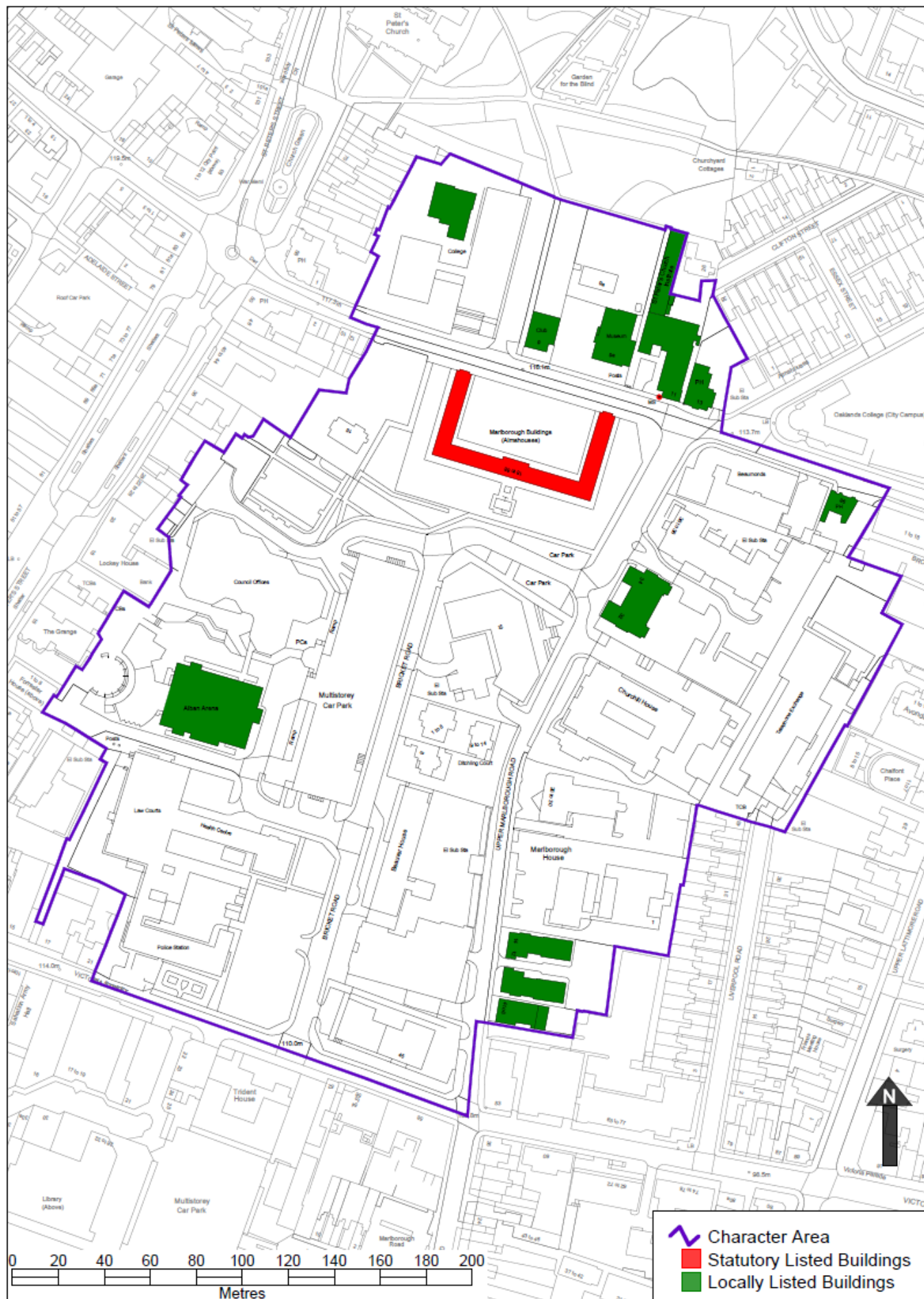


# ***Character Area 4b Hatfield Road and the Office Core***







## AREA 4B: HATFIELD ROAD AND THE OFFICE CORE

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## Area 4b: Hatfield Road and the Office Core

