



Abbey Precincts Residents Association

Protecting our Conservation Area

Newsletter No. 7 August 2024

<https://apralbans.org>

It's been a busy year for APRA with considerable work done on behalf of local residents, particularly in respect of the Abbey Orchard, School buses in Romeland, George St pedestrianisation, the state of Verulamium Park and Parke events.

Apart from thwarting the University's initial attempt to claim the Abbey Orchard for more graduation ceremonies, regrettably there's not a lot of positives to report, at least not just yet. This is especially the case when we come up against major local institutions such as the School, Cathedral, University, SADC and the County Council, even when we work with other RAs. Disappointingly, support from local councillors has been mixed in these dealings.

As covered below, the University's second specious application to claim the Abbey Orchard for private use is currently in play. APRA submitted a well-founded objection. Given the weight of our argument, it would be surprising if the University succeeds – but with SADC, who knows?

Members can make a valuable contribution: this year we have been helped enormously by some of you. If you would like to help APRA continue its efforts, some outlined in the following articles, in general or on specific issues, as a committee member or not, please do get in touch with us at membership.apra@gmail.com. Many thanks.

John Hedges
Chair, APRA

APRA 2024 Committee

John Hedges, Chair, Abbey Mill Lane
Kate Buckley, Vice Chair, College Place
Andrew Yaras, Treasurer, Fishpool St
Jacky Stephen, Secretary, Monastery Close
Robert Pankhurst, College Street
Geoff Dyson, College Street
Malcolm Hull, Abbey View Road
Ian Woodroof, Abbey Mill Lane

Get Involved

APRA has been going for 11 years now. Some of the committee members have been here since the beginning. Many things have changed and there are always new residents. APRA needs to evolve and renew itself.

Our membership has to keep growing. **If you are not already a member please join us (membership.apra@gmail.com).** Those without online access get free membership, but we need to keep an up-to-date-list, so please let the membership secretary know who you are (tel. 07803 798597).

We need new committee members in order to continue - the situation is becoming serious. Please contact us if you could spare an hour or two for a monthly meeting.

George Street Pedestrianisation

Experimental traffic orders are normally used to trial road schemes which can then be modified, implemented or abandoned as a result of monitoring, assessment and consultation. However, the 18 month trial of City-centre road closures ended rather strangely in April. Readers will recall that Phase 1 resulted in the permanent closure of the Market Place and Phase 2 with the reopening of the High St. Phase 3 trialled George St weekend closure after APRA and the majority of George St residents argued for it to be wholly reopened. Nevertheless, the trial was abandoned and Phase 3 arrangement made permanent. This includes one-way traffic downhill and an unsegregated contraflow cycle lane (largely ignored by cyclists). These were neither monitored nor part of the public consultation before implementation.

It seems that the Trial Project Board is determined to keep the current closure in place. According to Sandy Walkington, the permanent traffic order is not cast in stone and "there continues to be an absolute commitment to engage further in the autumn to fully establish the future direction for George St. In the words of the officer leading the project, 'this will be about listening to the community as a whole, meaning residents in other streets, businesses and visitors'."

It seems that if they don't get the 'right' answers to their questions the authorities widen the audience and repeat the questions until they do – but so much for the residents most affected.

Sunday 15 September, from 4:00 to 6:00 pm. Our annual summer party will be in the garden of the Thatched House at the bottom of Abbey Mill End, by kind invitation of Moragh and Michael Ormiston. All members are welcome and are encouraged to bring friends and neighbours, members or not. You can join (or catch up with subs) at the event.

Abbey Orchard Update

Members may recall the disruption and damage resulting from the University of Hertfordshire's graduation week in the Cathedral in February. Although it's a joyous occasion for graduates and their families and friends over five days, the event turned the Abbey Orchard into a construction site for 39 days. This caused much adverse impact on residents, including excessive noise from construction vehicles and generators powering arc lights, restricted access to public green space, obstruction of a public right of way and loss of already limited parking spaces. A similar event last September led to APRA issuing reminders to SADC, the Cathedral and University about the need for planning permission prior to the most recent event. This was ignored, as was a similar warning about the potential for damage to the Abbey Gateway, from the grotesquely large HGVs involved with construction.



