



## **Newsletter Summer 2017**

### **Chairman's Message**

It was good to see so many of you at our recent AGM, but for the benefit of those who weren't there, much of what follows is from my report.

A primary focus of our efforts over the last 18 months has been to attract a wider range of people in to our Buildings. This is not just to boost our income but because they are an important community asset: we want them to be known, visited and enjoyed by more local people as well as by tourists and visitors. So, since the last newsletter we have had a Beer Festival, a second Jazz Festival and an Open Day. Each of these brought several hundred people in to the Buildings, the majority of whom told us they had never been in before – but most promised to return! We are also seeing more visitors on our Open Afternoons, well over 300 in May and June. Do tell your friends and visitors that we are open (free) on Wednesday, Thursday and Sunday afternoons - and on Fridays if there is no wedding on that weekend.

Wedding receptions have been an important source of income for many years, but now that we have a civil ceremony licence, most couples are having their ceremony here as well as their reception. We are also seeing more people using the Buildings for family parties and celebrations – including several coming back repeatedly for big birthdays and anniversaries. So, do think about these atmospheric buildings for your family events. We offer a discounted hire rate to our Life Members.

The theatre continues to be very well-used. It is particularly pleasing to see youth groups such

as SOYPA and Gobo using it and as part of our outreach programme, we plan to run theatre workshops for children from challenged backgrounds as a joint venture with Oxford's Pegasus Theatre. We hope these young people will have happy memories and will come back in later life.

This brings me on to the very exciting prospect of our Buildings Enhancement Project. As many of you already know, we have been successful in winning a Heritage Lottery grant of nearly £70,000 to fund the feasibility studies and background work we will need to do prior to making an application for a full grant. This is very exciting news for the Friends and you can read more about it overleaf.

The final strand of our activities is our Civic and Community work. It has been a frustrating time, with little progress on the major issues which our town so badly needs to address: we probably get more comments from visitors about the boarded up Upper Reaches than anything else. However we had a very inspiring talk at our AGM where we learned about what has worked for other Civic Societies so hopefully this will encourage us to keep trying.

I am delighted to welcome the 40 new members who have joined us this year and I look forward to seeing many of you – old and new members alike – at our Members' Lunch on 15 August.

*Bryan Brown*



**LOTTERY FUNDED**

## Enhancement Project

In the last newsletter we reported on our "Enhancement Project" which aims to secure the Abingdon Abbey Buildings for future generations and to make them into a vibrant attraction and a venue which can be used all year round. We are now delighted to report that with (pro bono) help from our consultants at Purcell we have secured a grant of £68,000 from the HLF's "Resilient Heritage" fund: this fund is aimed at small charities like us, who often do not win funding bids because they do not have the resource to put in a strong tender. Essentially the grant is to pay for consultants to help us do a feasibility study to determine what could be done to enhance the buildings and the work needed to put them in good shape for a generation or more. For example we need to better present the history of the buildings by developing interpretation of our 1,000 years of history using the modern techniques used in today's heritage visitor attractions. The work will culminate in a capital fund application, and will include a business plan since before they make a large capital grant (we are envisaging a budget of between £3.5 and 4.5m) from public money, the HLF will want to be satisfied that the asset will be well managed for the foreseeable future.

During the autumn we will be working on the various strands of the feasibility study and, all being well, we should make an application for a capital grant next year. If successful - and HLF seem well-disposed to our project - we should take another year to undertake various surveys and make plans and commence work on site at the end of 2019.

We will of course keep our members fully informed as plans emerge and would love to hear from any of you who would like to be involved.

## The year so far..

### Abingdon Jazz Festival

The second Abingdon Jazz Festival – once again a joint venture between Music at the Unicorn and the Friends of Abingdon - was a great success. The weather was better than last year and there is something magical about listening to good music in the Long Gallery on a mild summer evening.

The most popular sessions were those with young local performers – especially the Oxfordshire Youth Big Band and the Abingdon School Big Band. The quality of musicianship and the enthusiasm and maturity of the performers was awe-inspiring.

At the other end of the age-range we had outstanding concerts by Maxine Day, with the Oxford Jazz Trio, and by Art Themen and his Band. Both soloists are well into their 70s but still play and sing beautifully.

These were just some of the highlights – there were a total of 8 bands involved over a packed two days, with something for everyone.



### "A Spagna in the Works"

June saw more very special music in the Abbey Buildings, with a concert of Early English Music in the Unicorn Theatre. Roy Marks and his wife, Alison Crum are leading exponents of European music from the

15th to the 18th century and have a large collection of viols, lutes and recorders. Roy originates from Abingdon and had long harboured an ambition to play in the Unicorn.

A packed audience was entranced by the programme of 15th and 16th century dances, divisions and instrumental settings – and a few of Roy's own compositions – and the evening was made even more interesting by Alison's excellent explanations of both the instruments and the pieces. Sitting at the back of the theatre I was bowled over by the clarity of the sound – the acoustics in there are wonderful.

