



Newsletter Summer 2018

Chairman's remarks

Dear Friends

The long-awaited Spring has rapidly arrived in all its glory and activity is certainly brisk with the Friends as this newsletter relates.

Abbey Buildings Enhancement Project

Members know of this significant project that we embarked upon last year. We successfully obtained a grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund of nearly £70,000 to develop what is essentially a feasibility study. Elements of the study include a review of our governance and organisation, an architectural and planning study and a business plan. We tendered and appointed a specialist conservation architectural consultancy, Purcell and a heritage management consultant, David Clarke Associates.

Architectural Design

The key elements of the architecture and planning brief are to make the buildings sound and secure and useable for 12 months of the year, and to improve safe access to the whole building whilst maintaining the integrity of the building fabric. Additionally, we are developing an interpretation strategy; to define how best to communicate and animate over 1,000 years of fascinating history. The design work to date will be presented at the AGM on the 13th June by Niall Phillips, the partner in charge of the Purcell architectural team.

Organisational change

The governance and organisational work is being led by David Clarke Associates. We notified all members in March/April of the changes we are proposing to the way our Society is organised; the Special General Meeting on 16 April authorised the Trustees to take the necessary steps to prepare the governing documents for two new Charitable Incorporated Organisations (CIOs) and apply to the Charity Commission for their registration. There will be more information about this process in the paperwork for the AGM on 13 June.

What does this mean for our members?

The charities will be separate but linked. All existing memberships will transfer automatically to the new Civic Society, whose Trustees and officers will continue, as at present, to be elected at Annual General Meetings. At the outset members will (unless they opt out) also become non-voting members of the Abingdon Abbey Buildings Trust. In due course the Buildings Trust will set up its own non-voting membership scheme(s): at that point, Life Members of the current Civic Society will remain Life Members of the Buildings Trust unless they opt out; Annual Members will cease to automatically be non-voting members of the Buildings Trust, but will

instead be able to apply for membership on whatever terms are agreed at that time.

The FoA Civic Society will nominate two trustees to the board of the FoA Abingdon Abbey Buildings Trust and we anticipate that there will be close co-operation between the two organisations.

What about volunteers?

Both charities will continue to rely on the efforts of volunteers. The Buildings Trust will still need guides to the Buildings, and help with their care and maintenance, gardening, running events etc. The Civic Society hopes to expand its role in promoting civic pride in Abingdon: help will be needed with current activities such as running the Community FreeSpace, Bank Holiday Walks and Heritage Open Days but we will also hope to engage with people on other projects such as Litter campaigns, improving signage, promoting the vitality of the town and protecting its heritage buildings and open spaces. There will be plenty for both charities to do and we hope that the re-organisation will be a springboard for us to involve more people – they can help with either, or better still, both. If you would like to know more, do get in touch with one of us.

Cinema at the Unicorn

In the last newsletter we said “Watch this space” – plans were progressing well for the Regal Cinema to open in the Unicorn. As most of you will know, they opened on 29 December and have been immensely successful – over 250 film showings and over 10,000 tickets sold in those five months. Many hundreds of people have visited the Buildings for the first time and, most importantly, feedback has been excellent, with lots of returning customers. The Regal will shortly be opening a second screen in the Abbey Hall, but will continue to use the Unicorn and we welcome the continued partnership with them, alongside our long-established partners in the drama groups and MATU.

Enjoy this newsletter, enjoy the summer!

Bryan Brown

Abingdon's Early Transport Links

In April we had a very interesting talk from Caroline Bullock about how road and river routes – and latterly the railways - developed through the ages and especially during the Industrial Revolution in order to facilitate the transport of goods to market. Also, how and why Abingdon, although the County town of Berkshire, only ended up with a branch line. She was supported by Martin Buckland who was able to answer questions on the Wilts and Berks Canal and Ivan Cadge who brought along models and memorabilia concerning the Abingdon Railway Company. During drinks and refreshments afterwards there were lively discussions with members including the technicalities of broad and standard gauge rails and stories of past family members who had worked for the Great Western Railway.

