beyond;
- View 4: View into Bancroft Recreation Ground, taking in the bandstand, trees and the children's play area beyond.





*Nos. 1 - 4, Nightingale Road (listed)*



*Bandstand in the Recreation Ground (BLI)*

Negative features:

- The poor condition of the Recreation Ground including seating and litter bins;
- The Bancroft Recreation Ground toilets are closed;
- Modern buildings of little merit, often in poor condition, in the Recreation Ground;
- The Bowling Clubhouse is in need of some refurbishment;
- The poor condition of the front boundary wall to Skynner's Almshouses;
- Some poorly detailed 20th century development, such as Regal Chambers, along the west side of the road;
- The poor quality commercial and residential buildings between The Victoria and The Phoenix public houses on the west side of Bancroft;
- Vacant commercial premises.

Opportunities for enhancement:

- Bancroft Recreation Ground – improvements/repairs needed to the bandstand, Bowling Clubhouse, the 1970s pavilion, and street furniture (litter bins, public seating, lighting);
- The general standard of maintenance of the pathways, grass and planting in the Recreation Ground needs to be improved;
- The reinstatement of railings on Recreation Ground boundary wall;
- The Bancroft Recreation Ground toilets are not DDA compliant and the District Council decided to close the toilets in 2007. Other facilities in The Arcade and in Hitchin Market Place have been refurbished and are DDA compliant. With no provision for the servicing of this building, consideration could be given to either an alternative use or maybe even demolition.

## **7.2 Character Area 2: The Town Centre**

This Character Area covers the historic town centre from Bancroft in the north to Tilehouse Street/Bridge Street in the south. It is focused on the Market Place and St Mary's Church and its churchyard, and is notable for the high concentration of listed or locally listed buildings. Of interest is the survival of the medieval (or earlier) street plan and burgage plots which provides the long thin building plots and associated buildings which help to define the special character of this part of Hitchin. It has been divided up into three sub-Character Areas as follows:

- Character Area 2a: High Street, Bancroft south and Brand Street;
- Character Area 2b: St Mary's Church;
- Character Area 2c: The Market Place, Bridge Street, Tilehouse Street and Upper Tilehouse Street.

### ***Character Area 2a: High Street, Bancroft south and Brand Street***

#### General description

This Character Area once formed part of the large market place to the west of St Mary's Church which was gradually encroached over, so that now the church is no longer visible from the High Street or from Bancroft, described by the architectural historian Sir Nicholas Pevsner as one of the best streets in of Hertfordshire. The street is wide and between Market Place and the junction with Brand Street, where High Street becomes Bancroft, has been subject to an environmental improvement scheme which provided a partially pedestrianised street. The uses are all commercial with residential uses above some of the shops. This is the major shopping area of Hitchin with national chains being represented. On-street short stay car parking is a useful shoppers' facility, but does encourage circulating traffic looking for free parking – this can lead to pedestrian and vehicular conflict. These issues were identified by stakeholders in relation to the Hitchin Urban Transport Plan that has been endorsed by Hertfordshire County Council's Highways and Transport Cabinet Panel.



*View along the High Street*



*Bancroft*

The buildings all sit on the back of the pavement without any front gardens or yards, creating continuous frontages. Virtually all of the buildings are either listed, locally listed, or considered to be 'positive' apart from a range of 1960s development on the south east side of Bancroft, and the Wilkinson Store at no. 18 Bancroft. Of note are the 1920s 'Tudorbethan' shops which turn the corner into Hermitage Road, such as nos.1-5 which are locally listed.

Of the listed buildings, many are very early (15th to 17th century) with high quality Georgian or Victorian brick facades. However, many also retain their exposed timber frame frontages, usually with gable facing the street. Together, these buildings provide a lively and varied streetscape only slightly marred by the modern shopfronts which can be seen on many of the ground floors of these buildings. Occasionally, a really good doorcase, such as no. 21A Bancroft, adds further interest. Most of the buildings are two or three storeys high, but the roofs are extremely varied, sometimes with steep pitches facing the street, sometimes with shallower slated roofs concealed by front parapets. Pevsner referred to Bancroft as being "...one of the best streets of Herts...."

Brand Street leads off High Street and represents a 19th century widening of a former alleyway. It has more mixed development than the other two streets, and has suffered from a greater degree of modern infilling or redevelopment. The western end of the street is dominated by Hitchin Town Hall, built in 1900 and grade II listed. To the north-west is the former Friends Meeting House (grade II listed and now known as Centenary House) and located almost opposite the Town Hall on the south side of Brand Street, is the former Town Hall of 1840 (now 'Ivory'), which is also grade II listed and provides a rare example in the town centre of a substantial, stuccoed building. The corner into Paynes Park is marked by an unfortunate red brick block of offices, four storeys high and dating to the 1970s or 1980s. Beyond the current Friends Meeting House (a BLI) and to the west, is Thomas Bellamy House, an early to mid 19th century yellow brick grade II listed building marking the entrance into the conservation area from this direction.



*Hitchin Town Hall, Brand Street*



*Thomas Bellamy House*



Positive features:

- Survival of historic street layout, representing the location of the former livestock market;
- Almost continuous frontages of high quality listed buildings, some of them listed grade II\* (nos. 26/27 and nos. 105/106 Bancroft);
- Former carriage entrances provide access to courts behind the frontage buildings;
- Not every building has a shopfront, reinforcing the residential character of parts of the area;
- Mixture of timber framed more vernacular buildings and high quality red or yellow brick Georgian townhouses;
- Pitched tiled roofs and chimneys important;
- Pleasantly domestic scale;
- Principle shopping street in the town, well served by on-street car parking and adjoining surface car parks;
- Traditional (though modern) stone paving and other features relating to the 1990s enhancement scheme.

Important views:

- View 1: Southwards down Bancroft, taking in the widening street (once the site of the Livestock Market) and the rows of varied listed buildings on either side of the street;
- View 2: View northwards along Bancroft, similarly focusing on the gently curving street, widening roadway, and rows of listed buildings on either side;
- View 3: View in a westerly direction up Brand Street, taking in the listed Old Town Hall on the left with longer views to the trees around the modern Quaker Meeting House;
- View 4: Southwards down High Street, noting the narrowing of the road towards the Market Place, the street being lined with varied buildings, most of them either listed or 'historic';
- View 5: View in an easterly direction towards Brand Street taking in the grade II listed later Hitchin Town Hall on the left.

Negative features:

- Some pedestrian and vehicular conflict;
- Some 1960s or 1970s development of little merit, particularly in Brand Street, including no. 19 ('New Look' and 'Argos') and no. 20/21 ('Halfords') Brand Street;
- New development has impinged on backlands including the loss of gardens and courts, most notably facing Grammar School Walk, such as Croft Court and the back section of Wilkinson, no. 19 Bancroft;
- Public realm is 'tired' with a certain amount of street clutter;
- Vacant shops;
- Munts Alley is affected by poor quality alterations to some of the buildings.

### Opportunities for enhancement:

- Public realm improvements needed – ‘refresh’ the 1990s scheme in High Street.

### ***Character Area 2b: St Mary’s Church***

#### General description

This area comprises St Mary’s Church and its churchyard, the Garden of Rest, and the other pedestrianised alleys around the church – Munts Alley, Churchyard and Churchyard Walk.



