

# With Our Ears to the Ground

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**Project Credits**

Total book is 6,500 words

# With Our Ears to the Ground

## Introduction

In mid 2009 we (arts organisation Proboscis) travelled around Hertfordshire meeting over 280 people from Watford, Stevenage, North Hertfordshire and Broxbourne. We set out on an autumn day to drive up through Cheshunt, Broxbourne and Hoddesdon, over to Ware and Stevenage then Letchworth, up to Ashwell, down to Pirton, Hitchin across to Watford and back to London. It was a journey through old and new; market towns, new towns, agricultural land and urban centres. In the weeks that followed we put our ears to the ground and got to know Hertfordshire and its communities through the stories of its people. We researched urban centres, towns and villages and travelled through the county in cars, trains, by cycle and on foot, on narrow lanes and motorways.

We talked to people in groups, individually, inside, outside, in pubs, cafes, community centres, libraries, at home and at work. We gathered their opinions and experiences of their communities, what it's like living in their neighbourhoods and what gives them a sense of belonging. These experiences, whilst locally specific, are relevant to Hertfordshire as a whole. We met people between the ages of 5 and 94, from many cultures and backgrounds, from small organisations, schools, community groups, urban centres and rural villages. We captured their views through informal conversations on the street, hosting a stall at the local market and visiting community groups. We ran a creative workshop with a youth group and collected stories through other activities and events. From this research emerged the six themes of Transport, Movement, Listening, Community, Getting Involved and Perceptions, which now form the basis for this book. In all this we've taken Proboscis' an archaeology approach, to informally and creatively excavate layers of meaning and understanding to get beneath the surface of some of Hertfordshire's communities. Our enduring experience of this journey has been of the generosity of the people, the ambition of their ideas and the determination and commitment they devote

to building their communities.

This book draws together the multiple layers of ideas and experiences we found across different communities and it is designed to reflect those ideas and voices. It can be read in any direction and you can interweave the pages of the three sections as you read, to find new perspectives.

by Alice Angus and Orlagh Woods, Proboscis 2009

## Background

With Our Ears to the Ground is a project by arts organisation Proboscis. It was commissioned by Green Heart Partnership with Hertfordshire County Council. It builds upon previous consultations, by Hertfordshire County Council, that used traditional surveys to find out how well people from different backgrounds get on with each other. This publication and the project research will be presented to the community, Council Members and Project Team to inform the Hertfordshire Forward Community Cohesion Strategy, equalities planning across the county, and to support the partners to build stronger communities where people feel valued, get along well together and feel they belong.

# Part 1

# Transport

## Introduction

From senior citizens to young people and commuters, people described how their neighbourhoods are defined by transport networks; affecting access to local facilities and public spaces where people come together to build communities. These physical aspects influence the flow of people, who they meet and how their communities interconnect.

Major roads like the A41, A505 and the M1 can define the movement of people and their access to common spaces. Often simple changes, like a lollipop lady, can make a positive difference. The roads can prevent communities from connecting with those on the other side, but can also form a protective barrier allowing neighbourhoods to develop defined communities with a sense of identity.

Disputes within neighbourhoods can be caused by something as simple as inadequate parking. Access to transport and parking also has an impact on the ability of people to participate in their communities; with the elderly and disabled often most affected.

## Transport Quotes

Especially with winter coming, we've got a couple of older ladies who might not come out to the Leavesden Community Café when it's freezing cold and raining so it'd be nice if we could do something for them to get some sort of transport organised.

We asked for a grant as we needed some money for a bus to collect the older people to come to Watford Muslim Women's Group and we got it. We need more money to continue.

Typical story, wife's had a stroke, he's the carer, usual situation, and we're trying to give them both a break to come to the Italian Club. My transport is full at the moment so what do you do? You have to prioritise. Is there someone on the bus that can get public transport 'cause they have a free bus pass or a lift from a neighbour, but you also need the appropriate driver to look after that disabled person.

If it wasn't for being collected to come to the Douglas Drive Day Centre, I'd never leave the house.

It's all to do with finance, there's a ramp the other end but he struggles walking there.

I'm still waiting to hear about a rail to help us get down the steps

You come up Six Hills in Stevenage and there's a roundabout there. You come down you've got one there, you come up you've got a little one there, you've got another one there. Yeah you've got roundabouts coming out your eyes.

