

alton now

WORKING TOGETHER FOR THE FUTURE OF ALTON



NEWSLETTER OF THE ALTON SOCIETY

SPRING/SUMMER 2026



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welcome

Alton Now, the newsletter of the Alton Society, is normally published twice a year. We welcome articles, letters, poems and images pertaining to our town and its environment, so if you have anything to share for the next edition, do get in touch. Please note that the views of individual contributors to the newsletter are not necessarily those of the Alton Society.



From the Chairman

By David Simpkins

Hello everyone. It is a pleasure to be writing this whilst looking out at sunshine, with daffodils and snowdrops coming through, rather than peering through the relentless rain we have had over the past weeks. Our Society continues to immerse itself more and more in the ever-increasing number of planning applications affecting Alton and its immediate surroundings. On behalf of the members and for the intended benefit of the community, much work has gone into compiling detailed yet critical comments and objections to the planning authorities in respect of many applications.

For example, we have delivered to East Hampshire District Council (EHDC) objections with constructive comments for the benefit of the community on two applications – at the previous Pritchards Garage location and Land South of Wilsom Road.

The increased delegation of decision-making to officers in the planning department combined with the pressure from local government to achieve house-building targets creates some pessimism about the outcome of our representations and objections. That said, we are redoubling our efforts on every occasion that we can.

Another problem is that Alton Town Council is no longer making specific allocations for housing development in the Neighbourhood Plan and that of course leaves EHDC able to nominate development sites. If we add to that the likelihood of EHDC merging with other local authorities within the next few years, it is very difficult to predict or influence planning decisions.

We continue to be actively involved in litter-pick events around Alton. The Spring Litter Pick took place on Saturday 7th March from 10am to 12pm. Volunteers met at the Cairn by the Assembly Rooms as usual. We urge as many people as possible to take part in these regular events. They are great fun for young families and they make our town a cleaner, better place to live.

Our work also includes representation by committee members at meetings about the future of the Curtis Museum and Kings Pond, for example, and we continue to work closely with Alton College and other local societies, some of whom have benefited from our grant allocations.

The committee is looking into a range of events during the year. Please watch out for circulars about these and join as many as you can.

At our committee meetings we continue to review the objective of how best to serve our membership, taking into account the changing environment in which we are volunteering at this local level.

I am very pleased to confirm that we continue to support the annual Alton College scholarship.

Throughout this year we will continue to notify you about our activities through Facebook and our website and, if appropriate, via email, of any particular matter or issue.

As always, anyone interested in joining the committee is welcome to make contact and sit in on a committee meeting to see what we do and how we do it. Thank you all for your continued support of the Society through volunteering and other practical support.

Alton's INDEPENDENT TRADERS

dill



In this issue, Paul Ebbutt has a chat with Trish Delaney from dill café

Since Trish Delaney moved to Alton in 2015, the town inevitably has undergone a few changes. However, Trish remarks how Alton very much maintains its community feel and everyone is as friendly as ever. She loves how the town hosts many local events supported by Alton Town Council, local businesses and volunteers. Trish also much appreciates how Alton is still well connected to the surrounding countryside, the lovely local scenery and its proximity to so many other Hampshire delights.

Trish left the corporate world in 2022 and inspired by her passion for good food, launched her independent café dill in Alton Market Square. Her intention was always to run a café that specialises in seasonal local produce. Trish is pleased to be a part of what she considers to be a vibrant area of Alton – the Market Square – which currently offers a range of good options for food and drink. Trish values that the traders in the town square work collaboratively to enhance the experience for the community and visitors. Definitely worth regular visits, I say.

She particularly likes the way Alton encourages local new businesses and groups within the town, and appreciates the benefits of establishing long lasting roots and great friendships. Activities supported by dill include Walk Alton and the town walking festivals, the Easter and Christmas discovery trails, plus of course Regency Week with the wonderful Victorian Cricket event.

In addition to her established local treats at dill, Trish offers monthly supper-club nights plus Kitchen Takeover guest-



Trish Delaney outside dill café

chef features, and pop-up events. You can check out what is on offer on the dill website.

I (Paul) recently encouraged some Australian Jane Austen fans to visit dill (after, of course, a swift tour of the High Street's Austen highlights). Trish proudly told me the visitors said "...it was the best food so far in the UK...". Well done dill!

Looking to the future, Trish welcomes any initiative that helps coordinate the local community with local progressive independent businesses. She also welcomes sustainable, quality developments to help the town grow sensibly, good connections to the town centre being essential to encourage local business, communities and local events.

So, I say thanks Trish for choosing Alton. Come on Alton friends: let's enjoy and support our local traders – tell the world about our great town!