*St Mary’s Church*



*Warner’s Almshouses*

St Mary’s Church dates from the 12th century but largely 14th and 15th century. It probably sits on the site of a previous Saxon building and is listed grade I. The building uses Roman brick and tiles, sandstone, clunch and flint in its construction and is surrounded by its churchyard on all four sides, with mature trees and pleasant pathways. The building probably originally faced its market place but encroachments of the medieval period (to create what is now Munts Alley and Churchyard) now provide it with a more intimate setting. The buildings which face the church are generally attractive historic buildings and include some timber-framed structures with probably 18th or 19th century fronts. Turning towards the Market Place however, nos. 8-12 (consec.) are listed grade II\*, being the surviving western range of a complex of courts which were demolished to make way for Churchyard Shopping Centre in the early 1970s. Whilst built from concrete and using generally unsympathetic details, the flank wall of the Churchgate Centre does at least try and reflect the scale of the historical form of development. Whilst acknowledging its positive community function, improvements to Church House or indeed its redevelopment would potentially improve the appearance of the conservation area and the setting of St Mary’s Church. Conversely, Warners Almshouses, a modest locally listed brick building completed in 1893, lies to the south east of and makes a positive contribution to the setting the church.

The River Hiz is a significant aspect of the church's setting and even on non-market days people are drawn to this attractive riverside environment, the tranquil character enhanced by the weeping willows, the large lawn between the church and the river, the bird life on the river, and the black squirrels in the churchyard.

Positive features:

- Grade I listed church with large churchyard;
- Peaceful and well used pedestrian-only area;
- Some surviving historic shopfronts, such as 'Something Sparkles', no. 8 Churchyard and the 1930s shopfront to Oxfam, no. 2 Churchyard;
- War Memorial faces the alleyway to the Market Place;
- Edge of St Mary's Square, built in the late 1920s;
- The River Hiz has been dammed to create an attractive lake.



*View across churchyard to Munts Alley*



*View from the churchyard towards the Market Place*

Important views:

- View 1: From the public car park facing St Mary's Square, over the lake and fountain towards the east elevation of St Mary's Church – one of the defining views of Hitchin;
- View 2: On emerging from Munts Alley, a narrow pathway from Bancroft, a pretty view of the church and churchyard, with the many mature trees and grass-covered churchyard;
- View 3: On approaching the church and churchyard from the Market Place, where pedestrians have priority and the War Memorial and grade I listed St Mary's Church dominate the view.



### Negative features:

- Poor condition of public realm generally, including the 1920s boundary walls to the Garden of Rest;
- Use of concrete paviors and other modern materials;
- Some of the buildings in Churchyard would benefit from minor enhancements;
- Short block of 1960s or 1970s development of indifferent quality along Munts Alley, which connects Churchyard to the High Street;
- Proximity of Churchgate – poor quality 1970s development with some poor quality shopfronts and considered to be an improvement opportunity;
- Night time security issue.

### Enhancement opportunities:

- Resurface Munts Alley, Churchyard, and Churchyard Walk;
- Provide improved street lighting;
- Encourage the sensitive redevelopment of Church House;
- The Garden of Rest, including improvements to the boundary wall and better public seating and lighting.

### ***Character Area 2c: The Market Place, Bridge Street, Tilehouse Street and Upper Tilehouse Street***

This part of Hitchin retains the highest concentration of listed buildings which create virtually continuous frontages along each of the main streets – Tilehouse Street, Bridge Street, Bucklersbury, Sun Street and the Market Place, which provides the central focus of the area. Although the western section of Tilehouse Street would appear to be a late medieval addition to the town (the first mention of 'Tylehousestret' is in the Court of Rolls of 1460), the other streets were created earlier and encompass what may have been the Saxon market place. The buildings between Bucklersbury and Sun Street represent medieval encroachment onto this market place. Excavations have revealed the remains of Saxon defenses to the west of Bucklersbury. Bridge Street would appear to mark the site of an early ford over the River Hiz and may have Roman origins.



*Sun Street*



*Bridge Street*

Nearly all of the buildings within this part of Hitchin are either listed or have been assessed as being 'positive'. The narrow but deep plots, most notably on the west side of Bucklersbury, reflect the layout of the medieval burgage plots and create many courts and back alleys. These are accessed by carriage openings in the front facades which provide the only 'breaks' in the continuous lines of buildings. Nos. 9 and 10 Tilehouse Street (with no.8 are grade II listed) are unusual in that they are set back about two metres from the pavement with small front gardens. Similarly, nos.30 and 30a Bridge Street (grade II listed) are set back from the back edge of pavement, otherwise, the buildings are mainly located on the back edge of pavements.

The buildings date to between the 14th and the 16th centuries, although many have been refronted in red brick, concealing the early timber framing behind. Most of these buildings have a domestic scale, being generally two storeys high, although these are interspersed with the occasional taller building. This is more noticeable around the Market Place which retains a higher number of 'prestigious' buildings, such as the mid-19th century Corn Exchange, which take advantage of the open space and are generally three storeys high. Most of these buildings are in commercial uses with ground floor shops.



*Bucklersbury*



*Cromwells in Sun Street*

There are a number of public houses or small hotels, particularly in Bucklersbury and Sun Street. The Sun Hotel dates to c1700 and is built using blue brick with red brick dressings and retains its original external wooden shutters. No. 5 Sun Street (grade II listed) was built in c1760 as a house and retains a high quality Georgian façade and internal details of the same period. Part of the land between the rear of these buildings and the River Hiz is a public car park that allow views of the rear of The Sun Hotel (grade II\* listed) but makes no positive contribution to the character and appearance of the conservation area. This car park is therefore considered to be an improvement opportunity.

When compared with other uses in the vicinity, the motorbike shop in Bucklersbury is rather incongruous and the building makes no positive contribution to the appearance of the area, however, the use provides an active frontage contributing to the vitality of the street. By contrast, the western end of Tilehouse Street is almost entirely in residential uses, the amenity of these buildings being assisted by the closing of the road to through traffic in the 1980s. Here, nos. 78 and 85 retain attractive late 19th century shopfronts.

Where Parkway intersects Tilehouse Street, a small garden has been created. This was opened in September 1952 as the Hitchin Urban District Council memorial to the well known Hitchin historian R L Hine and is therefore known as the Hine Memorial Garden. The Garden is on the site of the former Free School and is enclosed by a large ornamented red brick wall on the east side, and includes a stone and bronze plaque to R L Hine. Original and replica benefactor plaques also exist, however, the original curved benches are now missing. Western House (grade II\* listed) stands opposite The Garden and is listed grade II\*. It has a blue plaque on the front elevation which reads "George Chapman – poet, playwright and translator lived here 1559-1634". There is a distinct sense of quiet and stillness in Tilehouse Street which contrasts quite markedly with that of Upper Tilehouse Street on the opposite side of Parkway. Many of these listed buildings once had long back gardens which have incrementally been lost to development, for example on the south side of Tilehouse Street, where Wratten Road East provides access to new buildings.



*Baptist Chapel, Upper Tilehouse Street*



*Hitchin Museum*

The building of the Relief Road in 1981 has impacted upon Upper Tilehouse Street and Nun's Close. However, they are historically linked with the town centre and despite the large roundabout and other road improvements, the area retains a high concentration of listed and 'positive' buildings, as well as some green open spaces and a more rural quality than the town centre.

