

THE FRIENDS OF ABINGDON

Abingdon's Civic Society



Caring for our past, present and future

Newsletter – Summer 2016

Chairman's message

I hope that you are enjoying this long lasting, abundant Spring. It is a time of renewal and innovation and this seems particularly relevant to our Society and to Abingdon in 2016. Many positive things are occurring in our wonderful, historic town and your Society is involved in a range of new initiatives.

The Trustees have spent useful time developing a new strategy to enable us to better fulfil our mission: 'caring for our past, present and future'. To help us achieve that we have agreed a new organisational structure to give us more focus, with two sub committees reporting to the Executive Committee. One will deal with estates and events and the other our civic and community responsibilities. Trustees with particular expertise and interest serve on appropriate committees.

We have decided to embark on a major enhancement programme for the Abbey Buildings. It is difficult to manage and finance piecemeal projects with limited resources so we plan to apply for significant grant funding to enable us to make the Buildings secure for a generation. I will report more on this when the programme is officially launched.

As you know, we have also arranged a much more extensive and varied programme of events for 2016 with the aim of engaging a wider cross section of the community. We have also reviewed our brand identity and we will be launching an evolved identity in the near future. These projects will enable us to launch a membership drive with the object

of involving more local people with the Society and the Abingdon community.

The Society is also contributing to a range of new initiatives in the town. One is to create a summer festival season from 2017 to celebrate our town's distinctiveness. Working groups are developing plans for a festival of the Thames, showcasing the river; an enlarged science and technology festival, ATOM, celebrating the town's place at the epicentre of UK science; an arts festival which will include music and performance and possibly a history and heritage festival, to promote our long history and beautiful historic buildings. Plans are also afoot for a new tourism initiative to encourage more people to visit the town, including more of Oxford's 9 million visitors.

These projects are supported by representatives from the Councils and the Abingdon Business Improvement District (BID). There are over 200 BIDs in the UK, funded by the businesses themselves, i.e the business rate payers in a defined area; I represent the Society on the Abingdon BID board.

So as you see, there is a lot going on and I am delighted to welcome Sarah Jones as our new Manager/Curator. As I reported in the last newsletter, sadly we have said goodbye to our long serving Curator Jenny Berrell to whom huge thanks are due.

I thank you for your continuing support and I look forward to seeing you at forthcoming events and the AGM on Monday 27th June.

Bryan Brown

Civic Matters

Neighbourhood Plan

The Town Council has moved a small step nearer to developing a Neighbourhood Plan for Abingdon. The Town Council reported at its Parish meeting on 9 March that it had *“set aside £10,000 for the production of a local community plan, which will ensure that Abingdon can make a case for CIL or Section 106 funding for any other developments in or around Abingdon. This will also complete Stage 1 of the production of a Neighbourhood Plan; following which a decision would need to be made as to how to proceed”*. However, as far as the Friends are aware, there has been no further movement. Currently, the North Abingdon sites earmarked for development in the Vale of White Horse draft Local Plan do not lie within the Abingdon parish boundary, but are part of Sunningwell and Radley. This will have to be sorted out before any real progress can be made on the Neighbourhood Plan. We continue to monitor the situation and our offer to help with the development of the Neighbourhood Plan remains on the table.

Vale of White Horse Local Plan

The draft Local Plan has been submitted to the Secretary of State for independent examination. The examination hearings took place in February 2016. The key issues in relation to the North Abingdon sites were:

- *Environmental issues* – Green Belt, air quality, noise from the A34
- *Transport* – the cumulative effect of these and the proposed developments at Radley and Kennington both on local roads and the A34. Although the upgrade to the Lodge Hill interchange is promised, it seems that it may not be built till after many of the new houses.
- *Services*: The plans do provide for a school and a “Local Centre”, which presumably could be a Community Centre, Health Centre or whatever is deemed necessary.
- *Feasibility*: There were concerns about the feasibility – and the overall impact – of building so many houses in the Vale in a 5-year period. Will it be possible to find the materials and labour to make it happen?

The fundamental issue is that if the plan is not deemed to be “sound” (i.e achievable) it will not be approved and we will continue with the present situation where the Local

Authority has very little power to refuse development applications however inappropriate they may seem.

The Inspector’s preliminary findings are expected in May: we will report on them on the website and in the next newsletter.

Guildhall

The Town Council has finalised the plans for the Guildhall and submitted a planning application to the Vale District Council. As reported in September’s Newsletter, the plans have been substantially modified from those originally proposed. The Friends regret that the opportunity to make the Guildhall a lively cultural hub for Abingdon has been lost, but appreciate that financial constraints have made it impossible to carry out the original plans and look forward to the re-opening of this key town venue.