With thanks to Trish Delaney – dill café, Alton

WWW.DILLALTON.CO.UK
8 CROSS & PILLORY LANE, ALTON, GU34 1HL

GENERAL ENQUIRIES: dill.alton@outlook.com
TABLE BOOKINGS: dillbookings@gmail.com

The Alton Society Outstanding Person of 2025



Alton Says Farewell to Clare Allen – the Society’s Outstanding Person of 2025

In December Clare Allen left Alton for a new life in Sevenoaks, primarily to be close to her recently arrived granddaughter. This was a hard decision for Clare as she had lived in and loved the town for 38 years. During that time Clare earned a reputation for being one of the strongest minded community people in the Alton. And in looking back over her time here the Alton Society decided Clare was a worthy winner of the Outstanding Person Award for 2025. She was presented with her award at the November 2025 AGM by Ros Lynch, committee member of the Alton Society.

Clare has had a huge impact on the community – from the time when her children were at school where she was a Governor and member of the PTA, to her time working at Bushy Leaze and then Andrews’ Endowed School. Both before and since retiring she has worked with a multitude of voluntary organisations to make Alton a better place.

Most recently Clare has been the chair of ALFI, the chair of Walk Alton, a volunteer at the Foodbank, an active member of Alton Bowls Club and Alton Methodist Church, secretary to the Alton Art Society and many more. Clare was a founding member of the Young Families Group at St Lawrence Church and was on the committee which oversaw the restoration of St Lawrence Church in 1993.

Her work at Walk Alton has been characterised by trying to make Alton a great place to live and walk. She has been keen to promote walking to those who may be lonely or need to live a healthier life, and she has also supported local independent businesses by engaging local firms in a discount scheme offering Walking Festival participants discounts with the aim of bringing more footfall into the town.



Clare Allen receiving award from Ros Lynch at the Alton Society

Clare was involved in the first Alton Arts Festival (2024), and Kat Guenioui commented:

‘Clare was one of the first people to engage with us about plans for the Alton Arts Festival, ensuring the Alton Art Society would be involved and offering both encouragement and support from the get-go. She is so fantastic at connecting people and ideas, truly an exemplar of how community happens.’

This award acknowledges the huge amount Clare has actively contributed to Alton life across a wide range of community projects and for the role model she has been to us all in the warm and inclusive way she leads and involves others.

Alton Victorian Cricket

Celebrating community, tradition and local giving

Since 1983, Alton Victorian Cricket has brought colour, character and community spirit to the town, firmly establishing itself as one of the true highlights of the Alton calendar and a joyful way to kick off the summer season. Blending heritage, humour and heartfelt fundraising, this much-loved annual tradition unites local teams, charities, businesses and families for a memorable day of cricket and celebration — all in support of a vital local cause.

Beyond the boundary, the event offers even more. A selection of stalls showcasing local charities and independent businesses, giving visitors the chance to discover and support organisations at the heart of the community. Food trucks serve up a variety of delicious options, while the popular beer tent provides a wide selection of refreshing drinks.

True to Alton's vibrant brewing tradition, the day also features Dray horse & cart rides, alongside crowd favourites, Punch & Judy shows and fairground attractions — ensuring there is something for all ages to enjoy.

While the cricket and costumes attract the crowds, the heart of the event is its purpose. All proceeds from the Alton Victorian Cricket Tournament go directly to supporting local charities, helping them continue their vital work and make a real difference within the community.

This year we are proud to support Dogs for Autism, a charity that works tirelessly to have a positive impact on the lives of autistic people and their families,

empowering them to achieve their goals, improve access to their chosen communities and enhance their emotional and physical wellbeing.

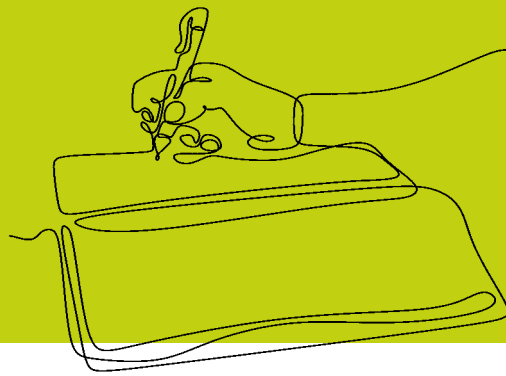
Previous beneficiaries of the Alton Victorian Cricket Tournament have included: **Broadlands Equine Therapy & RDA, Bushy Leaze, Dementia Friendly Alton, Home-Start Way Water, Alton Counselling Service, Cardiac Rehab & St Michael's Hospice.**

The Alton Victorian Cricket Tournament wouldn't be possible without the dedication of its volunteers, the generosity of sponsors, and the ongoing support of the Alton community. It is this shared commitment that transforms a day of cricket into a meaningful fundraiser year after year.