One of the most successful schemes is SCooTS. The rural scooter transport scheme in North Herts provides a loan scooter for people living in a rural area to go rural to rural, rural to urban or urban to rural, just not urban to urban. It's enabled people to remain in their village.

I used to walk quite a lot. You meet a lot of people while you're walking... I think people get to know the dogs more than their owners

If you miss the bus that's it, you have to wait for an hour. If you stand at the village bus stop someone mad like me will pick you up.

You don't go out to catch a bus, You go to catch THE bus.

The bus from Pirton to Hitchin is very social.

I drive most places, which restricts you from meeting people, rather than walking.

It had more shops and more life but they put a one way system through and destroyed the centre. Hoddesdon's not been the same since.

It's important for older people to be able to walk to the community centre or they get isolated.

People only talk to each other if there is a problem, if there is a disaster on the train, and people might have to share cabs home from the station.

Commuting by train you feel you know people, but obviously you never speak to them. Sometimes you see people out and think, "I know you" you think, "where do I know you from", then you realise it's from the train and you don't know them at all.

I've seen people on the train for the last 10 – 15 years. I don't know who they are or what they do.

I quite like commuting because it gives me the opportunity to wind down after work... I put my brain in neutral.

Sometimes because of the way the houses are built and the lack of car parking, the closeness does produce disagreements. It's also part of the government initiative to make people use public transport... sustainable modes of transport or something. Some of the roads are so narrow people have to park on the pavement to let cars pass.

Both of us being blind we needed to know there was public transport and the sales office said, "Oh yes, there's a bus"... We didn't think to check that it only goes in a circular route in one direction... If I wanted to go two or three stops in the opposite direction that would be impossible.

I had a bad accident several years ago. I was knocked down in London while out with my guide dogs. In Stevenage, it's all pedestrianised, I can take my grand-daughters out which I would never have done in London. It's given me my confidence back.

**End of part 1.**

# Part 2

## Movement

### Introduction

Moving house, moving to find work, for school, for a better quality of life; being relocated or rehoused, immigrating, commuting or migrating. We met people who can trace their heritage back to the 1200s, people who have just moved from other parts of the UK, longstanding Gypsy residents, old and new immigrants and people who came to Hertfordshire several generations ago from all over the world, from places as different as India and Italy, and built new communities.

We heard about the importance of a sense of belonging, certainty about home, support networks and understanding how a community works. People can find it hard to readjust when they relocate outside of the community they have lived in for a long time. Communities are constantly changing with new people moving into areas. Local government policies have a huge impact on communities, for example when traveller sites are moved or people rehoused. Relocation of businesses can affect communities by forcing people who are settled to move. Migrant workers can feel isolated from the wider community. Some new immigrants mentioned the difficulty of finding work in a profession they were qualified for.

Many families teach their children about both their native culture and British culture. People talked about appreciating and enjoying differences and the rich diversity of the people, their languages, music, art, traditions and food.

## **Movement Quotes**

Broxbourne is a mixed community. A lot of people work in London and yet they don't really seem to come together anywhere here. All through this area there are similar groups of people but where do they get together? Where do they meet? I think they get together in London.

New people move in, you don't know them. You know them to see of course but if they're young, they're out at work.

Feeling part of a community is more important since we moved here because this is the place we will probably settle. We lived in and around London and always felt a bit transient before.

The Meriden estate was built in the 50s and 60s. A lot of new people came to live here. There was no facility on the estate and the residents decided they needed a centre that could be used for families and kids, so they went around door to door collecting money, 2s 6d a week, and bought their own building.

Been in Stevenage two weeks. It's clean. It's green. I grew up in Tottenham so it's great.

I've been at this gypsy site for years, I'm no further forward. I can still get 28 days notice, even after living here for more than 20 years.

I moved out of my mum's, then went to a hostel and then they put me into St Nicks. I don't belong there. I'm a loud person, I like going out clubbing but it's for old people, you can't play your music loud. The old people think I'm too loud but they forget I'm a teenager.

Initially it was really difficult moving to Great Ashby because they were still

building the road that I lived in. There were only two houses that were lived in so there was nobody around apart from builders.

Something's got to be done to help the youngsters that live in Stevenage get further up that ladder to have a place of their own. Some of them can't afford a mortgage or private rent.