Old Abbey House

The future of Old Abbey House has still not been settled. The Friends understand that the Vale District Council is currently in negotiation with one of the bidders.

Upper Reaches

Again, there has been little change in the situation since the last Newsletter. The District Council, who own the site, are anxious to bring the Upper Reaches back into use and are in negotiation with the current leaseholders.

65 Oxford Road

Members will no doubt have seen that building is finally under way on this site, following the transfer of ownership from Orchard Developments to Christine Homes. We will continue to monitor this development. It is particularly important that the restoration of the soft landscaping, which is a condition of the planning permission, is carried out as soon as the building is complete.

Unitary options for Oxfordshire

Members will probably have seen reports in the local media about two proposed plans for restructuring local government in Oxfordshire. One, which is supported by all Oxfordshire MPs, proposes the replacement of the current two-tier system (County Council and District Councils) with unitary councils (based on Oxford City Council and the District Councils) working in partnership through a body known as a Combined Authority. Under this scheme the County

Council would be abolished. The alternative is to retain the County Council and abolish the District Councils. It is unclear where Parish Councils would fit into either of these schemes. As the implementation of either of these proposals will have far-reaching effects, the Friends will be examining the proposals when full details are published and contributing to consultations.

Co-operation with other civic groups

Many of the strategic plans which will impact on Abingdon are being drawn up by bodies with wider remit: the Unitary Authority proposals are one example, but there is also the Science Vale Project, the Local Enterprise Partnership, new thinking about the A34 and the impact of Oxford's housing crisis on the surrounding districts. We want to make sure that Abingdon's voice is heard so have made contact with Oxford Civic Society and will be looking at ways to share knowledge with them and, where appropriate, to make joint representations.

Schools

Following a request from Dunmore Primary School for help with a local history project, we tracked down the "Handling Box" prepared for schools as part of the Lost Abbey Project. The Box contains a child-sized Benedictine monk's robes and many other artefacts, as well as a Teacher's Pack and activity sheets which are available electronically and in hard copy. This is an excellent resource, particularly for primary schools, as evidenced by the following testimonial from Dunmore.



"The children thoroughly enjoyed using the resources provided. Being able to pass around artefacts and cleverly made replicas of items from the time of the abbey allowed the children to experience some hands on learning. They enjoyed dressing up as a monk, seeing the types of coins they'd use from that era and seeing the quill pens, amongst other things. The box really brought the topic to life for them. Thank you so much for the loan. They really enjoyed it."

We will be offering this resource to other primary schools in Abingdon.

We have also taken part in John Mason School Charter Day, which aims to introduce Year 7 pupils (age 11–12) to the history of Abingdon. The students are given a brief introduction to the history of the Abbey followed by a guided tour of the Buildings. This is an annual event which takes place in November and includes visits to the Museum, the Guildhall, and St Helen's church as well as the Abbey Buildings.

School visits to the Buildings have not just involved local schools: a party of students from Bruges, recently visited the Buildings as part of a trip to Oxford and Abingdon.

Bank Holiday Walks Monday 30 May

The Bank Holiday Walks programme began in 2012 as part of the celebrations for the Queen's Diamond Jubilee celebrations and now as she celebrates her 90th birthday we are still going strong. Last year 114 people from all over the world took part in the walks. They are organised by several town societies, so they also offer the opportunity for local participants to learn about some of the activities which take place in the town.

The format will be the same as usual. We limit numbers so that everyone can enjoy the day so you need to come to the Market Place to book your walk or tour on the day. Walks leave at 10:30am and 2:00pm and you can book your place from 10am. Here is the programme:

Morning Walks leaving at 10:30

- The **Boundary Walk** follows the Town Boundary as it was when the Royal Charter was granted in 1556. You will be accompanied by a Town Crier. About 4 miles and takes about 2 hours.
- Find out about the flora, fauna and other interesting features of the **Ock Valley** and the work that is done there by Green Gym. This is about 3½ miles and takes about 2 hours.
- The Ramblers are leading a pleasant 8 mile walk via **Radley Lakes, Radley and Lodge Hill**, returning along the River Stert with views over Abingdon. All day walk - bring a snack or packed lunch.
- On the Lost Abbey tour you will hear about the **Great Abbey Church** which once dominated the town, and the

associated medieval buildings which have survived through the centuries. The tour takes about 1½ hours.