*Bricket Road, Charter Close, Civic Close, Civic Centre, Hatfield Road (part), Upper Marlborough Road and Victoria Street (part)*

### Scheduled Monuments

None

### Listed Buildings

*Hatfield Road*

Malborough Buildings (grade II)

### Locally Listed Buildings

*Civic Close*

Alban Arena

*Hatfield Road*

Old School r/o former College of Art (now Alban City School), Liberal Club, former Museum of St Albans, 11, 13 (Peacock P.H)

*Upper Marlborough Road*

Evens: 4-14 (incl), 32, 34

*Victoria Street*

Odds: 53

Evens: 50, 52-54 (incl), 58



*The Marlborough Almshouses, Hatfield Road (grade II listed).*



*The Albans Arena (locally listed) as seen across the Civic Square.*



*The former Museum of St Albans on Hatfield Road (locally listed).*



*The Peacock P.H. (locally listed), looking east down Hatfield Road.*



## Area 4b: Hatfield Road and the Office Core

### Character Summary

This character area is central within the city and is linked to Area 4a, being located to the east of St Peter's Street. The Office Core Character Area is bordered by Hatfield Road, Victoria Street, St Peter's Street and Upper Marlborough Road. The character of the area is varied and its special interest is centred on a master planned 1960s Civic Centre which was superimposed on an area which was mostly within the medieval boundary of the town. Garden areas associated with large residential properties of the C17 and C18 are still represented by landscaped areas

between the buildings, some of which are good examples of mid C20 civic buildings. Most of the remaining historic buildings are from the Victorian period. The buildings and activities of the area today are broadly commercial rather than residential, and include local government buildings, two law courts, health centre, car park, police station, government offices, a telecoms building (former telephone exchange), education and recreation (public house, theatre and museum). However, there are a number of residential properties including Marlborough



*The master-planned Civic Centre is key to the character of this area.*



*Landscaped areas evoke the gardens of large, C17-18, residential properties.*

## Area 4b: Hatfield Road and the Office Core

### History and Buildings

Historically, this character area was mostly within the medieval boundary of the town, of which Upper Marlborough Road was one boundary then called Tonman Ditch. The Hare map of 1634 shows the area as being gardens or fields backing onto large houses along St Peter's Street (covered in Area 4a). This map also shows an inn called "The Peacock", on the site of the present public house of the same name and evidence of a medieval Manor of Newlane or Squillers, roughly on the site of the present Duchess of Marlborough Almshouses. This fine C18 listed building, which was refaced in the C19, remains in the same function, and the building and grounds have retained the same basic form of an open courtyard to the north, facing Hatfield Road, and enclosed gardens to the south<sup>1</sup>.

Victoria Street, previously known as Shropshire Lane, was also in existence during this period, but was a minor route. This changed in the Victorian era when this road became of greater importance due to the connection with the Midland Railway (1868). There are still some two and three storey buildings on Victoria Street dating from this era, such as the old St Peter's Brewery and hat factories. Other Victorian development included the entirely new Bricket Road, which was truncated by the almshouses plot. Nothing remains of buildings or plots on the western side and only one house, no. 8, on the east. Other plots have been infilled but many are still well landscaped with large trees and therefore reminiscent of the Victorian grain of houses. The area at the northern end and to the east of Upper Marlborough Road was known as Wall Close, an early garden suburb type development in the manner of Bedford Park in London and the first to be developed in the mid C19, initially with large detached and semi-detached houses in the neo-Jacobean vernacular, well spaced and landscaped, facing onto a bowling green at the rear and thus presenting their backs to the road. Only one of these fine Victorian buildings (nos. 32-34) remains, now converted to offices. In a yellow stock brick with a red clay tiled patterned

roof, with Flemish gables and decorative chimneys, this pair contributes positively both architecturally and historically as the only example left of Wall Close. Importantly now it also closes the vista eastwards along Bricket Road. Four or five of the large Wall Close plots remain, now occupied by office buildings and some of the frontage trees and views through to trees behind still remain.