The community is changing; there's a different aspect of the community now, there are other languages being taught and when you walk up the high road you hear mostly Eastern European languages, Polish in particular.

If you smile at someone...

We're Geordies, we're Scots, we're Londoners, we're Irish, we're poor, we're rich.

I enjoy living here but my employer has moved to Milton Keynes. My wife doesn't want to move, she doesn't want to move the kids from schools, they're settled here.

9 times out of 10 you'll get a smile back – you get out what you put in.

I've been here 46 years, I married into Pirton from Letchworth. When I first came to the village I did potat'ering and pea picking, my neighbour used to say, "Lovely, isn't it, out there in the fields" and I'd be thinking, "I'd rather be behind a desk!"

We came over here from Sicily with a work permit to give our family a better way of life.

I speak in Italian, he speaks in English, our children had to learn both languages.

I spent most of my life here. I belong here more than my homeland of Bangladesh.

I have lived here about 25 years. My grandfather helped set this gypsy site up. There were only 10 pitches originally. We're saddened because they want to take it away from us... They think they know what's best for us. If they were to move this site now, shift it and make it bigger, it would be ruined. It would destroy this peaceful community.

Apparently it takes about 20 years to fully integrate. It's the second generation who feel part of it.

I was born in Wales, my mum's Scottish, dad's Irish, my kid's think they're English.

I spent most of my life here. I belong here more than my homeland of Bangladesh. We are here, our children have been brought up here so we belong here. When we go back, we love it but we can't fully relate. Things have changed over time and we were not part of that.

When I was a girl, people hadn't moved into Pirton. It was a fairly static population. All my grandparents were in the village and that wasn't unusual. When the estate was built there was nearly a riot (1960s) there was quite a distrust of strangers... People no longer live near their family generally speaking, so their friends become their supporters, whereas generations ago it was the family they turned to.

**End of Part 2**

# Part 3

## Listening

### Introduction

Everywhere we visited people talked about how important it is to be listened to, to have a voice and to be able to express themselves. People find means and environments for communication from noticeboards, joining groups and meeting up in public and private spaces to social networking tools like facebook, bebo and instant messaging. People value safe informal groups and common spaces to socialise with friends and those in a similar situation; environments where people of all ages can be at ease.

The recession has affected many people who have lost their jobs and with it a social network, leaving them feeling alone. It seems particularly bad for older people whose networks can be small to begin with.

A common concern was how well people's voices were being heard by local government decision makers. Without a voice their ability to sustain the energy and enthusiasm to contribute to their community was eroded. Some Community Development Officers talked about their approach to listening to their community and encouraging people to have a voice. Communities find different ways to connect and for their voices to be heard be it through networks, residents groups, newsletters, the internet, local shops, amateur radio and interest groups.

### Listening Quotes

I mix with non-travellers at work, but going out I mix with my own community.

I was working with Irish and Scottish people in Hitchin for 35 years. We laughed. We were good friends.

You lose all trust because as a child the council men would come and they'd be very nice to you. Then the next morning they'd come to throw you off the gypsy site.

You become more aware of what people need here in Leavesden so you become sort of the voice of the residents.

The area is somewhat cut off from neighbouring areas by the A41. Many people have to cross it regularly. Children go to school on the other side, people access shops on other side. They find it quite dangerous. A lollipop lady at school times would help.

As a foreigner, networks don't exist. Your roots are not so defined. Your perception of people is not the same because you haven't grown up in this country.

In Leavesden, we send a newsletter every quarter to say who we are and what we're doing. We go out on foot and distribute them. There's a noticeboard. We give notices to the local shop who does it for free. The Trust promotes things.

Lots of people in the Broxbourne community think that the council don't listen to them. People are saying that there's no point in trying to communicate because no-one listens. It deadens the enthusiasm when you don't get anywhere.

What would make your community stronger?

There are a lot of opportunities for people to get their voice heard but they don't always know how to do it.

There are some people in the village (Pirton) who are very isolated... older people who have been in the village many years don't feel on the same plane as new people, they speak a different language, well it's not a different language but a different outlook.

We make people welcome in Kimpton by knocking on their door, talking to them. People are accepted for who they are and not what they do.

If you live in a village people do know what you do but if you don't ask questions you don't get to know what is happening with people and that's how you come to care for them. It's not being nosy... well sometimes it is.