Of note are the listed buildings which are in residential use (nos. 41, 42 and 43), as well as the Baptist Chapel, built in 1838 in a neo-classical style, and its separately listed gateway. A pleasant churchyard with historic headstones lies behind the building. Around the chapel, and continuing down Wratten Road West, is an old wall, possibly built as part of the late 17th century chapel which was demolished to make way for the present chapel. The wall is curtilage-listed and makes a positive contribution to the appearance of the conservation area. In front of the chapel, facing Upper Tilehouse Street, a 20th century church hall is considered to be 'positive'. Other listed buildings include The Highlander Public House (17th century) and the Museum. Facing the chapel, paired early 20th century houses with gabled elevations are built from red brick with slate roofs. Set back from the road, some of these houses have lost their front gardens to car parking.

A narrow alleyway (Russells Slip), in part marked by the historic wall mentioned earlier, leads off the main road to a much quieter backwater along Wratten Road West. This contains a row of terraced houses (nos. 20-29) built from red brick with yellow brick dressings. Next door, no. 30 is an early 19th century cottage which retains its original sashed windows. All of these are unlisted and make a positive contribution to the appearance of the conservation area. Mature trees along The Limes add to the ambiance of the area.



This Character Area also includes Hitchin Museum, a grade II listed building with a notable 1960s extension that is Hitchin Library. The Physic Garden to the east of the museum together with the grassed area to the south, form an Important open green space as indicated on the Character Area map. Although there has been some recent large scale development to the north of Tilehouse Street and accessed off Paynes Park, this development (Brookers and McCarthy and Stone) provides an important linkage between Market Place and the grade II listed Hitchin Museum and attached modern library.

Positive features:

- Survival of medieval (or earlier) street layout and burgage plots, with long, thin gardens or courts behind the frontage buildings;
- Domestic scale of most of the historic buildings, apart from around the Market Place;
- Arcade Walk, one such courtyard, now a long thin range of small shops which connects through to the public car park off Paynes Park;
- Connections from Sun Street through the courtyard to the Sun Hotel to the public car park in Biggin Lane;
- High concentration of listed buildings, the most important ones being listed grade II\* as follows:
  - No. 35 and 81/82 Tilehouse Street, no. 81 being 15th century and possibly the former Tylers Guildhall;
  - Nos. 29 (Red Lion Hotel) and nos. 33/34 Bucklersbury – 16th century timber framed inns with back courts;
  - No.4 (The Sun Hotel), Sun Street;
  - No.32 Bridge Street – a 15th or 16th century range of timber-framed buildings with jettied first floor facing the street;



*16th Century timber-framed building with back court (Bucklersbury)*



*Listed buildings in Tilehouse Street*

- Lively mixture of red or yellow brick, timber framing, red clay tiles and slate;
- Very varied roof lines and building forms, united by a common domestic scale and a unified building line which follows the back of the pavements;
- Timber framed houses often have gables to the street, providing a sense of liveliness to the facades;
- Tilehouse Street retains some high quality houses, all listed e.g. no. 13, with its moulded brick façade; no. 84, a three storey Georgian house with a slightly later extra floor; no. 88, a symmetrical stuccoed house with original iron balconies to the first floor; and no. 89, which has a modest shopfront on one side;
- The survival of a number of historic shopfronts – some of the shops also have traditional hanging signs at first floor level;
- The Market Place is the centre of Hitchin and provides a popular shopping area, surrounded on three sides by historic buildings, many of them listed, of which the Corn Exchange of 1853, with its leaded ogee roofed cupola, is marginally the most dominant (grade II);
- The Market Place has been resurfaced in the early 1990s using stone setts of various sizes and is complemented by the cast iron bollards, signage and lighting, all painted blue and gold;
- The old 'Freeman Hardy & Willis' sign on no. 29 Market Place;
- Some of the earlier buildings have pargetting (textured plasterwork) on their front elevations e.g. The Cooper's Arms, no. 81 Tilehouse Street (II\*);
- The occasional use of clay tile hanging (no. 27 Tilehouse Street) or black painted weather boarding (nos. 90-92 Tilehouse Street);
- Otherwise, much white painted traditional render, contrasting with the deep red brick and red handmade clay roof tiles;
- A large number of well detailed Georgian doorcases with decorative leaded fanlights;
- Traditional street lights, often fixed to the buildings directly;
- Traditional high quality stone paving in much of this Character Area, with Tegula concrete paviors for the roadway in Bucklersbury – otherwise tarmacadam;
- Survival of historic paving in the carriage entrance to the George Inn;
- Some green open space and a pond at the entrance to The Priory Conference centre;
- Close by, the River Hiz provides a break in development where it passes under Bridge Street, next to a small pond which is associated with The Priory;
- Narrow view up the course of the River Hiz to The Priory.

Important views:

- View 1: Four views into and across the open Market Place, taking in the mainly listed, locally listed or historic buildings which surround the space;
- View 2: View southwards along Sun Street, taking in the gently curving road with its listed buildings on either side including the grade II\* listed Sun Hotel with its Georgian façade; similar view northwards from the junction with Bridge Street, taking in the historic shopfronts and the many restaurants and cafes;
- View 3: View southwards from the Market Place along the narrow Bucklersbury, a slightly less prestigious street than Sun Street; similar view northwards from the junction with Tilehouse Street, taking in the many public houses with their long thin courtyards behind them;
- View 4: View along Tilehouse Street, taking in the slight change in level and the gently bending street, lined with mainly listed buildings on either side;
- View 5: Along Bridge Street towards the busy junction with Queen Street and Park Street, taking in the timber-framed buildings on either side of the street and the bridge over the River Hiz;
- View 6: View northwards along the River Hiz, taking in the new riverside walk – there is also a minor, very ‘glimpsed’ view of The Priory on the opposite side of the road;
- View 7: View of the entrance to The Priory from Tilehouse Street taking in the pond, trees, and, in the distance, the grade I listed buildings, which turn away from the public highway and which face southwards towards the park.



*View across the Market Place*



*View along Bridge Street*

Negative features:

- Backland development which does not wholly respect the scale of the domestic character of the listed buildings, most notably the new development between the Market Place and Payne's Park on the site of the former builder's yard (Brookers and McCarthy and Stone);
- Views from Bucklersbury through the back court of the Red Hart Hotel to some of this modern development;



- 1990s paving scheme in the Market Place needs attention;
- Poor quality shopfronts and garish signage or colours (examples)
- Whilst acceptable in scale and siting, no.14 Bridge Street is weak architecturally. The neighbouring three-storey building turns the corner into Queen Street and adversely affects the conservation area;
- Poor quality modern development and open space, losing the traditional sense of enclosure, around Midland House in Wratten Road East (this occupies the site of a former maltings which was demolished in the 1960s).

#### Opportunities for enhancement:

- Churchgate Shopping Centre should be redeveloped in its entirety in the longer term and if possible, enhanced in the short term;
- Public realm and paving in the Market Place needs attention;
- The former garage (no. 22 Bridge Street)
- The space at the end of Tilehouse Street next to Park Way.

### **7.3 Character Area 3: Queen Street and Hermitage Road**

Queen Street, which runs parallel to the River Hiz, was once called Dead Street and Back Street, the name being changed in the 19th century. This was originally a densely developed area with buildings and back courts to match those in the western part of the town. Degenerating into slums, of which Chapman's, Seymour's and Thorpe's Yards were the most notorious, nearly all were demolished by the Council in the 1920s to make way for St Mary's Square, a new lake and, at a time when car use was beginning to grow, for new public car parks. At the same time, Portmill Lane was downgraded into an access road for new shops along Hermitage Road.