In contrast, in the central section of the road the plots have been amalgamated to make way for a mixture of newer office developments. The AECOM (former Faber Maunsell) building, for example, is a standard five storey, concrete framed, 1960s office building with yellow brick cladding. The south of the road is dominated by the group of Victorian buildings, now converted to offices, which continue down Marlborough Road (Areas 7c & 5a). It is composed of three two storey, semi-detached, late-Victorian houses, one of them still with some unpainted terracotta details, a characteristic of St Albans in the



*Modern office buildings on Wall Close plots.*



*Nos. 32+34 Upper Marlborough Road (locally listed).*

<sup>1</sup> Hertfordshire Gardens Trust: Local List: St Albans Marlborough Almshouses



## Area 4b: Hatfield Road and the Office Core

### History and Buildings contd.

West of the Duchess of Marlborough Almshouses, on the south side of Hatfield Road, is an area of open land, which was formerly the site of St Peter's Pound, now used as a car park for the National Pharmaceutical Association. Behind this sits no. 16, a detached, red brick, two storey, C20 house. To the north of Hatfield Road, opposite the Almshouses, wide plots were developed in the Victorian era to accommodate the enlarging school, drill hall and parish room and later, in the early C20, the purpose-built county Museum and former Liberal Club. These buildings are in Victorian/Edwardian free style including variations of multi-red brickwork and red clay tiled roofs and one slate roof. These fine buildings contribute positively to the character of the conservation area both historically and architecturally, containing fine detailing unlikely to be repeated, such as the neo-Norman arches of the former Museum and the neo-Jacobean window labels and castellation on the parish rooms. This group includes the Peacock public house. The Alban City School complex (formerly St Albans College of Art then University of Hertfordshire Law Faculty), on Hatfield Road is the odd one out of this group; standard concrete buildings with prefabricated exposed aggregate panels, they are negative in their effect on the appearance of the character area, particularly within the

street scene, although the effect is softened somewhat in summer by good trees along the frontage of Hatfield Road. A small Victorian building remains hidden from Hatfield Road by the former university buildings and by a high brick wall on two sides, but is visible from the churchyard. This is the last remaining part of the former St Peter's School and completes the social buildings of that era in this sector. Its contribution to the character of the conservation area is in representation of a Victorian/Edwardian School and its group value with the other social buildings of the same era.

The main pattern of this character area that we see today is a consequence of C20 development of the Civic Centre. The development was based on a master plan by Sir Frederick Gibberd in 1956-68, although later changes have impinged on the original design. The buildings are all of large floor plate and form roughly three main groups, north, south and east. The north and south groups are unfortunately split by utilitarian service roads, which service the untidy rear of shops in St Peters Street and the Alban Arena. A central pedestrian civic square is connected to St Peters Street by two generous width pedestrian ways located north and south of the Georgian no. 16 St Peters Street, now used as a bank and part of Area 4a.



*The former St Albans College of Art buildings are incongruous in their style and materials compared to the Victorian and Edwardian buildings, of which the former Liberal Club can be seen in the central background.*



*The surviving Victorian and Edwardian development in the area makes a positive contribution. Left to right: St Albans Museum, no.11 and the Peacock P.H. on Hatfield Road (all locally listed).*

## Area 4b: Hatfield Road and the Office Core

### History and Buildings contd.

The **northern “District Council” group** originally comprising a theatre (now called the Alban Arena but originally the City Hall), Lockey House, Forrester House and the car park, together with District Council Offices added later in the 1980s. All of red brick but otherwise dissimilar, they are roughly arranged along an irregular sunken courtyard /pedestrian route between the Alban Arena and Council Offices. Although it is a well-handled exercise in applying the octagonal module to steps and planters, this space is spoilt by poor materials of grey concrete bricks. This group is separated from the decked car park behind (originally two decks but with a further deck added in the 1980s to serve the new offices) by poor quality service roads and also similarly separated from the group to the south and the important public garden to the north, although this does have the effect of making the garden a quiet spot. The decked car park is of three storeys, one underground, and is a fairly utilitarian building whose saving grace is its low height and its brick cladding, which is respectful at its northern end to the Marlborough Almshouses. Due to its long, unbroken north-south footprint, the car park channels pedestrian access to and from the Civic Square to the north and south of the civic area.

