



The story so far. .

The Old Rectory, which is next to King Edward Place and just off the High Street, has stood empty since the Helmets Factory site closed in 2002. Since then, the building has been boarded up and has gradually deteriorated owing to lack of maintenance.

The current owners, Hammersmatch Ltd (based in Wheathampstead) have been trying to get planning permission to convert the building from office to residential use and to make extensive alterations to it. Successive applications since 2006 have been refused by St Albans District Council on the grounds that the proposed alterations would have a detrimental effect on the historic character and integrity of the building and the proposed parking arrangements and extension of residential garden into the walled garden area at the rear of the building (itself an important historical feature) was unacceptable. The latest application (5/2008/2228) has now gone to appeal.

Permission to demolish the adjacent former canteen building (not listed) and build a much larger office block was granted on appeal in January 2008. No construction work on this has begun.

It is well known that empty buildings are a regular target for vandals and arsonists, particularly if they look run-down or they can be broken into with little risk of being seen.

Wheathampstead has suffered serious arson attacks in the recent past. The Wheathampstead Cricket Club and the Tennis Club pavilions have both been targeted.



DISASTER STRIKES AT THE OLD RECTORY

A further disaster struck the beleaguered Old Rectory on 30 December when it suffered serious damage in a fire. The story pricked the conscience of the community and made headline news in the local press. The *Herts Advertiser* of 8 January ran a major article on page 5 under the heading "Village suffers its third arson attack", while the *St Albans & Harpenden Review* of 7 January carried the story on page 1: "Historic house in fire row" proclaimed its main headline.

This is how the news was reported by Alex Lewis in the *St Albans & Harpenden Review*.

“ The former rectory in King Edward Place, Wheathampstead, a Grade-II listed building at least 400 hundred years old, suffered damage to its roof, roof cavity and interior in a suspected arson last Tuesday.

Rick Sanderson of Wheathampstead & District Preservation Society said: "This building, thought to date from the 16th Century, is of great historic interest and stands within a walled garden adjacent to St Helen's Church.

"This was an accident waiting to happen. We have been concerned about the deterioration of the building for several years and have been pressing the district council to take enforcement action to get the owners to preserve it, or at least to make it completely secure and weathertight until its future can be decided. /Cont'd on p.2

Annual General Meeting: Friday, 27th February 2009

8 pm, Memorial Hall, Marford Road, Wheathampstead All are welcome

Heartwood Forest

Our guest speakers will be **Alistair Crosby** and **Louise Neicho** from The Woodland Trust. Members will have an opportunity to ask questions about how the site is going to be developed and managed and how the local consultation process will work.

WDPS needs your help ...

Enclosed with this Newsletter is a nomination form for you to nominate someone or put yourself forward to join the WDPS Committee. This is your opportunity to do something for the community and to get involved in matters which presumably, as a member of WDPS, you are interested in.

Some current members of the Committee have served for many years, and feel that it is time for someone else to take on the role. In particular, Chairman Rick Sanderson has been on the Committee since 1997 and Chairman since 2003. Vice-Chairman Nigel Oxley has been on the Committee since 2003.

We really need some fresh blood on the Committee if WDPS is to survive and thrive. We have not had a Secretary – only a Minutes Secretary – for the past 5 years, and this is a post we would particularly like to fill. But there are vacancies also for ‘ordinary’ committee members – the Committee has been under-strength for several years.

So please consider ‘doing your bit’. The duties are not onerous – the Committee meets every 4–6 weeks on average – and, who knows, you may even have some fun.

If you would like to discuss this on a 'without prejudice' basis, please ring Rick Sanderson on 01582 832449

Disaster strikes at the Old Rectory

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“Some work to board up the building was done a few weeks ago, but this has proved to be ineffective because a gap in the fence was left at the corner of the site. This lack of effective action has resulted in further erosion of our conservation heritage.”

What needs to happen now

Since the fire, the Old Rectory has been boarded up again and a temporary repair has been made to the roof, but in our view this is not good enough. The building is not weather proof and access to the site can still be gained through gaps in the fencing.



Fire damage to the Old Rectory's roof

The Council have powers under the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 to take action where a historic building has deteriorated to the extent that its preservation may be at risk. They can serve an Urgent Works Notice or a Repairs Notice requiring the owners to carry out specified work on the property within a set time period. We think that this should be done without waiting for the result of Hammersmatch's appeal to convert the building to residential use.

The Old Rectory is part of the heritage of Wheathampstead. It should not be left to rot and be vandalised while the owners and the planners argue about how best to make use of it.



Winter was not so bleak

WDPS was one of twenty organisations that took part in the Christmas Tree Festival at Wheathampstead United Church just before Christmas.

Our tree (see left), sensitively decorated by Sonja Fillingham on the theme of the carol “In the bleak mid-winter”, was voted the second most popular. Well done, Sonja.

Subscriptions for 2009

Please note that membership subscriptions – £5 per household – are now due for 2009. Our thanks go first of all to those who have already paid.

Paying is much easier if you do it by Standing Order. If you don't already pay this way and would like to, please complete the enclosed form and send it to your Bank.

Every member is another voice to be heard – so please continue to support WDPS.