Although Hermitage Road was created in the 1870s it was not developed with buildings until the 1920s and is a fine example of an Inter-war shopping parade contributing positively to the architectural and visual quality of the street. The mock Tudor buildings at each end on the north side of Hermitage Road provide focal points. Medieval glass panels form a window of some interest above the entrance to no.112 Bancroft at the western end of Hermitage Road. At the east end of Hermitage Road and on the south side, a building successfully addresses this prominent corner and provides a focal point. The Inter-war ranges on both sides of the road are regarded as Buildings of Local Interest.



*St Mary's Square*



*Hermitage Road*

Although St Mary's Square was completed by 1930, the adjoining land was left in a neglected state for some time, including being used to provide air raid shelters during World War II. In 1973 the market moved from St Mary's Square to its present location next to the Churchgate Shopping Centre development, provided a slightly more attractive environment.

As stated in the Hitchin Town Centre Strategy 2004, Hitchin Market is "...important to the town's character and economic success...The market operates three days a week and is an important visitor attraction for the town...The market is an important retail asset..." (p.20). Whilst this may be the case, when not operating and particularly at night time, the market area to the north of Biggin Lane takes on a less inviting character.

Further south, there are three individual or groups of notable historic buildings. The Biggin is a grade II\* listed 17th century timber framed almshouse which is still in use as such. It marks the site of the mid-14th century building, built for the Gilbertine order of canons. The recent development of new housing in Jill Grey Place provides a relatively attractive setting to this stretch of the River Hiz albeit the materials used are slightly disappointing. Along Queen Street, nos. 66, 67 and 68 date to c1875 and are grade II listed. They are notable for their somewhat quirky details, with terracotta panels in their yellow brick elevations, and a corner entrance porch, supported on a single Doric column.

Almost opposite these are a particularly fine group of historic buildings made up from no. 40 - an early to mid 19th century stuccoed villa (grade II listed), the Bethel Chapel of 1869 (a Building of Local Interest), and the British Schools of 1857/8 (the frontage buildings which are grade II listed). Part of this complex has now become a national museum of education. The schools were founded in 1810 but the oldest surviving building is the unique Lancasterian school room built in 1837 to facilitate the monitorial teaching system. Further buildings were added in 1857/8. The significance of the site was realised by local historian Jill Grey in the 1970s, and the development of new houses on the opposite side of the road is named in her memory. Other buildings of note include the locally listed Bethel Chapel, built c1869-70, and an example of a simple Particular Baptist chapel building representing an important element of Hitchin Non-Conformity. Next door, nos. 37 and 38 Queen Street are a symmetrical pair of late 19th century cottages. Once known as West View and Titmore Cottage, they were built by George Edward and Walter Jeeves, whose father George Jeeves who was responsible for the building of nos. 66, 67 and 68 Queen Street in 1875 (now listed) on the opposite side of the road.



*The former British School, Queen Street*



*The Bethel Chapel, Queen Street*

This Character Area also includes a number of late 19th century 'positive' paired cottages in Storehouse Lane, an unadopted track of some significance as it once formed the back boundary to historic properties which before the 1920s had fronted Queen Street. These are built from red brick with sashed windows and panelled front doors. Nos. 1, 2, 3 and 4 Nursery Villas are the best preserved.

Otherwise, the historic character of Queen Street has been eroded by areas of 1960s housing and other buildings on the east side and whilst these lie outside the conservation area, they still have a major impact on the setting of the area.

#### Positive characteristics:

- A number of important listed buildings survive, particularly, The Biggin (grade II\*) and the British Schools buildings (partly grade II\* and partly grade II);
- Nos. 7 and 9 Portmill Lane are red brick Georgian houses listed grade II;
- St Mary's Square and the adjoining lake provide an attractive 'entrance' to the town centre for visitors using the public car park;
- Attractive views along the river next to The Biggin, and most notably, up Windmill Hill from both Queen Street and Hermitage Road;
- Cohesive 1920s buildings along the north side and the south east side of Hermitage Road, most locally listed.

#### Important views:

- View 1: Northwards along Queen Street taking in the British School complex on the right;
- View 2: From Queen Street, looking westwards down Biggin Lane towards the grade II\* listed almshouses, with the mature trees which lie close by;
- View 3: The defining view of St Mary's Church from St Mary's Square, over the lake and fountain;
- View 4: Westwards along Hermitage Road, taking in the locally listed 1920s shops and flats on the north side of the road;
- View 5: Eastwards up the steep slope of Windmill Hill, with its green open space and many mature trees;
- View 6: Eastwards along Hermitage Road, a busy shopping street, taking in the green backdrop of Windmill Hill beyond.

#### Negative features:

- A large number of modern buildings on the edge but outside of the conservation area of no merit, such as the Telephone Exchange, Cannon House and Woodcote House, often out of scale with the surrounding historic streetscape;
- Other poorly designed modern buildings within the conservation area, such as Portmill House and Netto;



- The back elevations of the Churchgate Shopping Centre and its service yards,
- 1960s development in Hermitage Road;
- Large areas of surface car parking;
- Poor quality pavements and other public realm details;
- Modern shopfronts in Hermitage Road;
- The rear elevation of the Post Office site facing Portmill Lane.

Opportunities for enhancement:

- Large areas of surface car parking, Asda site and the Royal Mail Sorting Office all identified as areas for improvement opportunities;
- The area around St Mary's Square including the pathways through the adjoining Garden of Rest need to be enhanced;
- The public seating area next to The Biggin would also benefit from improvements.

**7.4 Character Area 4: Windmill Hill and Walsworth Road**

The open space now dominated by Hitchin Girls' School was once the location of a windmill owned by James Hack Tuke, which caught fire in 1875 and was completely destroyed. In the early part of the 19th century the area was known as Rawlings Hill, after a previous owner of the windmill. Later in the 19th century, the land was purchased by Frederic Seebohm, the Quaker banker, who lived down the hill in the Hermitage, facing onto Bancroft. A water reservoir was built to serve the town in 1853, the water being pumped by a steam engine from the old waterworks building in Queen Street. Seebohm was a great benefactor to the town and gave, firstly, land at the Hermitage to create a new road (Hermitage Road) in 1875, and, secondly, land at Windmill Hill as far as Hollow Lane, to create a public park and as a site for the new Girls' Grammar School, opened in 1908. Seebohm's two daughters, Esther and Hilda, gave the rest of the hill to the town in 1921. The Windmill Hill water tower and reservoir was completed in 1909 by the Urban District Council.



*Windmill Hill*



*The Dell*

Today, Windmill Hill retains an informal layout with open grassed areas defined on the north side by dense woodland. Known as 'The Dell' the woodland area was originally 'Rollins' then 'Rawlings Dell' and was created through sand and gravel extraction. Once part of the Lordship of the Manor of Hitchin, The Dell passed to the Seebom family and later (1928) became part of the estate of the Revd George Bernard Gainsford. In 1939 it was conveyed, along with the Woodside Car Park, to Hitchin Urban District Council by the Trustees of Gainsford's wife, Elizabeth Constance, as a bird sanctuary in memory of her late husband. In 1951 the natural amphitheatre created by quarrying was used to advantage and The Dell was turned into an open air theatre. It was subsequently used as part of the Festival of Britain celebrations. Later, its use declined and the site became neglected and vandalised, being closed in 1994 for reasons of public safety by the current owners, North Hertfordshire District Council.