If communities can have a belief in themselves, it will happen, and our job as Development Officers is to come alongside and encourage them. You have to make sure that everyone gets heard. Listening is absolutely critical, showing a willingness to move, asking people for solutions.

I didn't get a chance to enroll at the time and they said, "We can't take you again until next September." So really, what can I do until I go to college and get my grades? Be a bum? 'Cause there's no work out there, I've tried every shop in Stevenage.

I'm a gardener, I work mostly with pensioners, they've been cutting me back a few hours and a few had to stop completely cause they couldn't afford to pay me anymore. It's hard for them too, they enjoy the company; it's like a win-win situation, they get the garden done and have a good old chat. All they want to do is talk as they're on their own most of the time. I know that feeling well – it's a shame as I really enjoyed it.

My neighbours are a Spanish family. They're young people. The father is English, mother is German, he married a Spanish girl so they have lovely cultural colours. They understand people.

What I love about my church is the fact that 'cause it's so new, everybody

knows everybody. I get a huge sense of community. It's fantastic that you can spend hours going from one person to another saying, "hi, how're you doing" and share a bit of your story. They know what's going on in your life and you know what's going on in their life.

**End of Part 3**

# Part 4

## Community

### Introduction

What is a community? What makes you want to be part of a community? What communities do you feel part of? What gives you a sense of belonging? What makes a neighbourhood a good place to be? Is it trust and respect? Is it sharing and contributing? Is it communicating with each other and strong leadership?

From school students, supported learners and youth groups to parents, commuters and senior citizens there are many everyday issues that are the same and many similar ideas about community. People talked about the various communities they belong to; geographical, physical or virtual communities as well as communities based on friendships, ethnicity, religion, background and shared interests. Despite the communities themselves being very different the qualities that people valued were similar such as friendliness, trust, humour and respect.

Places like markets are often as important for their sense of community as they are for what they sell. In spaces where many people wouldn't expect it, such as a skatepark, it is possible to find a warm and strong community of people who look after each other. Informal communities can be as important to people as formal ones.

### Community Quotes

I think people don't consider school as a community, because it's drummed into your head that community is the world around you.

Children that live in a community and have a sense of it have more confidence in themselves, feel proud of their community, they have things

in common. My daughter learnt from home and then when she went into the wider community, those things were reinforced again.

When the council ran the bar area (of Meriden Community Centre) they had a policy of no children. We turned it into a family bar. I've never been of the understanding that parents should be in one place and their kids should be in another. We have a park out here and during the day we have the doors all open, parents can be in here and their kids out there. Members all know each other and look out for the kids.

Our sense of belonging has dwindled over the years.

I don't think it's just people that make up a community because you can have a bunch of people but yet none of them interact with each other. I think it's people having a desire to fellowship. Where people actually want to get to know others, share their life with others. I think size has something to do with community. If it's not so big that you can get lost.

When you work, you feel part of the working community. At home we have another community. When we come here it's fun. People love to come now. We're part of the Muslim community. We are very empowered women. We make decisions, we influence. We all have a good knowledge of life.

A lot of people here in Kimpton look after each other. If we look after each other, look out for each other then, whatever position you are in, it makes it all work doesn't it?

People were more social 40 or 50 years ago. There were more terraced houses, people mingled more, now it's different. I don't miss it, as I like to keep to myself. I like my privacy.

Parents now go out to work, you don't have that open door policy you had with neighbours, interaction, walking kids to school. People need to work to give families a better quality of life. A lot of people commute and are not around much. They leave early in the morning and are back late at

night. You don't have time to know your neighbours. We're all fragmented now.

Great Ashby is still developing. It's quite nice, it's calm, quiet and green. It's a big change from Morocco.

Watford market is my community.

Getting back to your community. I think that's where young people get it from. They see that their parents have been festival volunteers. A festival they've enjoyed since being a toddler so they feel they can contribute as well. There's a general enabling expectation that they can get involved. Working in the market, one thing I have realised is how many people need someone to talk to. For a lot of people it's a social experience. It's not just about buying food.

I come to Watford market to get my shopping. This is empty. It used to be you couldn't move in here once upon a time.

I'm living in Hitchin over 50 years, there have been a lot of changes. The community, that's the only thing we can appreciate. Everything else is going down. In town half the shops are shut now.