Coming Soon

Our full events list is on page 6 so this is a quick plug for those in the next few weeks:

Bank Holiday Walks – Monday May 28th.

We will be running our usual programme of walks in the morning and afternoon and the Buildings will be open all day for visits and refreshments. A great opportunity if you have visitors – or maybe want to see some new angles to Abingdon. Full details in the enclosed flyer and on the website.

AGM – Wednesday 13 June – come and find out more about our exciting plans. Formal notification accompanies this newsletter.

“Castles in the Desert” – Tuesday 10 July

A fascinating talk by Bobbie Nichols on the amazing stonemasonry created in the American West at around the same time as our Abbey was built.

Members' Lunch – Saturday 18 August

in the Long Gallery. Last year's event was very enjoyable so we hope to see lots of you there this year. We don't yet have a menu or booking form but please put the date in your diary and we will circulate them nearer the time. Olga Senior is organising it and she would find it very helpful if any of you who don't use email (or haven't given us permission to email you) could let her know if you are interested so we can make sure that we get details to you by post. Her tel. no is 01235 559120.



Since I Joined You - by Tim Miller, Curator

Sometimes I still can't believe Brandi and I are here and that we get to work with the Abbey Buildings and live in a medieval cottage. I remember when I initially applied for the position, thinking, "I'll never get it but it won't hurt to try." I have enough to do, working toward the completion of my PhD course at Oxford, but working with the abbey buildings has done so much to enrich our lives. Since arriving September 1, 2017, we've secured much-needed rubbish bins, hosted six dramatic productions, hosted every kind of special event from dog first aid to the science of cheese, shown 252 films, welcomed thousands of guests, held eight MATUS, attended 30 meetings, met all of the neighbours, held 25 Open Days, killed rats, visited two local schools, held two weddings, pulled weeds. And during this time, I managed to write two more chapters of my thesis.

I've learned that the job may be part-time, but the hours are spread wildly across the weekly calendar. No two weeks are the same, but I like that! Monday and Tuesday are not off days. I've found that to be successful as the curator I must be flexible, and flexibility means giving a tour on Monday or holding a meeting on Tuesday when that is the best time. I love it, really, because I've learned to balance the time by taking time as it comes on 'working' days. Some days I'm in the abbey buildings early in the morning but other days I'm locking up near midnight. I do not get bored and I am eternally grateful to have this opportunity at this time in my life.

I've met many wonderful people. The trustees and residents have all been most hospitable. Some people like Simon Hutton turned out to be neighbor, pastor, and friend. Paul and Juliette Cheetham along with Darryl and Julia Jones turned out to be neighbours, members of the Friends of Abingdon, and friends. We have become co-parents to Merlin the cat with

Colin Sanderson and Gwyneth Lewis. We are immensely grateful to Maggie Henderson-Tew who furnished the cottage for us and helped us move – we couldn't have done it without her; Peter and Gladys Clarke also deserve special mention for going out of their way to help us feel welcome and make sure we'd be successful.

As a historian, I have challenged myself to learn as much as possible about St. Mary's Abbey at Abingdon. I am constantly searching for new sources of abbey history and recently, by combing several sources, I compiled a list of abbots who served here. It's important for me to help preserve the history between 675 A.D. and 1538 as we also remember the reason why they were here. Men joined monasteries for a variety of reasons, but we must acknowledge that many of them came sincerely to live a life of piety, one that honoured God. I have walked through the buildings and across the green many times late at night thinking about their daily life and what the monks were thinking. What do you think?

Buildings and Gardens



Over the last few years we have had to do several major maintenance projects, but this year, thankfully, is quieter. Of course, there are always problems to address: the new Long Gallery blinds, although a great improvement, did not stand up to the ravages of winter and we have to replace them (we got our money back); there are also masonry repairs to do, a problem with leaking gutters on the Thames Street wall and occasional pest control issues. All part of the joys of caring for a medieval building!