The most important building of the Council group, the Alban Arena, was designed by Sir Frederick Gibberd in the 1960s. It is an example of the restrained modern movement: a simple cubic building in local red brickwork. Each corner is glazed in demonstration of its structural frame design with an internal corner column visible within and fine accommodation stairs built around it. The side canopies reduce the sides of the building to a more human scale but are perhaps the least successful elements, especially where later additions have been pushed under them and where a now unused walkway ramp has been added. The 1990s front extension alters the geometry of the building, by presenting a concave circular face to the square, as does the rear extension which was inappropriately placed asymmetrically on this symmetrical building.

The District Council Offices are a competent 1980s building, to promote an informal and approachable face, an octagonal module and neo-vernacular forms and materials, such as pitched roofs and warm red brickwork, are utilised. To further aid this ambition, an octagonal module is used as the Council Chamber, which is connected to the Alban Arena by a bridge which, although a potentially exciting element, fails to connect in a satisfactory fashion with the Arena’s north canopy.

Lockey House and Forrester House are blocks of shops with offices and flats above. Also designed by Gibberd in red brick with large horizontal bands of glazing, they were part of the master plan but also have a frontage to St Peter’s Street (and therefore both included in Area 4a).



*St Albans District Council offices was built in the 1980s using an octagonal module to make the building more approachable.*



*Sir Frederick Gibberd's Alban Arena (locally listed) displays its structural frame through the use of glazed corners.*



## Area 4b: Hatfield Road and the Office Core

### History and Buildings contd.

The **southern “County Council” group** of four buildings conforms more accurately to the master plan and was completed during the 1960s. It comprises law courts, a health centre, local government offices and a police station; a police station having been in this position since the early 1900s. These were all designed by the acclaimed Hertfordshire County Council Architects Department and are skilfully grouped in varying height. The offices, “Hertfordshire House”, is a point block of five storeys, thus forming a focus for the area as a whole, linked to the law courts by the two storey health centre. The four storey police station appears separated and fronts Victoria Street but in fact is connected to the law courts at basement/lower ground level. The most cohesive architecture style of the central area is the Modern Movement. Here it is the Herts County Council system, which was developed from the lightweight steel schools system (see Aboyne Lodge School, (Area 7I)) and the College of Further Education (Area 7f), and this is its final incarnation using a heavier concrete structural frame to accommodate commercial loads and greater heights. Nevertheless, the curtain walled buildings have an extraordinary lightness that is deceptively difficult to achieve; the arrangement of white and grey opaque and clear and obscure glazed panels of varying widths are treated differently to express different functions behind. All buildings are given a unifying solid brick treatment at low level (the brick having been selected by Gibberd to compliment the brick he was using in the District Council group). In the case of the police station this solid plinth at ground floor level provides an inactive, forbidding effect. It is understood that this was felt to be safer given the function but run counter to the original police brief to treat the building as an office building on a more friendly approach.

The enclosed inner courtyard between the buildings is given over to parking. A significant part of the H.C.C. group is sadly impermeable to pedestrians due to its function as a police station, cells and law courts. However, a useful footpath runs along its western boundary,

connecting the Civic Square with Victoria Street. Sadly this does not show the best sides of the fronting buildings, especially the underbelly of the law courts and the poor rear and flank elevations of the Victoria Street buildings to either side. The sunken area to the west of the courts does, however, include some landscaping and good 1960s floorscape. Whilst not public, there is also a pathway which the public does use that runs from Victoria Street along the western edge of the car park and around Hertfordshire House into Civic Close.