Alton Victorian Cricket continues to demonstrate what can be achieved when a town comes together — celebrating tradition, supporting local causes, and creating a summer event filled with laughter, generosity and community pride.



Letters to the Editor



Dear Editor,

Are Planning Gaps Leaving Alton's River & Water Supply at Risk?

East Hants District Council (EHDC) are currently overseeing an outline planning application for 'Land North of Basingstoke Road'. If you're not familiar with this site, it's in NW Alton and is the large arable field west of Brick Kiln Lane and the Hopfields estate; it wraps around and behind Will Hall Farm with significant frontage to the Basingstoke Road.

Reviewing the application documents and subsequent objections raised, it's apparent there are many gaps, inconsistencies and shortcomings. Among the many objections lodged, perhaps the most abundant and vociferous relate to the poor quality of the flood risk assessment. Even the Environment Agency and a local company who specialise in hydrology and flood prevention have raised objections that are, frankly, damning.

I've also been delving deeper into some of the commentaries – and within the realm of flood risk and water management, have picked up on serious inadequacies in water course ecology and groundwater protection. Both must be fundamental factors for consideration in this application, yet, so far, neither has been given real prominence.

What does that all mean in simple terms? It means that the location for this proposed development is one of the most hydro-geologically sensitive sites in Alton but so far this has been all but ignored. Let me share why I say that:

1. The proposed development site contains the headwaters of the River Wey (one of a fast degrading and diminishing number of chalk streams nationally). The proposed development on land that is upslope of the Wey headwaters could interfere with and disrupt the natural springs that feed the river. Under the formal Water Framework Directive (WFD) 2016, the Wey is designated as a 'priority watercourse' for environmental improvement to 'encourage the recovery of priority habitats'. Yet while it has been defined as a priority case, the WFD classifies the Wey's current condition as 'poor'. For a headwater source, a 'poor' baseline condition is of grave concern as they have limited biological capacity to absorb disturbance or recover from

degradation – and that's without even considering the further and cumulative impacts downstream.

2. The planning application site is located on white chalk bedrock which is porous and permeable. Water can filter through it into the deep chalk aquifer beneath. As development across Alton has happened over time and covered much of the chalk outcrop, there is less opportunity for the white chalk to take in surface water and usefully direct it to recharge the deeper chalk aquifer below. Why does this matter? Well, the aquifer is the drinking water supply for Alton but with current levels of extraction, it is reducing. Furthermore, with the population of Alton threatened to boom further (with associated increases in water consumption), even more building on the exposed white chalk is unsustainable. The application site can be argued to be best reserved as a recharge point for the aquifer; development cannot be permitted when it will undermine the critical natural resources that sustain the town.

3. Key areas of the chalk bedrock in the Alton area are overlain by a poor draining clay and flint capping which cannot perform the same infiltration function as the chalk (clay is impermeable). This leads to surface run-off problems. Those who've observed the increasing number of documented flood events at parts of Will Hall Farm, along the Basingstoke Road, at the bottom of Brick Kiln Lane and additional sewage spills, have seen this increasing risk in action. More land under concrete means less natural infiltration of precipitation, greater surface run-off and thus worsened flooding where the clay acts as a natural 'ponding' mechanism.

4. Pollution risks to the River Wey, groundwater and our drinking water source aquifer. Beyond surface water flooding, the proposed development site and surrounding area is subject to regular groundwater flooding. As the groundwater rises and mounds, this increases the hydrostatic pressure on the adjacent aging sewer network. This pressure exacerbates groundwater infiltration into the sewage network, causing devastating external sewer flooding. This is important as high groundwater levels already overload the local sewage network – it's not a theoretical problem. During previous flood events, sewage has infiltrated properties near the site and flowed directly into the Wey.

More development also increases the pollution risk from contaminated urban run-off entering the chalk aquifer via infiltration through natural sink holes found on the application site. How does this pollution originate?

- Piling into the ground to support any new houses and their foundations, along with bore holes for run-off infiltration or other purposes risk contaminating groundwater and the aquifer due to the many pollutants and debris found in surface run-off. So this impact is felt both during construction and forever more post development.
- Contamination from nitrates and other nutrient mobilisation during flood events. Agricultural land presents a contamination risk that can be mobilised during flooding. Land disturbance (from building, for example) releases stored nutrients which harm groundwater. And, again, after construction stops, the use of chemicals in private gardens, simple activities like car washing and daily living continue to release chemical pollutants into the soil, groundwater and waterways. As can be seen, there are dangerous risks to the Wey, groundwater and the chalk aquifer from both site construction and ongoing presence of development thereafter. Yet, these have not been considered by the planning application assessments so far. Furthermore it cannot be guaranteed that any development will not adversely affect groundwater and the aquifer – the very source of our town’s drinking water – with unacceptable levels of water pollution.