In keeping with what is now a tradition for our "Music for A Summer Evening" concerts, we had strawberries and Prosecco in the interval in the Long Gallery and the gardens.

And, for those who like me had wondered, "La Spagna" is a tune which first appeared in 1485 in an Italian dance manual and which re-appeared in many other pieces throughout the renaissance period.

### **Open Day and Bank Holiday walks**

The May Bank Holiday walks are now a 6-year old tradition, but this year we paired them with an Abbey Buildings Open Day.

On the morning of 29 May the Met Office greeted us with a Yellow Warning of thunder or heavy rain some time before 4pm – and we had planned 8 walks and tours around Abingdon, some venturing as far afield as Sutton Courtenay and Radley Lakes! So the outlook wasn't good, but we crossed our fingers and hoped for the best and as it turned out, the rain stayed away until the last minute and the morning walks including the long walk to Sutton Courtenay finished in the dry as did two of the afternoon walks.

Unfortunately, just as the Radley Lakes group were admiring the orchids in a new site the heavens opened so they were glad that there were tea and cakes at the lakes to warm them up. The walkers who were learning about the small streams and rivers in Abingdon were also caught and had to make a swift get-away from the Swift Ditch.

Overall 100 people took advantage of the opportunity to explore Abingdon and its environment. Understandably, given the forecast, there were fewer takers than usual for the longer walks including the popular 1556 Boundary walk and the Ock Valley Nature walk, but the Lost Abbey and St Helen's tours were both enjoyed by good sized groups and others were fascinated to learn more about St Edmund of Abingdon. This was one of two new ventures this year, the other being the streams and rivers walk.

Although the Friends of Abingdon, as the local civic society, organise these free walks, they couldn't take place without the help of leaders from other societies in the

town: Abingdon Twin Towns Society, Green Gym, Guild of Town Criers, Friends of Radley Lakes, Vale of White Horse Ramblers, Wilts & Berks Canal Trust. It was truly a community event and many thanks to the walk leaders and to those who helped set up and take down the stall in the Market Place.

PS If you wish to explore Abingdon-on-Thames in your own time - and in good weather – you can download trails from <http://friendsofabingdon.org.uk/>. Also look out for more walks – including some new ones – on Sunday 10 September as part of Heritage Weekend.

### **Open Day**

Following our theme of encouraging more people to visit the Abingdon Abbey Buildings we organised an Open Day to showcase the Buildings and the Friends activities. We were delighted to welcome over 330 visitors during the day, some who were taking part in the walks, others who had just come to see us. We gave guided tours of the Buildings, had information stalls about various aspects of our work and a children's area with the opportunity to dress up as a monk and find out more about how they lived and how Abingdon would have looked in medieval times. We also had strolling minstrels from the Oxford Waits, and mini-performances from the Studio Theatre Club actors and singers and from a range of other musical acts. All of this fuelled by Gladys' legendary tea and cakes.



**Friends of Abingdon  
AGM**

The inspirational speaker at our AGM in June was Ian Harvey, the youthful and energetic Director of Civic Voice – the national organisation for the Civic movement. It was encouraging to hear what other Civic Societies are doing and in particular how some of them have established good relationships with their local councils and are working together to improve the places where they live. We picked up some useful ideas – hopefully we

will be reporting on progress with them in future newsletters. Ian, in turn, was very impressed by the range of activities we are undertaking and bowled over by our Buildings. All in all an uplifting evening!

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### Dick Barnes

Congratulations go to Dick Barnes, a former Secretary of the Friends, who has received the British Empire Medal for his contribution to the community. Dick was active in the Friends for many years, writing the 'Yellow Book', the definitive history of the Society's first 50 years, and the Abbey Buildings leaflet which we still give to our visitors. He played a major role in the refurbishment of the Theatre and the building of the external staircase to the Checker.

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### Civic Matters

#### Community Led Plan

As reported in the last Newsletter, the Town Council has decided to produce a "Community Led Plan" (CLP) instead of a Neighbourhood Plan. In April we met the officers from Community First Oxfordshire and the Vale District Council who are assisting the Town Council in developing the CLP. They plan to launch the Plan at a series of events starting on 5 September (4pm) at the Abbey Buildings. There will be extensive opportunities in the coming months for the community to be involved and we hope that as many as possible of our members will contribute. More information is available at <http://www.abingdon.gov.uk/partners/community-led-plan>.