*Hertfordshire House and health centre display a variation in heights amongst the H.C.C. group and interesting glazed walls.*



*The police station faces onto Victoria Street but relates to the rest of the group through its materials and architectural style. The relationship is also more obvious from within the enclosed inner courtyard.*



## Area 4b: Hatfield Road and the Office Core

### History and Buildings contd.

The final Civic Centre **eastern group** consists of Central Government buildings in Bricket Road. These were not part of the master plan, some came earlier and some later and, perhaps as a result, are a disparate group comprising various public and private use offices and the Crown Court.

The first, Beaver House (currently HM Taxes/ Job Centre and DSA) on Bricket Road, is a four storey, early 1960s, framed structure but, having a very long, unbroken roofline and poor detailing, it has little relationship with either the lightness and architectural merits of the HCC buildings, or with the scale and traditional appearance of its remaining Victorian neighbour. It owes more to the 1950s in its design and, although it has vague Corbusian elements in the exposed concrete frame, the materials and detailing are poor. The forecourt and rear are also forbidding areas of car parking.

The second, St Peters House on the corner with Victoria Street, is of more appropriate scale and is a surprisingly late C20 example of neo-Georgian with a “developer’s mansard” roof.

The last is the late C20 Crown Court, massively high and out of scale in yellow brick, which is an odd material for this area. A particular problem of its excessive height is that it is a sky line building when viewed from the east/south-east. Still worse in effect is the Telecoms building / former Telephone Exchange to the east of Upper Marlborough Road of similar era and style, but five-six storeys in height and severely detrimental to the character and appearance of the area, especially so because the flat roof sprouts a forest of telecommunication masts and cabins, air-con units and tanks. All of these buildings are negative to the character and appearance of the area.



*Bricket Road with (left to right) Beaver House, the Crown Court and St Peter's House (mostly obscured by trees).*



*St Peter's House on the corner of Bricket Road and Victoria Street.*



*The Crown Court (centre) is out of scale and built from atypical yellow brick and so has a severely negative impact on the area.*

## Area 4b: Hatfield Road and the Office Core

### Local Details and Materials

Materials have been mentioned specifically above, however, in general, traditional Georgian, Victorian and Edwardian buildings in this area employ red and red-multi brickwork, tiled or slated roofs and white painted timber windows. There is some tradition of terracotta decorative details, including decorative plaques, and of polychromatic brickwork, as well as other such detailing typical of these periods. Materials associated with the C20 buildings are concrete framing, glass, metal and brick cladding and some stone or stucco cladding, and flat roofs.



*Terracotta panels on the old Liberal Club.*



*White-painted timber windows on Marlborough Almshouses.*



*Concrete framing on Beaver House.*



*Glass on Hertfordshire House.*



## Area 4b: Hatfield Road and the Office Core

### Public Realm

This Area's main public space is the Civic Centre, which makes reference to the former garden use of the area with the retention of major trees in brick planters. The main green space is the public garden to the north of the present Council Offices, which, though well maintained, is unfortunately rather hidden and cut off because of service roads, but nevertheless quiet, also for that reason. To the east of this garden there are also smaller linked green spaces with north-south and east-west pedestrian pathways. There are some good groups of trees: the large surface car park fronting Bricket Road between Hertfordshire House and Victoria Street is partially hidden from view by a high hedge and contains several good trees, which have a strong presence. There is also a smaller group of trees fronting Hertfordshire House, all of which are a further reminder of the former garden function of the area. The police station is set back behind the former Friends' Burial Ground, dating from the 17th century, now a garden and a rather municipal and low key introduction into the street scene. Also of note are the group of trees fronting the highway at the northern end of Bricket Road and also on Upper Marlborough Road.