On the positive side, these fundamental considerations are receiving increased scrutiny. In mid March, the North Wey Community Trust (NWCT) held a busy meeting in the Community Centre, providing a presentation, discussion and proposal on how we can approach these critical matters for

better protection of our chalk streams and aquifers. It was impressive to see so many Altonians present, sharing evident knowledge and deep understanding of local geology, hydrology, the current monitoring of natural springs and water quality rising from the chalk, biodiversity sampling and more. The NWCT shared well constructed policy proposals for submission to EHDC for the emerging Local Plan to ensure protection of the River Wey, its headwaters and our aquifers within planning and environmental law and regulations. I commend their work – please look out for future meetings and opportunities to get involved to support the NWCT.

What is absolutely clear is that far more work and assessment into the impact of the “Land North of Basingstoke Road” planning application (and every planning application for the Alton area) is demanded. The chalk and vital aquifer do not just reside under this specific site – the hydrogeology is similar across most of the town and (current) agricultural fringes. What’s needed includes a full investigation of each site plus the cumulative impacts of developments across the area including: groundwater depth mapping, an aquifer assessment, a contamination baseline study, a nutrient release risk assessment, an effective monitoring plan and full hydrometric studies. Among others, I call on the Alton Society, Alton Town Council, EHDC and even Hampshire County Council to make sure it does before anything in this or other planning applications can be determined. Many critical outcomes from such investigations will connect directly into our town’s infrastructure and hydro-geology – including the quality of the very water we all use and drink, plus our valued, yet much mistreated River Wey.

Yours faithfully, Martyn Edwards

The Nicky Branch Award for Excellence in English

The Alton Society has again partnered with Alton College Foundation to acknowledge and support one of its talented students.

This year, the Society presented the award for Excellence in English in honour of Nicky Branch to the talented Emily Hartwell. At interview, Emily impressed us with her enthusiasm for the subject and her ability to draw out and apply key lessons from the books she reads. While Emily is unsure of the career she wishes to pursue, she acknowledges the solid foundation her studies in English will provide.



Emily Hartwell is presented with the Award for Excellence in English by Ros Lynch from the Alton Society

AAF

ALTON ARTS FESTIVAL

Alton Arts Festival has released the full 2026 programme and all tickets are now on sale. The 10-day festival returns on 3rd – 12th July, bringing music, comedy, theatre and visual arts to venues across Holybourne, Alton and Chawton.

This second iteration of AAF brings you more of what you loved about the inaugural festival, held in 2024: intimate performances in Alton's favourite spaces. Lucy Porter's sparkling wit and feel-good comedy will fill the Assembly Rooms with laughter, while singer Jordan Mackampa will be bringing his smooth, soulful sounds to the stage, and we'll present live jazz and canapés in the beautiful garden of Jane Austen's House. All this in amongst a wide range of live music, theatre, literary and visual arts workshops that give everyone the chance to try something new.

Our Venues: Intimate Spaces, Transformed

"What made 2024 so special was the unexpected experiences people had in familiar spaces,"
says Festival Chair Annie Lancaster.

"The Assembly Rooms has always been a wonderful venue, but the atmosphere in the room when LYR performed, for 2024's launch event, was really something else. We're going to make the most of that this July with Katherine Priddy performing on Wednesday the 8th and Jordan on Friday the 10th. And then of course, the Assembly Rooms will also host the Alton Knees-Up on Saturday the 4th, making the most of that sprung floor for the town ceilidh!"

Alton Arts Festival 2026 The Full Programme is Here!



Goldfinch Books: Words, Stories and Sounds

Goldfinch Books is another special venue at the heart of the Alton Arts Festival. With new tech in place since the 2024 festival thanks to a grant from East Hampshire District Council, Goldfinch is now fully equipped to host a range of events. This year's programme includes live music from alt-folk duo Memorial (4th July) and singer-songwriter Naima Bock (9th July), a live-recording of the award-winning Failing Writers Podcast (5th July), and a conversation between award-winning authors Lou Morrish and Emma Darwin (5th July). The venue will also host workshops on editing, writing and drawing across the week.

"We have been delighted to be involved with Alton Arts Festival from the very beginning," says Gary Clark, owner of Goldfinch Books and one of AAF's four directors. **"We love bringing diverse events to the shop and seeing the impact those have on audiences. We have a very special community here and the festival both celebrates that and feeds it."**

Classical Music and Beyond

The festival will also present classical music events including the Cartref Chamber Collective (10th July) and 'Is Opera Boring? (11th July)', a unique blend of opera and comedy that pairs boogie-woogie pianist

3-12 JULY 2026

www.altonartsfestival.com



Mark Hoare & Lucy Mellors - Is Opera Boring?