- Learn more about the area round **St Helen's** church and visit the Christ's Hospital Hall in the Long Alley Almshouses with a member of the Twin Towns Society. The tour will take approximately 1 hour.

Afternoon Walks leaving at 14:00

- A member of the **Wilts and Berks Canal** Trust will show you the route of the canal. You may have walked and driven across it without ever realising it was one of the main transport routes in the 1800s, supplying Abingdon with goods it needed to flourish. You can drop out when you like.
- Join the Abingdon Naturalists on a nature walk to **Radley Lakes** where you can enjoy tea and cakes and walk round the lake before returning. This is about 5 miles.
- There will be a second opportunity to do the **Lost Abbey** tour in the afternoon.

The Abbey Buildings will be open all day for refreshments and visits.

Independent Examiner

The Friends are looking for an Honorary Independent Examiner to review their accounts for the year ended December 2016 in the spring of 2017, and for future years.

Your role would be to carry out the examination in accordance with Charity Commission guidance. An examination is less than an audit and does not require the same level of evidence.

The charity prepares its accounts on a simple receipts and payments basis. You should be competent in financial management and could, for example, have experience as a bank or building society manager, hold a finance MBA or AAT membership, or be a retired accountant, local authority finance officer or similar.

If you would like to find out more, or know of anyone who might be willing to help, please ring our Treasurer, Bruce Hunt on 07545 910118 or email him on treasurer@friendsofabingdon.org.uk.



Visit to St. Edmund Hall

During the last year we have been developing contacts with St Edmund Hall College in Oxford, to discuss ways of building on our common connection with St. Edmund of Abingdon; he was born in Abingdon in about 1175, but taught at the site of St. Edmund Hall and ultimately became Archbishop of Canterbury. This connection was marked in 1944 when Dr AB Emden, Principal of St Edmund Hall, became first Vice-President of the Friends of Abingdon. Following a visit to the Abbey Buildings last year by senior staff from St Edmunds, several of our trustees made a reciprocal visit to the college in March. It is only open to the public by appointment, so our guided tour was very special.



Medieval halls, many of them predating Oxford's colleges, were established to house and educate undergraduates and St Edmund Hall is known to have been in existence before 1317; it has a claim to be the oldest surviving academic society to house and educate undergraduates in any university. The "Old Library" was the first Oxford library to be built with shelves along the walls, and the last to be furnished with chains. The Chapel has stained glass by Edward Burne-Jones and William Morris, and the painting behind the altar, Supper at Emmaus, was painted in 1957-8 by Ceri Richards. The Hall now also incorporates the 12th century Church of St Peter-in-the-East, whose Lady Chapel is believed to have been donated .by St Edmund. The Chapel is now the College Library.

We had a very useful discussion with the Principal and several colleagues and agreed to explore opportunities for co-operation in various areas, such as joint research into the history of the heraldic shields of the College and the Abbey, a talk on St Edmund and a performance by the College Choir in the Abbey Buildings or St Nicolas Church. The visit ended with an enjoyable supper in the Senior Common Room and an interesting lecture on "The Myths and Reality of Healthy Ageing". The lecture was one of an occasional series organised by the college's Centre for the Creative Brain; they are open to the public.

Farewells

Jenny Berrell

We reached the end of an era in March when Jenny Berrell retired as Curator. She and her husband Peter became active in the Friends in the 1970s and Jenny was elected to the Executive in June 1980. Three years later, she became Vice-Chairman: the Chair at that time was Elizabeth Aldworth who died earlier this year.



At that time Jenny and Peter were running the busy newsagents in Bridge Street but in late 1986 Peter was appointed Curator so the family moved in to 12 Checker Walk and Jenny stood down from the Executive. Jenny always shared the load of looking after the Buildings – and especially the garden – and in 2000 she and Peter became joint curators. Sadly Peter died in 2006 and Jenny continued as sole Curator until this spring.

The Friends owe an enormous debt of gratitude to Jenny – and to her family who have helped and supported her – and we wish her all the best in her well-earned retirement. She will not miss the late nights dealing with over-exuberant party-goers or some of the stresses that go with managing a medieval building! We will be arranging an appropriate farewell celebration during the summer – details to follow.

Elizabeth Aldworth

We were sad to hear earlier of this year of the death of Elizabeth Aldworth at the age of 94. Elizabeth was active in the Friends of Abingdon for many years and was Chairman from 1983 to 1988. She came from a long-established Abingdon family, no less than 10 of whom appear on Abingdon's WW1 roll of honour, and we were delighted to see her at the WW1 Exhibition which we put on in FreeSpace in 2014. From 1960 to 1980 she taught English at John Mason School where she was Head of English, Head of Sixth Form and eventually Deputy Head. In retirement she was active, not only in the Friends of Abingdon, but also in St Helen's Church and retained a lifelong interest in education and young people.