People make the community but a school and meeting area are important too.

Your community can be focused on a subject and that's the only thing you share or it can be a community of friends where you have some things in common but you are your own person at the same time.

You might know the neighbours next to you and across from you but you don't know your entire road. I have people down my road that I don't even recognise.

Flo next door, she's 70, she's lovely. She talks to me over the garden.

In Pirton, everyone speaks to each other. Everyone is friendly whether you know them or not, people wave; you don't always know them!

Getting out on a Monday night with the girls, having a moan, socialising. There were 15 of us in the darts team... You could have a right old laugh.

Community is knowing people you can rely on, people you can trust with your spare keys, who will look in on your cat.

You've got to put yourself out, to push yourself, it can't be one sided.

There are a lot of football groups, that's a common identity between a lot of people in terms of the teams they support.

How long have you been here?

(chatting with two members at Meriden community bar)

1962 I moved onto this estate.

I was going to say half past 7.

I've been a member of this club for years since it first opened.

I've been here so long I've worn a hole in the carpet.

You certainly don't get any trouble in here fighting or all that, it's just all mates really I suppose.

Like a big extended family.

We come down here to insult each other.

Don't know what we'd do without it, we'd sit indoors and watch telly.

**End of Part 4**

# Part 5

## Getting Involved

### Introduction

Hertfordshire is as diverse in people as it is in environments. Despite the many differences in the communities we met, there was a shared sense that to develop communities that are safe and welcoming people have to get involved. There were inspiring stories of people taking the initiative to build their own community centre, set up youth groups and organise BBQs for residents. In some places people had come together around local concerns such as town plans, airport extensions and schools while others had set up groups just to meet and socialise.

People have busy and pressured lives with less time to invest in their communities. Some feel there has been a loss of social responsibility through the generations, possibly as a result of these time pressures, and that it is important for parents and others in the community to set an example to younger people. Many young people do feel a responsibility towards their community. However some people may not be aware of or feel able to access existing support channels to help them to get involved in the wider community. Commuters and working families can lack time and finance to be part of community activities and many people are more able to contribute when they retire or are not working.

### Getting Involved Quotes

Time is of the essence, because unless people in the community have got time, money and energy, then the community doesn't happen. You just get individuals shutting their doors and not interacting. People have less time. They're trying to fit more into their time which is taken up doing other things.

If you're a single parent and working you don't have time in the evening to

run round joining other organisations. The pressures on people, particularly families, are extremely heavy.

One thing about this Gypsy site, everyone gets on. This site is one in a million. If you walked out and left your car with keys and everything, nothing would happen to it. If we had an old person here, we'd knock to see if they were ok. In other places they're just left alone.

In the good old days, we were taught social responsibility weren't we? Nowadays, that doesn't seem to happen.

When people are in the position where they have anxiety for work, money, health, it is not good for the community or family.

Some people might not think they have the skills. It's not about skills, it's about coming in and doing what you can, it's about having the guts to come in and join a group and feeling like you can be part of it.

We've got the youth club up and running here in Leavesden. A few of us mums got a bit of training and we run it now for 11 to 16 year olds. It saves them hanging around parks and looking for stuff to do.

What's lacking is younger people with a community ethos. We all joined Round Table at a very young age because we wanted to do something in the community.

Lots of Polish people are offering to do voluntary work. It means that their confidence has grown.

There's a petition to get a skate park. I don't think the council want it. They don't realise how many people skate. On a Saturday you can hardly move for so many people of all age groups. Younger ones go to older ones for help, the older ones keep the younger ones out of trouble. It's a real community, an informal community.

Because I worked, I was out of the drive at 5am not back sometimes until 12 at night. I got involved when I retired.

Success breeds success. You see somebody doing something and think, "I could do that" and there is an expectation that you'll contribute.

Because I have children I naturally get involved and get to know about events through them and through my work.

There are people who live in the village who don't enter into it, that's their choice. People have that right, if they want, to have a quiet life in the country.

We have elderly neighbours who are very neighbourly, who will knock on the door to give you stuff from their garden, but that is very much, I find, a dying tradition.

Some of the most effective people in fact are the older ones. It's a case of attitude and having the time to do it.

I've noticed that with community groups, the majority are made up of people that don't work or are retired.