### Guildhall

The Town Council has adopted a much-reduced plan which does not include the modern part of the Guildhall. The Magistrates Court, which has now been vacated by the Music Centre, will be used partially as an exhibition space (an extension of the Museum) and partially for storage. Despite strong objections from Historic England and the Vale Conservation Officer, the 1731 staircase from the Bridge Street foyer to the Bear Room and the Council Chamber will be altered to accommodate a lift for disabled access with a new narrower staircase. The Town Council considered that, despite the historic importance of the 1731 staircase, provision of disabled access to the upper floors of the Guildhall justified the adoption of these proposals.

In summary the proposals are:

1. A platform lift within the Bridge Street foyer rising to the bottom of the staircase to provide access to the Magistrates Court and to
2. A lift rising from the hall at the bottom of the staircase to the level of the Abbey Room, also providing access to the Mayor's Parlour, Bear Room and Council Chamber.
3. Creation of a new corridor behind the Roysse Room, with additional toilets and a new muniment room. This will also provide indoor access between the Town Council offices and the Guildhall rooms.

More details are available on the Town Council website under the Guildhall Committee sections. A planning application for proposals 1 and 3 has already been submitted. The Friends did not object to this, but submitted a statement to the effect that they would be scrutinising further applications involving the 1731 staircase very carefully.

The Friends have also written to Abingdon Town Council expressing their serious concern about these plans, from the heritage and community viewpoints and also the lack of public consultation. A reply has been received, emphasising that the plans had unanimous support from the full

Council. We are considering whether – and if so how – to press this matter any further and would be interested to hear members’ thoughts on this.

### **Old Abbey House and Upper Reaches**

There is no movement on either of these buildings. The future of Old Abbey House (proposed lease by a company which provides office space for start-up businesses and charities) is still under discussion. However, while the Vale drags its feet, the condition of Old Abbey House is deteriorating. In the case of the Upper Reaches, the lease-holders are unwilling to relinquish the lease to the Vale of White Horse DC (the owners of the property) who want to see it reinstated as a hotel. In the meantime there have been problems with squatters and vandals, which have affected our Buildings and the Curator’s Cottage. Given that both properties are in the Conservation Area and currently give a really bad impression to visitors to the town we would like to find ways to break the impasses.

### **Planning issues**

#### **North Abingdon developments**

Two applications have been submitted: one from CEG Developments for 900 houses to the north of Dunmore Road (east of Tilsley Park) and Twelve Acre Drive, and one from Catesby for 200 houses to the north of Dunmore Road (west of Tilsley Park). The Friends do not object to these developments in principle as there is such a shortage of housing in this area, but we are very concerned about the provision of appropriate infrastructure. The promised funding for the upgrade of the Lodge Hill junction has not materialized, and this is an important component of the viability of these developments.

#### **Culham development**

As part of their Local Plan exercise, South Oxfordshire District Council have identified a site for 3500 houses between the Europa School and Culham railway station – less than 2 miles from Abingdon Town Centre. Although this is not strictly within our area, such a large increase in population is bound to affect Abingdon: again, it is a question of

infrastructure. The discussions are at the strategic stage at present so the Friends will maintain a watching brief on this, commenting further if a firm proposal emerges.

### **Smaller planning issues**

Here we have had two successes:

- an application to open a gym in the upper floors of 1 Stert Street which would have severely affected the quality of life of the residents of 3 Stert Street was withdrawn following objections from the residents supported by the Friends.
- an application to convert the Clock House and the neighbouring building in Ock Street was refused. The conversion itself was acceptable, and had been supported by Historic England but the Friends objected on the grounds of inadequate parking and vehicular access, and this was the reason given for the refusal.

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### **Buildings and Gardens**



Work continues on maintaining and upgrading the Buildings in compliance with Fire Regulations.

Externally our Gardener has been helped by volunteers, keeping the weeds in check and planting and maintaining the pots and hanging baskets. Thank you to our present helpers: anyone who has an odd hour and would like to join them will be very welcome. This especially applies to the coming Autumn/Winter when we intend to do a major clear up, taking ivy off walls, pruning the apple tree, in the South Garden

dividing and feeding, and similarly in the North Garden where the lawn and beds need an overhaul.

## Volunteers

We have been delighted to welcome several new volunteers this summer: we have one team covering the open afternoons and another working in the gardens. More help is always welcome so do please get in touch if you have time to offer. We would especially like to hear from anyone who could help with designing publicity materials (including this newsletter and posters), posting on our social media sites or distributing posters and flyers for events.

## Abingdon Traditional Craft Fair 3-5 November



In 1970, the idea of holding a Craft Fair in the Buildings began with small local craftworkers and grew to be a widely-loved event bringing enthusiasts into the town from towns and villages in the surrounding counties.

As with many other Fairs, recent years saw a gradual shift towards gifts rather than crafts, and a lot of our regulars have told us they regretted this. We therefore decided that for 2017 we would, with the help of our partners at Mushroom Communications, run our own "Abingdon Traditional Craft Fair", reverting more towards the event's roots – real craftsmanship with a strong local focus. For the first year this will be a smaller and shorter event than in the past, but with some interesting innovations. As always, entrance will be free to Friends of Abingdon members – more details nearer the time, but get the dates in your diary.