New Faces

Kevin Senior

Kevin was elected to the Executive at last June's AGM and has now been appointed as Vice-Chair, leading the sub-committee which looks after all aspects of the Abbey Buildings and the Friends' events. Kevin has lived in Abingdon for over 25 years and until recently was a partner in a global accountancy firm specialising in international financial clients. He has had a long association with the Friends of Abingdon, having been the treasurer some twenty years ago and, more recently, the Honorary Auditor. Now retired, Kevin intends to devote more time to civic affairs in Abingdon, together with his continuing role as a school governor, work with other charities and directorships of private companies; He believes that Abingdon has a lot of untapped potential and wants to help build on the Friends' current activities to help bring this to fruition.

Sarah Jones

We are delighted to welcome Sarah Jones as our new Manager-Curator. Sarah has lived in Abingdon since 1987, working first in human resources for the Health Authority, then as a secondary school teacher, then in various roles in the affordable housing sector. In addition, she worked for 6 years as the part-time Director of Oxfringe, Oxford's Fringe Festival, gaining experience in many areas which will be of value to the Friends: securing grant and sponsorship funding, booking and dealing with performers, designing publicity materials – paper and web-based, and managing budgets. Most recently she was the Administrator and Treasurer at St Michael at the Northgate Church in Oxford, where her duties involved, among other things, managing building contracts, repairs and maintenance. She also has experience as a user of our Buildings, having been involved with the Old Gaol Theatre Company. Sarah started work with us in mid-April and she and her daughter Emma will be moving in to the cottage in a month or so when we have completed some refurbishment work. She looks forward to meeting you all at our events in the coming months.





Friends of Abingdon Events

We want to bring our Buildings and the work of our Society to the attention of a wider audience so have arranged a programme of events for the coming year which we hope will provide something for everyone. We hope you will support us in the coming months and look forward to feedback and suggestions from you all for future events.

Talks

All at 19.30 in the Abbey Buildings. Entrance free but donations invited from non-members. Refreshments afterwards (small charge).

Monday 27 June

Friends of Abingdon AGM and talk on "The History of Salters' Steamers" by Simon Wenham.

Tuesday 26 July

The work of Abingdon Street Pastors and the Good Neighbour Scheme.

Music

At 19.30 in the Abbey Buildings (unless stated otherwise)

Tuesday 17 May – Sunday 22 May

Abingdon Jazz Festival – various times and venues: see brochure or website.

Thursday 30 June

Concert: Abingdon Town Band – tickets £10 available in June

Sunday 17 July

"Music for a Summer's Evening" with Abbey Strings and Friends – more details on page 8.

Saturday 1 October

Pavlova Winds – Classical Wind Octet – tickets £10 available nearer the time.

Other activities

Monday 30 May

Bank Holiday Walks and tours – more details on pages 3 and 4.

Wednesday 6 July

Visit to Fishbourne Palace and Chichester: Museum Friends event but Friends of Abingdon members invited. More details on our website or contact Pam Martin 01235 530996.

Saturday 3 September – Saturday 10 September

Photographic Exhibition: Abingdon in the 1950s – FreeSpace, 18 Bury Street, bring along your own photographic memories.

Saturday 10 September – Sunday 11 September

Heritage Open Days – open properties, market place events and guided walks. Details nearer the time.

Thursday 6 - Sunday 9 and Thursday 13 – Sunday 16 October

Abingdon Crafts and Gifts for Christmas Show – under new management, so a new look.

Friday 9 December – Sunday 11 December

Abingdon Beer Festival – details to be announced.

Children's Events

Saturday 9 July

"Short Cut Tales" – Concert and story-telling for young children with Ben Heaney and Luna Geckos. At 14.30 in the Abbey Buildings.

Monday 8 August

"A Dragon's Tale" – Puppet Show and Workshop – for families and children aged 4+ at 14.30 in the Abbey Buildings.

Thursday 25 August

"Spymaster" – activities for 8-12 year olds. At 10.30 and 14.30 in the Abbey Buildings.

Tickets for children's events will be £5 – plus £1.00 for materials for those making a puppet on 8 August. They will be available in June: if you would like to be notified when they are on sale please email tickets@friendsofabingdon.org.uk stating which event you are interested in.