People spend more time indoors and not outside, we used to come out and join together in our streets to celebrate things.

I'd bring all the teenagers together and go somewhere like bowling, just to get all the teenagers that actually want to do something with their lives and who can't find work together, to help them look for work to change their lives.

**End of Part 5**

# Part 6

## Perceptions

### Introduction

How do we perceive others? How do we learn about other communities and cultures? Our information comes from many sources but often it is when you personally get to know people and places that you can begin to have a new understanding of them. A lot of communities thought that media was a large contributor and at times had an influence on how they were treated by others in the community while others mentioned that language, cultural differences and local knowledge had an effect on how they were perceived and their ability to interact with the wider community.

Some communities felt strongly that their culture was not always well understood and that unbalanced press can reinforce negative stereotypes. Many thought that this contributed to tension as it made different groups wary of interacting with each other. This was especially apparent with the young people, Gypsy, Muslim and Polish communities we spoke to.

There was concern about young people and their future. Some people suggested that more resources for young people would improve the community for everyone. A number of young people hoped for opportunities for people of all ages to interact informally and provide good role models for the next generation.

### Perceptions Quotes

It's the media who says that Muslims are like that, Muslim women are like that, they can't speak the language, they can't understand the language, there is negative stereotyping against Muslims which is not right. In our country we learnt English, we studied English as a subject, all the courses are in English. We're educated women. I was an English teacher in my country.

A lady came to our gypsy site because she'd lost her dog. She said "I'm surprised. Where are the campfires? Where's the violinists?" I said, "People don't live in igloos do they?"

I came because of my family. The work I'm doing is not good work if you look at the qualification I have from Poland. I'm a Maths Teacher and I used to work at a High School in Poland. I now work as a care assistant.

You are scared of what you don't know aren't you? If you see groups of kids hanging around you might be intimidated. But usually if you know them, if you know their parents, you know its not so intimidating.

For ever old people have been scared of young people, look at the Punks and Rockers.

Most jobs now, you've got to be over 18, you've got to have experience, you've got to have a top CV, no criminal record. I'm kinda screwed on that one, that's why I ain't got a job. If you lie about your criminal record you get found out.

I'm a teenager myself, I don't really want to be associated with old people cause they see teenagers as threatening. So I was just thinking like, if you were to get teenagers and old people together to show that not all of us are as bad as people make out in the news. I think it's really bad that teenagers get knocked down for wearing hoodies and hanging around the shops. There's not really much more we can do, there's no jobs out there so we just think, "sod it" and hang around the shops.

I'm nineteen. It's not as if I'm walking home in my school uniform pushing my son. Yet they obviously assume, "teenage mum, got to come from rough background". They don't want to take the time to get to know us.

There are a lot of youngsters around causing trouble, they congregate in town and are quite threatening.

Hanging out in town is how I get to see all my friends from the boys' school and the girls' school and my old school.

There is a point where you have to say, "No you are being unreasonable, the kids are behaving themselves. Yes, you may not like what they are doing but that's not a reason for stopping them."

This is 2009. 60 years ago, lots of people were put down then but laws have changed now. This is England. It's supposed to be one of the richest countries in the world. Why should they be putting one race of people down? Why should we move?... When children grow up on a gypsy site, they're frightened to say where they're from. The young people have problems getting a job if the employer knows this address.

In my community...

I saw a fox,

I saw the pub, shops, chip shop,

I saw a cat and a man smoking,

I saw a tree a road and an aeroplane,

I saw a red flower and a broken glass,

I saw myself,

I saw a load of people at the youth club,

I saw my house,

Apparently we saw a train going up a tree,

I never saw two men shooting each other,

I saw Darren,

I saw houses, dogs,

I saw the green, football, cricket, cycling down Fairlands,

Nothing else.

**End of Part 6**

# Find out More

To find out more or share your thoughts about your community see;  
<http://withourearstotheound.wordpress.com>

Tel: Hertfordshire County Council Strategic Partnerships Unit: 01992  
556709

For information on volunteering in Hertfordshire see  
[www.volunteeringherts.org](http://www.volunteeringherts.org)

With Our Ears to the Ground was created by Proboscis 2009 for more  
information on Proboscis see [www.proboscis.org.uk](http://www.proboscis.org.uk)

# Thanks

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The photographs in this book are of Hertfordshire during 2009.

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