Working with the District Council, Groundwork Hertfordshire, and local volunteers, the Countryside Management Service implemented improvements to the site and in October 1995 'The Dell' was re-opened. In 1999 an interpretation board for the site was unveiled to provide information about the site. More recently, open air performances have ceased and the earth banks and theatre structures have been damaged by young people using BMX-type bicycles in the area.



*Baptist Chapel, Walsworth Road (BLI)*



*Substantial villas in Walsworth Road*

The pronounced topography of Windmill Hill provides exceptional views across Hitchin and during weekday lunch hours, weekends or at evenings, when the weather is fine, the Hill attracts significant numbers of young people who congregate and socialise in small groups, although other users of 'the hill' are also in evidence. As a popular and well used local facility, Windmill Hill is therefore as much a defining characteristic of Hitchin as the Market Place and the historic area around the church.

A 19th century lodge and separate chapel (formerly part of the Caldicott site) are located on the west side of Highbury Road in wooded grounds. The chapel is locally listed and is a residential conversion.

At the southern end of Highbury Road at the top of the road looking north-west is the far more visible Hitchin Girls' School, a substantial red brick building with modern extensions. On the opposite side of Highbury Road, the North Hertfordshire Music School is housed principally in Highbury House, a villa built in 1874-77 for Charles Willes Wilshire and later the home of Benjamin Seebom. This structure is included on the local list. Two ancillary 19th century buildings make a further positive contribution to the conservation area.

To the north west of this Character Area is the historic route of Walsworth Road which retains a number of fine, mid to late 19th century villas, two of them (nos. 4 and 5) being locally listed. The Queen Mother Theatre and long stay car park are accessed on the south side of Walsworth Road whilst two locally listed buildings: the Baptist Church (1875) and the adjoining church hall (1914) mark the junction with Verulam Road and Benslow Lane to the north-east.

Positive features:

- Attractive elevated open green spaces with mature woodland along the northern boundary of Windmill Hill;
- Cast iron bollards at the top of the path;
- Stunning views across Hitchin further up the hill;
- Hitchin Girls' School is a substantial Queen Anne Revival building which is locally listed;
- Walsworth Road retains a number of large Victorian villas, whose setting is enhanced by the many large trees;
- A notable cluster of positive unlisted buildings and locally listed buildings in Verulam Road and Radcliffe Road.

Important views:

- View 1: From outside Hitchin Girls' School, looking across the summit of Windmill Hill towards Hitchin;
- View 2 and View 3: From Windmill Hill, taking in the town of Hitchin below and the wooded hillsides which partly frame the town on the opposite side;
- View 4: Up Windmill Hill from Hermitage Road, taking in the wide grassed area, winding pathway, and mature woodland to the north;
- View 5: Along Walsworth Road, taking in the 19th century villas along the north side, and the many trees on both sides, but particularly behind the public car park.



*View over Hitchin from Windmill Hill*



*View along Walsworth Road*



Negative features:

- Bulky and dominant 1960s development along Queen Street/Hollow Lane, particularly the BT building;
- Some modern development of no special merit on the skyline below Hitchin Girls' School (Yew Trees, Windmill House and Woodside);
- The public realm (public seating particularly) on Windmill Hill;
- Remnants of 1920s features, such as the wall at the bottom of Windmill Hill, where the railings have been removed;
- The disabled access from Windmill Hill onto Queens Street and Walsworth Road;
- Some of the trees are in poor condition, particularly in The Dell, often due to ivy growth;
- Generally neglected and insecure character of The Dell;
- Graffiti on walls facing the Grammar School and Windmill Hill;
- Some broken fencing facing the alley on the north side of Hitchin Girls' School;
- Radio antennae are a regrettable feature on the locally listed water tower;
- Poor condition of the former stables in the public car park.

Sites for enhancement:

- The Dell, where selective tree clearance, tree management, and new landscaping would be welcome;
- Reinstatement of railings at the bottom of Windmill Hill;
- The provision of improved disabled access from Windmill Hill onto Queens Street and/or Walsworth Road ;
- Tree clearance/tree management regime is needed;
- Clear graffiti from walls near the school, and mend any broken fences;
- Find out who is the owner of the stables in the public car park and try and negotiate as scheme of repair.

**7.5 Character Area 5: *The Avenue, Highbury Road, Wymondley Road, Chiltern Road and The Chilterns***

This is a late 19th and early 20th century residential suburb on the eastern outskirts of the town centre, convenient for the shops and railway station, yet quietly located on a slight hill. Originally the new area was called the Nettledell Estate, after the Nettledell Fields on which the buildings were constructed from the mid 1890s onwards. The first house in The Avenue was completed in 1896 and the new road was renamed The Avenue because of the tree planting which accompanied the new houses. Further properties were built in Highbury Road and Chiltern Road, in a variety of styles a few of which echo the Arts and Crafts style of the period. For instance, some of the more substantial

examples have fine quality details such as oriel windows, jettied upper floors, and attractive timber porches. Tile hanging and the use of matching red brick is another notable feature. The buildings in Highbury Road tend to be more substantial than those in The Avenue and Chiltern Road, and often have second floors. Chiltern Road was completed slightly later and the first buildings came on the market in 1901. This Character Area conveys a very positive image of well-maintained, architecturally embellished residential suburbs situated within a well-established verdant setting.



*Buildings in The Avenue*



*Chiltern Road*

Sadly, not all of the street trees in either The Avenue or Chiltern Road have survived. However, an open area of grass with an avenue of silver birches, close to the junction of The Avenue with Chiltern Road, makes a major contribution to the sylvan character of this part of the conservation area and should be preserved.

At a right angled bend in Chiltern Road, Pinehill Path runs in a northerly direction towards Pinehill Hospital and is a verdant, quiet lane leading away from the conservation area. At the mouth of the lane with Chiltern Road a significant boundary wall forms the east boundary to no.12 Chiltern Road and should be retained.

The Character Area also includes properties in Wymondley Road, an ancient route, possibly of Roman origins. Until the early 20th century, when it was gradually developed, steep banks on either side and the distinctive ridge and furrow patterns in the adjoining landscape confirmed the existence of medieval strip fields. From about 1900, prestigious family houses were built to take advantage of the elevated position, the first being The Chilterns (demolished in 1933). Over the next ten years further houses were added for the aspiring middle classes: Connaught House (now nos. 23 and 25) was completed in c.1903, and Wayshott (now no. 35) was completed in 1904 to the designs of F W Kinneir Tarte. Further eastwards, Dowlands (no.44) was built in 1904 and designed by Hitchin architect, Walter Millard, whilst Riddy Shott (no.52) was built in 1907 by Geoffry Lucas and was once the home of Reginald Hine, who wrote the classic two volume history of Hitchin in the house between 1927 and 1929. Much of the garden to Riddy Shott is now The Aspens. Nos. 18, 20, 22 and 24 on the south side of Wymondley Road are substantial Arts and Crafts houses which similarly date to c1900. These have large gardens which back onto Riddy Lane, a footpath which reflects the old field boundaries in the area. Mature trees and deep front gardens add to the attractions of these well preserved houses. In the 1930s further houses were built with distinctive green pantiles and these are also included in the conservation area. Most buildings in this character area merit protection by Article 4 Directions.