Surprise, surprise! The Gateway was damaged and Abbey Mill Lane blocked when a fork lift truck working on the roadway, in contravention of safety regulations, hit the stonework and shed its load across the road. The Abbey Orchard itself has still not fully recovered as a much loved and fully usable public green space.



Yet despite this damage and disruption, the Cathedral is committed to future use of the Abbey Orchard for similar events, if permitted by SADC. To smooth the way for this misappropriation of public space, we know (from an FOI request) that the University, following SADC advice, applied to SADC for a Certificate of Lawful Development, for religious and educational use of the Abbey Orchard. Bizarrely, this overreach includes part of the roadway under the Gateway too, much to the surprise of the School, which owns the Gateway.

Recent good news is that the University has withdrawn its change of use application, almost certainly as a direct result of APRA's objection. However, in its place an application has been submitted for temporary event use for 12 weeks a year, in perpetuity. Again, APRA has submitted an objection, largely based on the evidence of the ill-effects of the February event, particularly the adverse impact on the heritage setting, transport and access problems and loss of amenity to residents. This was circulated to other RAs. They and their, and many APRA, members have also objected. Given the weight of evidence against, it would be surprising if the application succeeds.

APRA will continue to resist any further attempts to appropriate a much loved and used public green space for private use.

Potential for extra residents' parking.

As a result of a walk around the conservation zone with Cllr Edgar Hill and SADC officers with about 12 prospective new parking bays were identified (e.g., the lower end of Abbey Mill Lane, Fishpool Street, Mount Pleasant and Verulam Road). It was suggested that the public on-street paid parking be removed from Romeland and all bays limited to residents. These ideas will be put forward in the next parking review.

Please let us have your ideas.

Waste Collection

During the last year many members have continued to report delays and issues with waste collections. We encourage quick reporting for missed collections.

On a positive note, Ward and County councillors supported APRA's request for new NO HGV road signage at the entrance to College Place.

Unfortunately, the heavy lorries are still being used for waste collection and damage to road surface and pavements continues. College Place residents have recently reported new subsidence to HCC, in almost the same location as last year's small sinkhole. This is dangerous for pedestrians and other road users.

We will continue to press for smaller electric vehicles.



On the buses

Road safety around Romeland continues to be compromised by egregious School bus driver conduct, lax supervision and no enforcement of traffic regulations. Typical examples include: road junctions being blocked, sight lines obstructed and 'school keep clear' lines ignored. Efforts to discuss bus operations safety with the School with a view to seeking improvements were rebuffed in June 2023 and subsequently. As a result APRA has withdrawn from the School's routine biannual community group meetings, until such time as the School engages on bus operations safety.

Last December APRA, together with other local RAs and councillors agreed on the need for a road safety audit of Romeland bus operations. It was hoped that this would lead to recommendations for improved road safety (signs and lines) and thus better enforcement of traffic regulations. In view of an earlier similar safety audit being hijacked by council officials (into a review of Romeland Hill parking bay safety during the summer holidays!), terms of reference were drafted by APRA to focus on the obvious dangers, illustrated below.



The safety audit apparently took place over the winter but little was forthcoming until we were told in March that APRA's terms of reference had been changed, unilaterally by Sandy Walkington (our county councillor) to focus on pupil safety not bus size: the overall safety of Romeland bus operations was not considered, despite APRA's efforts. And, if that wasn't dismaying enough, that the results could not be made available until after the local government elections in May. Did this mean the results were of sufficient gravity they could influence voter intentions? Possibly, at least it avoided potential fall-out affecting district councillors.

The audit feedback, delivered only orally in May, reported no safety issues for pupils. Apparently, the School was exemplary in conveying so many by bus (c. 50% school roll from an area of some 1500 sq miles) and, anyway, other schools were much worse. Another way of looking at this probably means it's not well rated on the sustainable travel (walking and cycling) scale.