Holly Searle aka The Subversive stitcher

Mark Hoare and opera singer and comedy writer Lucy Mellors for a behind-the-scenes look at the ‘glamorous’ business of opera.

As well as programming the contemporary music programme, festival director Richard Walters will also be performing his album ‘Songs from the Solent’, written as part of an artist residency with the Solent Seascape project.

Art Workshops and the Makers Fayre

Art workshops were a huge success in 2024, and Jackie King, the festival’s Visual Arts programming lead, is bringing a new selection to the fore this year – as well as bringing back some 2024 favourites. Workshops will include book-binding, tutored life drawing, craft activism with Holly Searle aka the Subversive Stitcher (award-winning maker of the Subverted Tea Towels series), and the return of the super-popular stone-carving workshop, which sold out before the festival programme was even printed last time around.

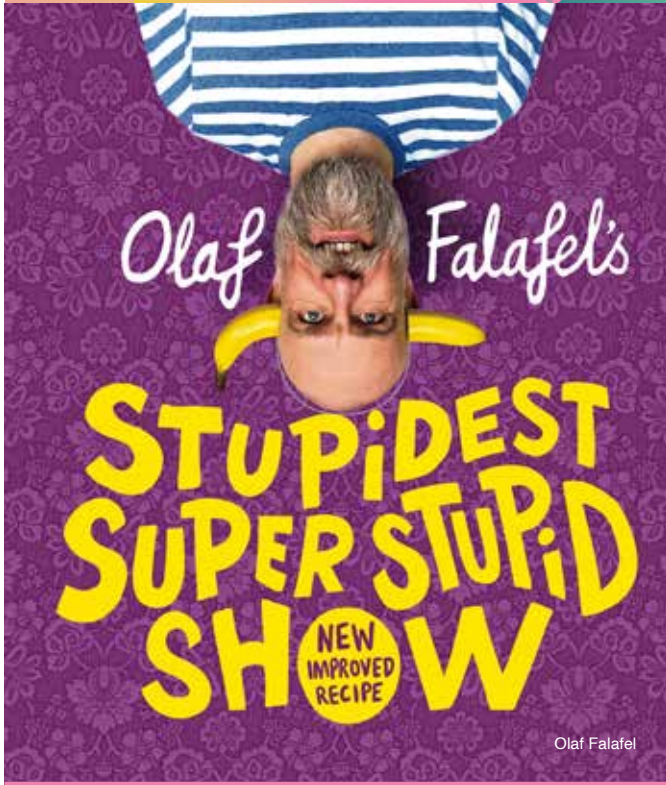
The festival has also partnered with Zooniverse Makers Market for a Makers Fayre on Saturday 4th July, bringing in new artists to sell their wares and share their processes through interactive experiences along the high street and into Market Square.

Something for Everyone For Children and Young People

For kids, AAF presents Olaf Falafel at Holybourne Theatre performing his ‘Stupidest Super Stupid Show’ – winner of the best Kids Comedy Show at the 2024 Leicester Comedy Festival – as well as the Children’s Illustration Workshop with Alton’s own Flossy Waters, and a theatre workshop run by renowned theatre company Frantic Assembly, sponsored by Alton Fringe Theatre.

A new programme of events at Alton Community Centre runs for pre-schoolers and the home school community on Monday 5th, Wednesday 7th and Friday 9th July. The three days will be hosted by three artists, running inclusive have-a-go workshops that will be free to access. Alton Town Council is also sponsoring Pumpkin Pantos’ production of Alice in Wonderland, which will play on the afternoon of Saturday 4th July in the Public Gardens, free to all.

“Our aim has always been to be as inclusive as possible, so we’re keeping ticket prices low and putting on more free events this year, thanks to generous sponsorship, the support of our fantastic patrons, and of course – lots of fundraising,” Annie says.



Olaf Falafel



The Failing Writers podcast



Alton Morris



Pumpkin Pantos

www.altonartsfestival.com

The Schools Programme: Reaching Every Child

This fundraising includes an application to the Alton Society, which is this year supporting the festival with a £2000 grant towards the AAF Schools Programme. “The Schools Programme is the festival’s outreach arm,” explains Helen Reeves, co-leader of the schools’ team. “This year we are going into 15 primary schools, two secondary schools and Treloar’s, providing a fantastic range of arts experiences at no cost to schools or families. With the support of our local schools, we’ve been able to secure dates ahead of the main festival, which we hope will give us time to showcase what the children create – from paintings and comic creations to eco themed sculptures – in an online exhibition that will run throughout the festival, with selected pieces being showcased at various festival venues”.