Positive features:

- Peaceful late 19th century purpose-built suburb;
- A high concentration of well detailed houses of various sizes, some of them locally listed;
- Clay tiled roofs with decorative ridge tiles, prominent chimney stacks and attractive pots;
- The use of red brick, false 'timber framing', painted pebble-dash and tile hanging;
- Bay or oriel windows, and porches, add interest, with high quality joinery details;
- Survival of most of the original front doors and sashed windows;
- Street trees and planting in the spacious gardens provide a sylvan character;
- Survival of old footpaths across the area, reflecting the layout of the fields before they were built over.



*Detail of house in The Avenue*



*Detail of house in Chiltern Road*

Important views:

- View 1: Southwards along The Avenue, taking in the rising ground, street trees, and high quality detached Arts and Crafts houses on the left;
- View 2: Looking in a south-easterly direction up the hill along Chiltern Road, taking in the well detailed red brick houses on either side and the mature street trees;
- View 3: Looking southwards up the hill along Highbury Road, taking in the curving road, constrained along the west side by mature trees.

Negative features:

- Some of the street trees have died and not been replaced; other street trees may need surgery or will have to be replaced in the near future;
- Loss of front boundaries in Highbury Road, and the creation of car parking areas where there were once gardens;
- Extension to Hitchin Girls' School as viewed along Highbury Road.



Enhancement opportunities:

- Service of Article 4 Direction(s);
- Tree Management Plan needed for the street trees.

**7.6 Character Area 6: *Benslow Lane, Trevor Road and part of Radcliffe Road and Verulam Road***

This Character Area relates to Hitchin's expansion after the railway arrived in the town in the middle of the 19th century. Benslow Lane is contained by terraced houses, two or three storeys high, dating to the mid to late 19th century (Benslow Terrace retains a date plaque of 1861). The houses are mainly two windows wide with natural slate roofs facing the street and small front gardens, historically contained by low brick walls. Nos. 41/43 are a pair of substantial brick houses of c1870 with mullioned and transomed windows and large gables facing the road. Next door, no. 45 (Elm Garth) is a pleasingly symmetrical three bay detached villa of around 1860, with a shallow hipped slated roof and a central entrance defined by a stuccoed doorcase.

Trevor Road is a small cul-de-sac of more modestly sized terraced houses, mainly one window wide, but also built using red brick (sometimes with blue headers) with natural slate roofs. Along both streets, the simple building forms are enlivened by the substantial brick stacks, often topped by their original clay chimney pots, which are important in views along each street. Some of the original margin light or multi-paned windows remain.

The Walsworth Road properties are more mixed but similarly dated (about 1860 to 1880), with a variety of details, but again mainly built using red brick. Sash windows are the most common window type. One of them, no. 106, has a small pediment over the central bay, defined by yellow brick, with a large bay window on one side. No.47 Walsworth Road was built c1860 and is considered to be a Building of Local Interest.

On the north side of the street, nos. 43 to 46 (consec) are an imposing three storey terrace of houses of c1875, with gables facing the street and canted two storey bay windows which are decorated with modillion eaves cornice and foliage capitals to the window mullions. These buildings are all considered to be 'positive'. Again, these properties, and the buildings in Trevor Road and Benslow Lane, should be afforded greater protection. Consequently, an Article 4 Direction is proposed.



*The Cloisters, Radcliffe Road*



*Houses on Trevor Road*

To the north of Walsworth Road, a small area of mid to late 19th century development in Verulam Road and Radcliffe Road includes a number of positive buildings (nos.18a, 21 and 22, 23, 25, 26, 27 and 28 Verulam Road), Buildings of Local Interest (nos.18, 19 and 20 Verulam Road), The Cloisters Almshouses, St Bridget's Orphanage and Gainsford Court (also BLI's), and the grade II\* listed Church of the Holy Saviour which was built in 1865 to the designs of William Butterfield. Gainsford Court, The Cloisters Almshouses and St Bridget's Orphanage were all built between 1869 and 1873. A number of mature trees within the rear gardens of the properties in Verulam Road not only contribute positively to the gardens of those properties but also provide an important backdrop to the locally listed buildings in Radcliffe Road.

Positive features:

- Residential development of the mid to late 19th century, allied to growth of Hitchin after the railway line was connected;
- High concentration of well detailed mid to late 19th century houses, mainly retaining their original materials and details;
- Use of red brick with natural slate roofs;
- Mainly residential uses with a strong domestic scale;
- The Cloisters Almshouses, St Bridget's Orphanage, Gainsford Court, and the Church of the Holy Saviour form an impressive group.



*Church of the Holy Saviour, Radcliffe Road*



*Benslow Lane*

Negative features:

- Busy traffic along Walsworth Road;
- Some use of modern materials and details, such as concrete roof tiles or uPVC windows, mostly facing Walsworth Road;
- Some poor quality or inappropriate front boundaries.



Enhancement opportunities:

- Service of Article 4 Direction(s);
- Encourage property owners to reinstate their front boundaries preferably using brick walls.

**7.7 Character Area 7: Priory Park and Hitchin Hill**

Priory Park makes up the largest area of open green space in the Hitchin Conservation Area, and although it is not normally open to the public, views from the surrounding footpaths into the park are of note. The Priory Conference Centre (listed grade I) is located close to the town, and incorporates some of the 15th century cloisters from the early 14th century monastery which was founded in 1317 for Carmelite monks. The Priory also provides a venue for weddings. The buildings were located close to the River Hiz (to provide a supply of water and a drain) and also to a ford over the river, below what is now Bridge Street. The River Hiz makes a positive contribution to the appearance and character of the Park.



*The grounds and house in Priory Park can be glimpsed from the public footpath*



*Cottages in Hitchin Hill*

The original road to Charlton, called Mill Lane after the malt mills located nearby, runs between The Priory pond and no. 1 Tilehouse Street. The Priory was extensively rebuilt in the 18th century when the parkland was laid out and the River Hiz dammed to provide a lake. The Hitchin Relief Road (Parkway) now crosses this parkland.

Hitchin Hill forms the eastern boundary to the park and cuts through an embankment with trees on either side, providing an attractive entrance 'gateway' into Hitchin from the south. On the west side of Hitchin Hill, on higher ground, stands a notable boundary wall and three 'positive' buildings. The wall includes a significant amount of 'rat trap' bond (brick on edge) brickwork and makes a positive contribution to the conservation area. Other notable sections of wall in this Character Area can be found in Old Charlton Road, Kitchen Garden Court and although outside the conservation area, another section on the north side of Taylors Hill.



Another interesting inclusion is the almshouses on the corner of Wratten Road East and Old Charlton Road. These single storey buildings were built in the 1930s and are well detailed, retaining their original clay roof tiles. The two buildings are the same and sit at right angles to each other, turning the corner which marks the junction between the two roads. Whilst the windows have been replaced in uPVC, the original window openings remain unchanged and the style and details of the modern replacements are not out of character. The original front boundary, built of matching red brick with a curved brick coping, also remains.