Unicorn Theatre Events

More details available from the event organisers or online at <http://www.abingdonabbey-unicorntheatre.org.uk/> or organisers' websites.

Monday 6 June – Saturday 11 June

ODN Drama Festival of one-act plays

Thursday 16 June

Music at the Unicorn: *Jess Vincent*

Wednesday 22 June – Saturday 25 June

Venom by Fred Owen – Abingdon Drama Club

Wednesday 20 July – Sunday 23 July

The Dover Road by A.A. Milne – Studio Theatre Club

Saturday 6 August

Unicorn Music Festival – Music at the Unicorn

Thursday 1 September

Music at the Unicorn: *Ninebarrow*

Wednesday 7 September – Saturday 10 September

Hedda Gabler by Henrik Ibsen – Breakaleg Productions

Thursday 3 November

Music at the Unicorn: *Charlotte Campbell*

Thursday 1 December

Music at the Unicorn: *Martha Tilston*



Other Abingdon Events

For more details, contact the Town Council Information Centre or see www.abingdon.gov.uk/events

Oxfordshire Art Weeks (South) Saturday 14 May – Sunday 22 May

Fun in the Park and Music in the Park – Saturday 4 June

Royal Celebrations Weekend Saturday 11 – Sunday 12 June

Abingdon Food and Drink Festival - Saturday 25 June

ATOM! Festival – Thursday 30 June – Sunday 3 July

Swan Upping – Friday 22 July

Abingdon Horse Show – Sunday 21 August

Dragon Boat Festival Sunday – Sunday 4 September

Can you help us?

As you can see, we have ambitious plans for the Society and the Abbey Buildings. Sarah Jones has joined us in a new role of Manager-Curator so that, as well as caring for the Buildings, she can help with other parts of our activities – events, publicity, administration, etc - but to make time for her to do that, we need help with some of the practical tasks associated with the Buildings. For example:

Abbey Buildings - summer welcome desk.

We open the Abbey Buildings in summer on four afternoons a week from 14.00 to 16.30. We need personable volunteers to help make them accessible to visitors. We hope to have two volunteers for each session, ideally offering a commitment of one afternoon a fortnight or being on standby in a volunteer pool. The role involves welcoming visitors, showing them around if they wish, explaining about the buildings' history and selling merchandise. You will get full training - and free tea/coffee and biscuits whilst on duty! This is an interesting task and not arduous – if you like talking to people it is an opportunity to meet and talk to visitors from many backgrounds.

Help with events

We are looking for help with "Front of House" for our events for the coming season. This can involve any of: helping moving chairs and tables, setting up and serving refreshments, preparation of home-made cakes and nibbles, clearing away afterwards.

Gardening

We will have someone to do the heavy garden maintenance – but would like to give the gardens a makeover so would welcome help from green-fingered members with refreshing the garden design, plant selection and occasional light gardening.

If you can offer any time, or would like to know more, please email Sarah on enquiries@friendsofabingdon.org.uk; if you prefer to telephone, please ring Hester Hand on 01235 529044 (Sarah is not easily contactable by phone while the cottage is being refurbished).

Music for a Summer Evening

Abbey Strings will be joined this year by members of the Pavlova Wind Quintet for their annual concert of light classical music to raise funds for the Friends of Abingdon. Join them in the Long Gallery at 7.30 pm on Sunday 17 July. The programme includes music by Bach, Mozart, Finzi and Bartok.

The price of £15 includes Prosecco and strawberries. Tickets will be on sale to the general public from Mostly Books from Saturday 4 June but Friends of Abingdon members can reserve theirs by emailing tickets@friendsofabingdon.org.uk. For each of the last two years, this event has been a sell-out, so don't delay!

Abingdon Jazz Festival

The Friends of Abingdon and Music at The Unicorn are proud to announce the inaugural Abingdon Jazz Festival. It will take place at various venues throughout the town, including the Unicorn Theatre and FreeSpace, from 17th to 22nd May.



It will include eight concerts, two drama performances, one audio-visual show and one musical workshop. Six of the concerts will be free events. The workshop will also be a free event and will be open to anyone interested in playing music. Programmes are available from the Abbey Buildings, Information Centre and around town or www.abingdonjazzfestival.org.uk.

AGM and talk on Salters Steamers

After the AGM on Monday 27th June we will have a talk by Simon Wenham on the history of Salter's Steamers, who have played an important role in Abingdon for over 100 years. Simon used to work for them and is now a member of Oxford University's Continuing Education Department; he is an excellent speaker so it should be a good night and we hope to see lots of you there.