“The programme features a wonderful mix of creative workshops, many led by local artists: creative writing with Sarah Lucas (Putting Pen to Paper), illustration with Flossy Walters, movement and wellbeing with Laura Dymock (Yo-chi), practical techniques for focus, relaxation and emotional balance with Sara Wood (Natural Balance), dance with Boppin Dance School, and plenty of music thanks to generous support from Amery Hill, Eggars and Hampshire Music Service. Selected works will be exhibited at AAF venues and local gallery Freedom Through Expression. We can’t wait to show you what the children have created – made possible by the generosity of the Alton Society and other supporting organisations.”

For the community, by the community

The Schools Programme is a complicated jigsaw of scheduling, budgeting and programming, managed entirely by a team of two volunteers juggling jobs and caring responsibilities. It wouldn’t be possible without the £2000 grant from the Alton Society this year, supporting the festival’s commitment to inclusion. “Our committee is incredible,” says Annie. “We know how lucky we are and we absolutely couldn’t do this without them. But we’re surrounded by excellent examples of how valuable volunteers can be. There must be something in the water in Alton – it’s a town full of wonderfully generous people, and that’s one of

the reasons we were so determined to bring the festival back for a second year and give this community the celebration it deserves.”

And talking of volunteering, there is still time to register your interest in volunteering during the festival period. AAF welcomes applications via the website, www.altonartsfestival.com. Whether you can help with tech, ticket-checking, bar-tending, stewarding, or all of the above, the festival invites you to get involved. “We recommend buying tickets for the events you’d love to see first,” advises Annie, “as we can’t guarantee that you’ll get to see an event just because you’re volunteering for it. But we definitely welcome volunteers to help ensure everyone has the best possible experience – both audiences and artists alike.”

Book Early – Tickets Selling Fast

And speaking of buying tickets, did we mention they are **ON SALE NOW?**

Go to www.altonartsfestival.com for the full line-up. Tickets are sold via ticketing platform **WeGotTickets**.

“The best thing you can do to support the festival is to buy tickets!” Annie says. **“The more tickets we sell, the more likely we’ll be able to do this again.”**

Anything else to mention? **“Always,”** Annie laughs. **“There’s more going on than we can possibly make space for here. I haven’t even mentioned Party in the Park – our big celebration on the final day of the festival. Save the date – we’ll finish in style in the Public Gardens on 12th July. For now, though, I’d just say please do follow us on Facebook and Instagram, check out the website, and book your tickets early. We have small venues and limited capacities, so tickets tend to sell out fast. And of course don’t forget to spread the word. We want Alton to become a centre for arts and culture – everyone’s invited.”**

3-12 JULY 2026



Town Guides

In December 2025 Allan Chick stepped down as chairman of the Alton Town Guides after over 30 years at the helm. Allan, former Town & District Councillor and twice Town Mayor, was a founding member of this volunteer group.

A resident of Alton since 1974, Allan developed a keen interest in the town's history and initiated short history walks around Alton. This highlighted the demand for regular guided history walks around the town and, with Joan Richardson from the Mid Hants Railway and others, Allan went on to establish a group of town guide volunteers. This group of volunteers have for over 30 years been guiding town walks under Allan's guidance and leadership.

Now in his 90s, Allan has been a great supporter of the town, including doing his bit to support appropriate local development, particularly reflected in his efforts to ensure retention of the open space above the Greenfields estate. Allan's passion for Alton's local history includes the local brewing heritage, the English Civil war battle and the sad episode regarding Sweet Fanny Adams.

Local resident and Alton Society member Paul Ebutt has agreed to be the new Chairperson for the group and was ceremoniously handed the baton at their Christmas 2025 gathering (see photo).

Guided town history walks are held every 3rd Saturday of each month, meeting at 11am at the Cairn on the High Street. There is a small fee to support running costs.

In addition to the standard 90-minute town walk the group delivers special walks covering the following:

- Regency period & Jane Austen
- Alton & the English Civil War
- Alton pubs & brewery history

Look out for these walks in the Alton walking festivals and Alton Regency week.

Please encourage your friends and visitors to take advantage of these guided walks.

Special walks can be arranged upon request through Alton Town Council or the Community Centre.

So, it's many thanks to Allan and all the best for Paul and his colleagues as they look forward to another 30 years of entertaining Alton history.