*Almshouses on corner of Wratten Road East and Old Charlton Road*



*The Three Moorhens Public House*

Landmark buildings make a significant contribution to this Character Area: The Three Moorhens Public House (grade II listed) performs an important 'gateway' function and The Priory is an important landmark building particularly when viewed within the park.

Positive features:

- Rural ambiance with many mature trees and River Hiz;
- The Priory, a grade I listed building with retains fragments of the monastery;
- Other notable features within Priory Park are also listed, namely the flint bridge, the stables and the coach house;
- Historic landscape features remain within the park including the icehouse of c1775;
- The park also retains a number of important specimen trees, including the large London plane tree dating to about 1680-1700, which is located immediately to the west of the River Hiz next to the Relief Road;
- Other notable trees include other London planes and a copper beech near the entrance to the park, and the belt of trees in the east of the park alongside Hitchin Hill which originally followed the 18th century entrance driveway;
- The Kitchen Garden boundary walls and a gazebo which survives near the 1980s office buildings;

- St. John's Path, a quiet passageway with a number of 'positive' late 19th or early 20th century cottages or houses;
- The Three Moorhens Public House, a grade II listed 18th century building on the summit of Hitchin Hill;
- The Half Moon (positive building), The Lord Lister Hotel (grade II listed), and the adjoining red brick house (also grade II listed), form a group of historic buildings at the junction with Queen Street/Bridge Street, all that is left of a much larger complex of buildings which is shown on the 19th century maps;
- A number of important boundary walls.

#### Important views:

- View 1: Southwards up the hill along Park Street, taking in the wall and trees on the right hand side which define the edge of Priory Park;
- View 2: Through trees to the Mount Zion Chapel;
- View 3: View southwards along Hitchin Hill, improved by the Hitchin-Welwyn Turnpike Trustees in the early 19th century;
- View 4: Northwards down Hitchin Hill, where the road dips down the hill towards the town, and is constrained by the high banks on either side and the many trees;
- View 5: View from the public footpath over the field to the south;
- View 6: View, rather glimpsed through the trees, into Priory Park;
- View 7: View over the Relief Road to the fields and open landscape beyond;
- View 8: View through the trees towards The Priory and (in places) to the spire of St Mary's Church on the horizon;
- View 9: View over the lake formed by the River Hiz;
- View 10: From outside the new Radcliffe House office block looking north along the former Malt Mill Lane, into the town centre, with St Mary's Church spire on the horizon.

#### Negative features:

- Limited public accessibility to the Priory Park;
- Some of the trees in the park appear to be in need of lopping or replacement planting due to disease;
- The Zion Chapel in Standhill Road is in poor condition;
- The generally poor quality public realm.

#### Opportunities for enhancement:

- A Tree Management Plan for the Priory Park;
- Improvements to the public realm, particularly the pavements.

## **8 SUMMARY OF ISSUES**

These 'Issues' were identified and discussed during the stakeholders' meeting held in Hitchin in March 2009, and also follow the identification of Key Negative Features which are set out in Chapter 7.

### **8.1 Town Centre Strategy**

In 2001 North Hertfordshire District Council adopted a Town Centre Template which sets out the main issues for each of the four principal towns in the District, namely Hitchin, Letchworth Garden City, Royston and Baldock. Since then, individual Strategies for each settlement have been produced by the Council. The Hitchin Town Centre Strategy was the first, and was adopted by Full Council in November 2004 as the Council's Statement of Policy. This Strategy lays the foundations for future growth and development in Hitchin Town Centre. It was prepared after extensive consultation, providing an overview of the town centre whilst recognising its historic character, local distinctiveness and the needs of the local community.

The Strategy is subject to regular review. This Character Appraisal for the Hitchin Conservation Area has been drawn up in part to help with that review process, by providing a 'health check' of the Hitchin Conservation Area in 2009 which can then be used by the Council to inform planning policy and development control decisions.

It is not surprising that many of the 'Issues' identified in the Strategy of 2004 remain, and that this Character Appraisal is in many cases merely reiterating concerns put forward five years ago.



*Improvements to the public realm in the town centre are needed (High Street)*



*Shopfronts are extremely important in the conservation area (Sun Street)*



The principal issues for the Hitchin Conservation Area at this point in time would appear to be the following:

- Hitchin Conservation Area boundary review
- The control of new development
- The protection of views
- Approaches to the town
- The public realm
- Shopfronts
- Buildings of Local Interest
- The Article 4 (2) Direction
- Site specific improvements

## **8.2 *Hitchin Conservation Area boundary review***

As part of the appraisal process, a thorough review of the existing conservation area boundary was undertaken which is described in greater detail in Chapter 9 *Conservation area boundary review*.

## **8.3 *The control of new development***

In conservation terms, Section 72 of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 and PPS5 : Planning for the Historic Environment (2010) underpin the District Council's consideration of future development opportunities in the Hitchin Conservation Area.

In addition, the District Council has produced the Churchgate Development Area Planning Brief (2005) and a detailed Paynes Park Planning Brief (2005), the latter includes part of the land now developed to the west of Bucklersbury. Furthermore, the Hitchin Urban Design Assessment was published by the District Council in 2007 which breaks up the town into various Character Areas, including detailed advice about how any new development should be designed. This remains a useful tool and will be used when assessing future applications for change within the conservation area.

## **8.4 *The protection of views***

The most important views within the conservation area are noted on the relevant Character Area maps, but of course each resident or visitor will have their own favourite view or vista, sometimes little more than a glimpse through a gap in some buildings. The protection or enhancement of these 'glimpses' and pleasant surprises is an important consideration when planning applications are being assessed. Views over rooftops, the roofscape, and the choice of materials and details for new roofs, must all be considered when new development is proposed.

### **8.5 Approaches to the town**

Many stakeholders felt that the main 'entries' into the town were disappointing and failed to reflect the high quality of the historic environment within the town. Improvements were particularly sought at the northern end of Hitchin Hill, where Park Street meets Queen Street and Bridge Street, and along Queen Street, where traffic and modern development dominates.



*The main approach into Hitchin Town Centre from Park Street is disappointing*



*Traditional paving in the Market Place*

### **8.6 The public realm**

The provision of a largely pedestrianised town centre has meant that Hitchin is a popular shopping area where visitors enjoy the facilities as well as the general environment equally. The many restaurants and cafes add to this appeal. However, in several locations the poor quality of the public realm is a detrimental feature, and there are clearly issues with poor maintenance and the gradual deterioration of the various items of street furniture which were installed in the early 1990s. Areas for improvement include:

- The Market Place and High Street, where the early 1990s street furniture needs redecoration and in some cases, replacement;
- The use of high quality natural materials for resurfacing, reinstatement and repair works;
- Proposals should allow for greater priority for pedestrians and better signposted pedestrian routes across the town;
- The paving in the Market Place is in need of repair;
- The pathways around St Mary's Church and the adjoining Garden of Rest need improving, including new stone paving, street lighting and street furniture;
- St Mary's Square and the adjoining car parks (see Churchgate Development Area Planning Brief 2005);
- The western end of Tilehouse Street, which ends in an unattractive blank wall.

## **8.7 Shopfronts**

Whilst there are many surviving historic shopfronts in the town centre, there are also a large number of poorly designed shopfronts and garish colours and signage detract from the ambience of the conservation area. In 1998 the Council produced a Shopfront Design Guide which would benefit from updating and republishing. The identification of existing historic shopfronts in the conservation area would help to inform the design process.