Traditional Victorian pavings were of Staffordshire blue brick with granite or York Stone kerbs, and are still to be found in Upper Marlborough Road. Also in Upper Marlborough Road, east of the Almshouses, there is a Victorian vent post. In Hatfield Road, there is an example of a late Georgian cast iron milepost, which is part of a set installed by the Marquis of Salisbury between his residences at Hatfield and Reading. Apart from this vent post and mile post, street furniture is generally of a poor standard, which detracts from the character of the conservation area, as does the poor paving material. This is especially true of the Civic Centre which, though it originally included York Stone in the civic square, is now mixed and nearly all either concrete slabs, alien red clay blocks and blue bricks. Sawn York Stone slabs have, however, been used to repave the northern path from St Peter's Street and, as with the original Gibberd scheme, paving has been



*The Civic Centre is mostly paved with concrete slabs.*



*There are a number of good green spaces in this area, which evoke the former garden function and provide pedestrian links.*

## Area 4b: Hatfield Road and the Office Core

### Positive & Negative Characteristics and Scope for Change

#### Positive

- ✓ Positive buildings are mostly designated by local or statutory listing, though, in order to retain these positive aspects, in the case of locally listed buildings, minor unsympathetic alterations need to be prevented. The remainder of the buildings are of neutral impact.
- ✓ Trees, gardens and pedestrian only routes.



*Gardens provide attractive pedestrian only routes through the area and public green space.*



*Listed (and locally listed) buildings are a positive aspect of the character area.*

#### Negative

- ✗ Negative buildings include the Telephone Exchange and Beauver House, the 1960s College of Art (now Alban City School) buildings and the Crown Court which, due to excessive height, is a sky line building when viewed from the east/south east, and also because of its materials does not contribute positively.
- ✗ The tall Telephone Exchange which also dominates Liverpool Road (Area 7c).



*The former College of Art buildings have a negative impact.*



*The Telephone Exchange makes a negative contribution and can be seen from within the area and from Liverpool Road (Area 7c).*



## Area 4b: Hatfield Road and the Office Core

### Positive & Negative Characteristics and Scope for Change

#### Scope for Change

- The negative buildings are areas of opportunity for redevelopment, but these need to be considered holistically, including the spaces between buildings, as the danger of piecemeal redevelopment is the further fragmentation of the area.
- Any new buildings should not become sky line buildings when viewed from the north west as they would tend to detract from the importance of the Abbey tower and St Peter's Church tower; views of St. Peter's tower from within the zone should be maintained and where possible improved. In this vein, Hertfordshire House should retain its predominance and the scale and settings of existing Listed and Locally Listed buildings, such as the Marlborough Almshouses and nos. 32-34 Upper Marlborough Road, should be respected in new development. Materials of new buildings should be considered carefully in order to unite the area.
- Apart from the demolition of the negative buildings, and their replacement with better buildings and spaces, there is also capacity for smaller scale changes which could improve the character of the area. This is particularly true of the Arena - a good building by a prominent architect marred by alteration but capable of enhancement - in the case of the fish pond. This formerly flanked the entrance to City Hall and "squared" the geometry, but now remains only as a vestigial puddle trapped behind one end of the extension, the other end being unattractively used for rubbish storage and car parking. The intended transparency of the extension is reduced by advertisements for up-coming productions and the roof is spoiled by ad hoc, retro-fitted extract units. This latter retro-fitted roofscape problem is also true of the Council Offices and the telephone exchange.
- The Civic Square needs to be given more sense of enclosure without, of course, compromising its pedestrian accessibility and essential permeability. This includes street furniture and lighting, which could be improved using generally contemporary fittings to match the C20 architecture. Pavings should be improved to use consistent good quality and natural materials in place of tarmac and concrete blocks. Elsewhere, early original pavings should be retained and if possible re-introduced in traditional areas such as Hatfield Road, parts of Bricket Road and parts of Upper Marlborough Road. Many of the trees are mature and new replacement planting is needed when they become unviable. Planting of major trees should be extended into open areas, such as in Charter Close to the north of the Council car park, and existing good trees should be retained.



*The remains of the fishpond are tucked behind the white-painted extension.*



*Views of St Peter's Church Tower from within the area are important.*