So, another safety audit has been hijacked and another year passes without action. One can't help thinking that councillors and officials don't want an objective road safety assessment, under any circumstances, but APRA will keep pushing for one.

Work with the Combined City Centre RAs (CCRA)

Travel & Movement Group. APRA has been working on this with other RAs and HCC and SADC officers. It has been agreed that a St Albans City Centre Transport & Vision Strategy will sit alongside the Local Plan. Once all CCRA members have been briefed at the upcoming pre-CNC meeting, next steps will be to engage with you as members, watch this space!

City Centre Vision Update. We have also been working with the CCRA and other stakeholders to ensure that key parts of Council policy wording refer to protection of city centre residents' amenities, with due regard to new developments within heritage and conservation areas.

Verulamium Park

The Park, or at least the area around the Lake and towards St Michaels is in a sorry state. The Ver continues to flood Bell Meadow, leaving sewage courtesy of Thames Water. APRA has been pressing councillors and the Council for flood mitigation measures, including repairs to the Ver banks, for some time. Since children often play in the river around the fish ladder and stepping stones APRA has also asked SADC for public health warnings to be posted by the Causeway. Apparently this could not be done for jurisdictional reasons.

The footpath (public right of way) to St Michaels St remains closed after several accidents. Apparently, and not before time, SADC is considering plans to build a boardwalk to allow the path to re-open, but timing is uncertain. The County Council recently posted a notice saying the path between the St Michaels St and Abbey Mill Lane entrances will be closed for 6 months for resurfacing, but that now seems to have been withdrawn.

Finance is now in place for works on Revitalisation of the River Ver Project to commence in Reaches 2 (Westminster Lodge) and Reach 3 (east of Holywell Hill). There does not appear to be any material change from the plans for these two Reaches published in 2018. Work will start next few months and aim to complete before March 2025.

But the revitalisation works to the much more popular Reach 1 (Bell Meadow and Lake) are on hold, plans still to be finalised. There is some funding but the scheme may need to be adjusted to meet available funds (£2.2m) and the increased flooding. The next step is to carry out an archaeological investigation in Bell Meadow to meet Historic England requirements. This cannot happen until water levels have dropped, but short-term repairs to the Ver banks to allow this are, apparently, not possible – Catch-22! Despite all this, the Park was awarded a Green Flag in July!

APRA will continue to monitor the situation and press for Park improvements, including replacement of the Causeway public toilets.



Verulamium Park Events

There is pressure to hold more big events in Verulamium Park, due to demand from organisers and the general public from a very wide area, and ostensibly to supplement District Council revenue. Events scheduled this year include the Half Marathon and Comedy Garden (each with less than 20,000 attendees), and Pub in the Park and the Fireworks (over 20,000 each).

For 2025 there was a Planning Application to double the permitted number of days for events to 56. Over 50 residents surrounding the park, supported by APRA, objected on the grounds of noise, lack of parking, damage to the environment, lack of toilets and some bad behaviour, as well as a lack of transparency on the cost benefit to the council. **But the application was granted, with some strict conditions on noise (with the Council having discretion on limits), toilets, environmental damage, additional car parking and marshals.** However, would enforcement notices for breaches be issued to the council itself or its business partners?

Verulam Councillors have asked residents to monitor events in 2024 and 2025 as a test (the council intend to submit a new planning application for 56 days for 2026 and beyond). Parking and noise were identified as issues at the Half Marathon in June and Comedy Garden has just been held in an enclosed big tent. If you have comments on any events please email either Cllr Edgar Hill (cllr.e.hill@stalbans.gov.uk) and/or Moragh Ormiston (moragh.e.ormiston@gmail.com).

APRA is a non-aligned voluntary association for local residents, principally in the area around the Abbey roughly enclosed by Holywell Hill, High Street, Verulam Road, Hill Street and Abbey Mills. Please send comments or queries to membership.apra@gmail.com