Above left - Allan Chick with Paul Ebutt
Above right - (top) The Eight Bells pub in Church Street, (bottom left) Jane Austen statue in the Regency garden at the Assembly Rooms, (bottom right) St Lawrence Church

Swifts

Spectacular visitors from Africa that need our help



By Catharine Gale - Trustee of Hampshire Swifts

Swifts are supreme flyers. Their streamlined bodies, high aspect ratio wings, and ability to alter the shape and size of their wings make them highly aerodynamic and perfectly adapted to life in the air. They sleep, feed and mate on the wing. They only land to breed. When a Swift chick fledges, it will spend the next three to four years in constant flight. Swifts do not land on the ground or perch on buildings, trees or cables. They have short legs and tiny feet, with sharp claws that are perfect for clinging to vertical surfaces like brickwork – often necessary when they are looking for a nest site – but unsuitable for perching.

Swifts migrate from Africa to the temperate regions of Europe and Asia each Spring so they can take advantage of the seasonal abundance of flying insects. They feed on small insects and spiders known as aerial plankton that are found up to an altitude of several hundred metres. These insects are most numerous between May and August. That determines how long Swifts can spend in the UK as they need huge numbers of these insects to feed their chicks and themselves. Unlike Swallows and House Martins, who eat a wider variety of insects and can have two or three broods of chicks during the summer, Swifts have a single brood, usually of two or sometimes three chicks. It takes at least nine weeks to rear a Swift chick, around twice as long as it takes to rear a Robin chick, for example. Of all the bird species that migrate to the UK from Africa, Swifts are here for the shortest time – only three months. There are too few aerial insects in temperate regions during colder months for Swifts to survive here.

2000 years ago, Swifts nested in holes in trees or in cliffs. Now that is rare. Swifts are entirely dependent on buildings for nest sites. They look for small gaps high up where they can access a flat space to nest, such as under tiles or eaves. The nest is invisible from outside. Modern building techniques mean that houses built in the last 30 or so years rarely have any gaps, so most Swifts nest in older buildings. Thousands of nest sites are lost each year when buildings are demolished, or renovated, or when plastic soffits and fascias are installed. Swifts are faithful to their nest site, so once a pair find a site, they will return to it every year. If they return and find their nest site has been destroyed or is inaccessible, they may not breed that year unless a new nest site is available nearby.

Swifts are in catastrophic decline. Since 1994, data from the British Trust for Ornithology shows that their population has declined by 68% in the UK, while in the south-east of England, including Hampshire, they have declined by 75%. The loss of their traditional nest sites has made it much harder for them to find places to breed. Although survey data suggests that insects too are in decline for a variety of reasons, including climate change and overuse of pesticides, there has been no evidence yet to indicate that the long-term decline in Swifts is due to lack of their insect food.

Preserving existing nest sites and providing new nest sites is crucial to prevent Swifts becoming extinct in the UK. Thousands of new nest sites are needed to halt the decline. Hampshire Swifts is a charity set up in 2016 with the aim of stopping the decline of this >



Photos by Robert Booth



special bird and increasing their numbers. We provide advice on creating homes for Swifts using swift bricks, hollow nest bricks integrated into the walls of new buildings that provide permanent nest sites not only for Swifts but also for other endangered cavity-nesting birds such as House Sparrows and Starlings. We lobby local councils to make the installation of swift bricks in new buildings a condition of planning approval. We try to persuade developers to install one swift brick per home on average in new developments. A major part of our work is making and installing swift boxes. Since 2016 we have installed hundreds of swift boxes, on houses, flats, churches and workplaces. Our survey data suggests that putting up large numbers of nest boxes for Swifts can boost their numbers. In Winchester, where we have installed 566 swift boxes since 2018, the total number of identified swift nests rose from 241 in 2018 to 345 in 2025, an increase of 43%. Of these 345 swift nests, 176 (51%) were in boxes. This reflects both the loss of natural nest sites in the city and Swifts' readiness to use artificial nest sites.

Alton has long been an important area for breeding Swifts. The biggest colony is probably on St Lawrence's Church. When we last surveyed it, there were at least 18 pairs nesting behind the gutter on the spire. But in Alton, as in so many places, Swifts have lost many of their traditional nest sites and this loss continues as houses are renovated or plastic soffits and fascias installed. Nearly all the new housing estates that have been built in and around Alton provide nowhere on their homes for Swifts (or indeed Starlings and House Sparrows) to nest.

One exception is Cala Homes' Rivermead Gardens development, where under the developer's Urban Wildlife Strategy, there is on average one swift brick per home. To ensure that Alton's Swifts can easily find places to breed, all new buildings of at least two storeys high need to have swift bricks and many more swift boxes need to be installed on existing buildings.

If you would like to help Alton's Swifts by providing them with a safe place to rear their chicks, please contact us by emailing info@hampshireswifts.co.uk with your name, address, email and phone number. Most houses that are two-storeys high or more and have an open outlook are suitable for swifts. Swifts prefer to nest near other Swifts, so why not talk to your neighbours about putting up several swift boxes in your road. Make your road a 'Swift Street'.