## **8.8 Buildings of Local Interest**

North Hertfordshire District Council currently maintains a *Register of Buildings of Local Interest* (BLIs), more commonly referred to as 'locally listed' buildings, many of which lie within the Hitchin Conservation Area. More details are provided in Chapter 6 section 6.2. The District Council prepared a revised list of BLIs in Hitchin Parish with the assistance of the Hitchin Historical Society and 96 buildings or structures are now included on the adopted Hitchin Parish Local List.

## **8.9 The Article 4 (2) Direction**

Proposals to amend the existing Article 4 (2) Direction and to extend it to cover further buildings have been put forward by the consultants and can be viewed in a separate document.

## **8.10 Buildings at Risk**

There are no listed buildings considered to be 'At Risk' within the conservation area.

## **8.11 Areas identified on plan as an improvement opportunity**

### **Former bus garage, no.22 Bridge Street**

See section 7.2 of this document.



*The former Bus Garage, No.22 Bridge Street*

### **Carpentry/Netto site**

See section 7.3 of this document.

### **Churchgate shopping centre, market & car parks**

The District Council produced the Churchgate Development Area Planning Brief in 2005 to guide the potential redevelopment of this complex of buildings which was built in the early 1970s, involving the demolition of a number of important historic buildings, one wing of which remains and is now listed grade II\*. Any scheme should follow the design principles set out in the Urban Design Assessment of 2007. In 2008 planning permission was granted for a refurbishment scheme for Churchgate.





*Churchgate Shopping Centre*

**Former post office, Hermitage Road**

See Hitchin Town Strategy 2004.

**Site south of West Alley**

See Paynes Park Planning Brief 2005.

**Site north of West Alley**

See Paynes Park Planning Brief 2005.

**8.12 Other site specific improvements (not shown on plan)**

**Bancroft Recreation Ground**

A number of improvements are recommended to both the buildings and spaces. It is understood that the bandstand is already subject to a grant bid for repairs, and as the focal point for the whole Recreation Ground, it is clearly important that this work goes ahead as quickly as possible. The removal or replacement of unattractive park buildings would also be welcome. The day to day maintenance of the park also needs to be addressed with overflowing litter bins, poor quality public seating, and bare flower beds suggesting an under-investment in this aspect.

**River Hiz**

To continue improvements to the River Hiz, including, where possible, the opening up of the river frontage for public access (see the River Hiz Development Guidelines 1994).

**The Dell**

This area requires an enhancement scheme including a Tree Management Plan which could include selective tree clearance.

## **9 CONSERVATION AREA BOUNDARY REVIEW**

### **9.1 Introduction**

As part of the survey work for this Character Appraisal, a detailed assessment of the existing boundary of the conservation area was carried out, including the areas suggested by the Triangle Residents Association and the Hitchin Historical Society. Reference was made to the Hitchin Triangle Design Statement and to submissions concerning the Gainsford legacy in Hitchin, prepared by the Hitchin Historical Society.

Reviewing the designation that was seen as appropriate in 1998, eight additions were initially proposed and these were subject to public consultation and proposed to be included. As part of the public consultation, Thomas Bellamy House and additional buildings along Wymondley Road including The Chilterns were also proposed and have been included. All these additions have been addressed in this Character Statement.

### **9.2 Areas not proposed to be included**

Much thought was also given to the request for the designation of a conservation area which would include Dacre Road, Radcliffe Road, and possibly Verulam Road ('The Triangle'). This area represents the expansion of the town following the provision of a railway line in 1850 and provides a number of mid to late 19th century residential properties, mainly in terraced form. The area is also notable for Church of the Holy Saviour, Gainsford School, The Cloisters Almshouses and St Bridget's Orphanage, and following public consultation, these together with some properties in Verulam Road have now been included in the Hitchin Conservation Area. The reasons for rejecting other parts of 'The Triangle' are as follows:

- Both Dacre Road and Radcliffe Road have been subject to a certain amount of modern infilling, diluting the architectural and historic interest of the area;
- Most of the terraced properties have been adversely affected by the insertion of modern windows, replacement front doors, the use of modern roofing materials, and satellite dishes;
- Many of the front boundary walls have been lost or unsympathetically altered.

Further areas of late 19th century terraced housing in the Lancaster Road, York Road, Duke's Lane, Ickleford Road, and Bunyan Road area were inspected but rejected as being too altered to merit conservation area status.

Consideration could be given to introducing a new non-statutory designation, sometimes referred to as 'Areas of High Townscape Value' which acknowledges the value of the streetscape but will not have the same level of protection as afforded by conservation area designation. However, such a designation would not form part of this current review.

### **9.3     *Proposed new conservation areas***

The Council has proposed three new conservation area designation, because of their unique character and these are:

- Butts Close, contained by Fishponds Road and Bedford Road;
- The Railway Station and associated railway buildings and Ransom's Recreation Ground, including the railway station (1911), some surviving elements of the original GNR station of 1850, the station master's house (1911), the Great Northern Cottages (1850), the Midland Cottages (c1857), and the railway warehouse and weighbridge, all of which are on the revised Register of Buildings of Local Interest.
- Hitchin Hill Path and Butchers Lane

The designation of these new conservation areas has been subject to public consultation and separate Character Statements for each have been adopted by the District Council.



## **10 BIBLIOGRAPHY**

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Various publications by the Hitchin Historical Society including:

A walk along Tilehouse and Bridge Streets (1983);

A Walk along Bucklersbury (1991);

A Brief Guide to Historic Hitchin (1997);

Hitchin and the GNR (2000); and

Blue Plaque Guide (2000).

River Hiz Development Guidelines (1994)

The Hitchin Town Centre Strategy (2004)

North Hertfordshire and Stevenage Landscape Character Assessment (2005)

Churchgate Development Area Planning Brief (2005)

Paynes Park Planning Brief (2005)

Hitchin Urban Design Assessment (2007)

## ***APPENDICES***

### ***Appendix 1: Maps***

Map 1	The Hitchin Conservation Area
Map 2	Character Areas
Map 3	Character Area 1: Bancroft north and Bancroft Recreation Ground
Map 4	Character Area 2a: High Street, Bancroft south and Brand Street
	Character Area 2b: St Mary's Church
Map 5	Character Area 2c: The Market Place, Bridge Street, Tilehouse Street and Upper Tilehouse Street
Map 6	Character Area 3: Queen Street and Hermitage Road
Map 7	Character Area 4: Windmill Hill and Walsworth Road
Map 8	Character Area 5: The Avenue, Highbury Road, Wymondley Road, Chiltern Road and The Chilterns
Map 9	Character Area 6: Benslow Lane, Trevor Road and part of Radcliffe Road and Verulam Road
Map 10	Character Area 7: Priory Park and Hitchin Hill
Map 11	Boundary review

# PLANNING GUIDANCE - APPROVED FOR DEVELOPMENT CONTROL PURPOSES

## STATEMENT OF CONSULTATION AND PROCESS

4 July 2009	Exhibition launch to 1st round of Public Consultation
4 September 2009	End of 1st round of Public Consultation
14 May 2010	2nd round of Public Consultation
11 June 2010	End of 2nd round of Public Consultation
14 September 2010	Hitchin Committee
26 July 2011	Cabinet Meeting

In addition, there was local publicity, entry on the District Council's website and letters were sent to various stakeholders, details of which are available from the address below.



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