## Heritage Open Days 9-10 September

The theme for this year's Heritage Weekend is "Made in Abingdon" – focusing on the town's industrial heritage in the Town Centre and Ock Street and to the west (leaving the rest for a future year). As always we will have talks, walks, exhibitions and properties open to visit. Some details are already available on the HODs website <http://www.abingdonheritage.co.uk/> watch out for more and for leaflets and posters nearer the time.

In our own Abbey Buildings we are delighted to host the Abingdon Flower Club who are putting on what should be an amazing display: "*Abingdon then and now - a floral walk through Abingdon's history*"  
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## Newsletter and Bulletins

Sending newsletters by email saves us a lot of money – and effort! We also issue occasional Members' Bulletins to those for whom we have email addresses, with updates on news and events. If you would like to receive these Bulletins and/or get the Newsletter by email too (in colour!), please let us have your email address.

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## Changing Faces

We have recently said goodbye to **Richard Charles** who has stood down after two years as a trustee. Richard has done sterling work on improving the electrical systems in the Buildings and on ensuring our compliance with Health & Safety regulations. He also made a valuable input to the early stages of the Enhancement Project. **Sarah Jones**, our Curator-Manager for the last year has also recently left and we are in the process of recruiting her replacement.

**Elizabeth Drury**, who has been a Trustee for more than 30 years and is our Archivist has decided to stand down as a Trustee but, thankfully will continue as Archivist so we are not saying goodbye to her yet.



We welcome **Maggie Henderson-Tew** who joined the Trustees in January and was confirmed in position at the AGM.

After her English degree, Maggie worked in HR and then as a banker in the City, after which she spent several decades as a financial services head-hunter. Alongside her commercial projects, she enjoyed handling assignments on a pro bono basis for clients in the heritage sector, such as The National, Trust, Kew Gardens, The Historic Dockyard, Chatham and HMS Warrior 1860.

In 2009, Maggie came to Oxford University to take a second degree in English, specialising in medieval texts, culture, history, language and the history of the book. She later moved to the History Faculty, where she remains a student.

A Life Member of the National Trust for over 35 years, history, architecture, the built environment, art history, gardens, landscape, literature, drama, film and music of all types remain consuming interests.

Maggie has always been an energetic volunteer: she aims to make a positive difference to everything in which she is involved and is convinced of the huge potential of the Abingdon Abbey Buildings as a heritage attraction.

### **Friends of Abingdon Events Summer- Autumn 2017**

15 August – *Members Lunch* (see back page)

9-10 September - *Heritage Open Days and Flower Festival*

6 October (TBC) *Talk on Pub Signs*

3-5 November - *Abingdon Traditional Craft Fair*

1-2 December – *Abingdon Beer Festival*

### **Unicorn Theatre Events Summer- Autumn 2017**

**Music at the Unicorn** – all at 19.15, details in their programme or at <http://www.musicattheunicorn.org.uk/>

Wednesday 2 August – *Mancunia*

Thursday 7 September – *Kirsty Bromley*

Thursday 2 November – *Edwina Hayes*

Thursday 7 December – *Hannah Sanders and Ben Savage*

Sunday 17 December – *Pavlova Wind Quintet Christmas Concert*  
15.00 Unicorn Theatre

#### **Drama**

13–16 September - *When We Are Married* by JB Priestley - Breakaleg Productions

27-30 September – *Portia Coughlan* by Marina Carr - Abingdon Drama Club

22-25 November – *Julius Caesar* – Studio Theatre Club

#### **Other Abingdon Events**

Sunday 3 September – *Abingdon Dragon Boat Festival*

Tuesday 5 September – *Community-Led Plan Launch* - 16.00 Abbey Buildings

Saturday 2 December – *Christmas Extravaganza*

## Friends of Abingdon Members' Lunch

### Tuesday 15 August 12.30 for 13.00

### Abingdon Abbey Buildings

Many of you have asked if we would revive the tradition of a purely social event for our members, so we have organised a members' lunch. It will be a buffet in the Long Gallery – why go elsewhere for a summer event when we have such a wonderful venue of our own?

#### Menu

##### *Main course*

- Italian Chicken
- Poached salmon with lemon mayo
- Oriental roast pork

Accompanied by a selection of salads

##### *Desserts*

- Eton Mess
- Apple & Walnut tart
- Chocolate truffle torte

Wine and soft drinks

Tea and coffee

Price: £20 per person to include all food and drinks.

We look forward to seeing as many as possible of you there. To book a place and arrange payment, or if you have any special dietary requirements please contact Rosemary Allan on 01235 553938 or [rosemary.allan@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:rosemary.allan@hotmail.co.uk)

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