Swifts are amazing and beautiful birds. The sound and sight of them racing, screaming over our rooftops is exhilarating and an essential part of summer. Let's make sure that continues. Our website is

www.hampshireswifts.co.uk

Catharine Gale will be expanding on her article at a talk titled 'Saving Hampshire's Swifts' at the Assembly Rooms on Thursday 23rd April at 7.30pm. In a joint venture with 'Hampshire Swifts' the Society will be unveiling a scheme that will provide and install a limited number of swift nesting boxes free of charge on qualifying properties (subject to a survey).

SAVING HAMPSHIRE'S SWIFTS

FREE
ENTRY

A talk by
Catharine Gale
from Hampshire Swifts

THURSDAY 23RD APRIL - 7.30PM
ALTON ASSEMBLY ROOMS

Sign up on the night for a **FREE SWIFT NESTING BOX** installed by Hampshire Swifts. Offer is subject to a (free) property survey and availability.



THE ALTON SOCIETY
www.altonsociety.org.uk

In association with
Hampshire Swifts
www.hampshireswifts.co.uk

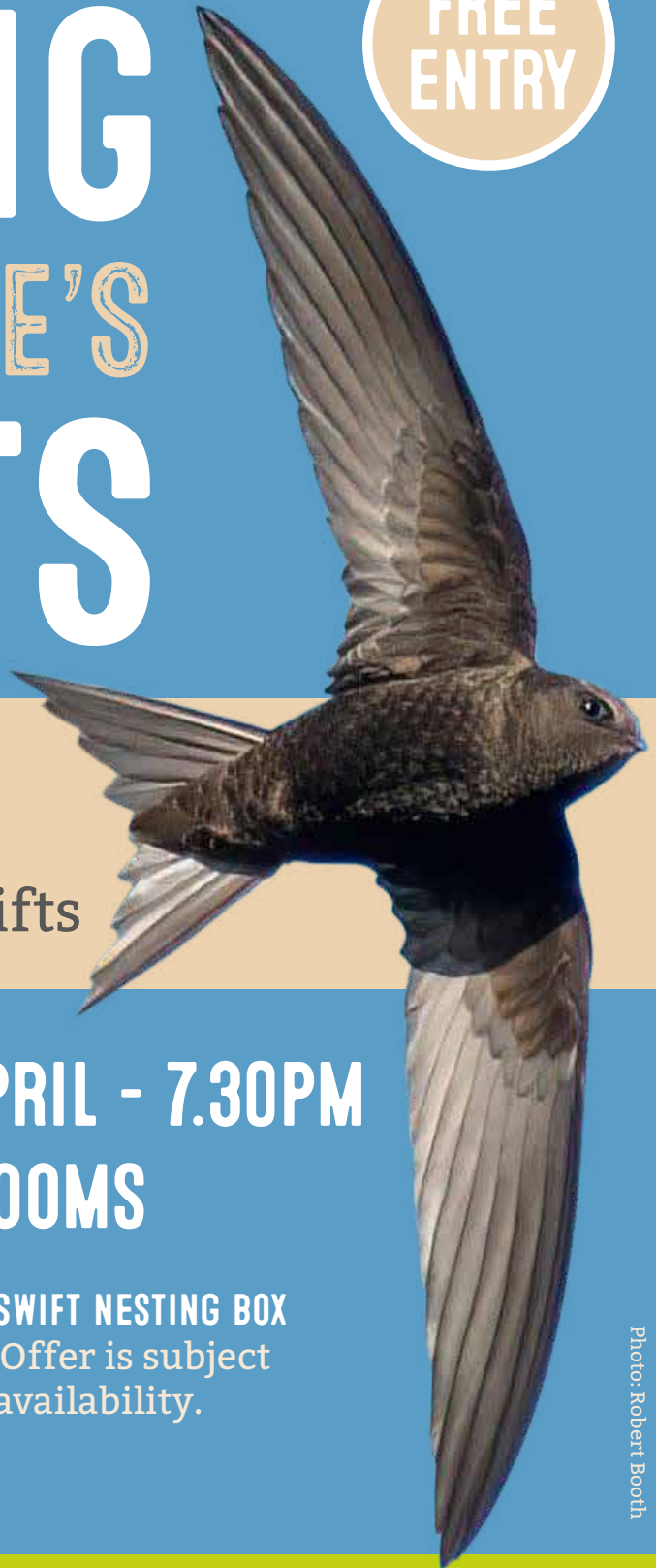


Photo: Robert Booth



ALTON SOCIETY

Join us **now** and have a say and a role
in the future of our town.
Check out our website
www.altonociety.org.uk

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