The gardens are looking wonderful at present – if you have not been, do come and have a look. This is largely thanks to our gardener, Simon Odell and to Gladys Clarke. However they have greatly appreciated help from several of our

members, especially with clearing brambles and climbing roses. The area on the stream side is nearly clear but does require one more push so if any of our green fingered members would like to help please email Gladys (peter.clarke111@btinternet.com). Coffee and cake are usually on offer as a reward!

Opening times

We try to have the Buildings open to the public as much as possible in the summer months and having the cinema there has been very helpful in this as they are happy to show people around whenever they are open (although obviously not in the theatre while the film is running). This means that we have had several hundred visitors in the winter at times when we would not otherwise have been open. However as a historic attraction we are keen to keep regular times when visitors can see the whole complex in relative peace: our official opening times till the end of September are 10-12.30 on Wednesday, Thursday and some Fridays (not if there is a wedding on Saturday) and 2 – 4.30 on Sunday, but if you want to come at another time (e.g if you have visitors) do contact Tim on 01235 525339 and he will try to arrange something.

We have a rota of volunteers to man the buildings in these sessions – Tim and Brandi manage this and they could do with a few more helpers, so if you would be interested, do please get in touch with them. You will be given training and support. The Regal have also agreed that, subject to availability, volunteers can have two free tickets for a film showing later that day.

Civic Matters



Guildhall and Abbey Hall

A Special Parish Meeting was called for the 15th January to discuss the lack of progress in reopening the Guildhall and Abbey Hall. The point that there was no suitable civic venue for meetings of over 100 people in the centre of Abingdon, a town with a population approaching 40,000, was well made by the fact

that over 50 people were unable to get into the Meeting because the Roysse Room was full to capacity. Therefore a second meeting was called a week later in St Helen's Church. The proposal from the Town Council that the Abbey Hall would become a 'community hub', consisting of the Library and a Family Centre, at some unspecified time about two years in the future, was not well received as this would not solve the problem of the lack of a large civic space. There were also many adverse comments about the proposals to demolish the 1631 staircase in the Guildhall in order to install a lift allowing fully inclusive access to all the historic rooms. It was noted that the Regal Cinema Evesham, which is running the Unicorn Cinema in the Abbey Buildings, had proposed leasing the Abbey Hall from the Town Council and running it as a cinema and a public venue. This proposal has now been accepted by the Town Council and the necessary work is under way.

The Friends continued to press the Town Council to seek advice from appropriately qualified consultants on the historic significance of the 1631 staircase and this was received early in 2018. The report highlighted the difficulties involved in weighing up the benefits of fully inclusive access against the harm that would arise from replacing the staircase with a lift and a replica staircase, and recommended obtaining an access audit from a suitably qualified person. At the time of writing, the recommendations on access have not been made public. However, the Friends are cautiously optimistic that a solution will be found that does not involve replacement of the staircase. We will continue to monitor the situation

Old Abbey House

Following the announcement in late 2017 that VWHDC were planning to use the OAH site for social housing (it is unclear whether this involves demolition or conversion), a local resident came forward with a plan to buy OAH and use it partially as his family residence, but mostly as a community space (small meeting rooms, music rooms etc.) on the ground floor with the upper floor converted to flats for holiday lets. The Vale have also received another similar expression of interest. The Friends are sympathetic to both proposals and have supported both parties in discussions with the VWHDC. Currently, the plan is stalled, with no meaningful response from VWHDC, and the condition of OAH continues to deteriorate.

Upper Reaches

The Friends were approached by two businessmen who expressed an interest in acquiring the Upper Reaches, refurbishing it and running it as a hotel. They had approached the current leaseholders, Continental Hotels (a subsidiary of Caparo Steel), but nothing had come of this. It appears that a member of the family who own Caparo has expressed an interest in running the hotel himself, but so far there is no news of progress on this. Some repairs have been done to the fabric recently, but it remains an eyesore.



Old Gaol

Cranbourne Homes submitted a planning application for further development of the ground floor. As they have been unable to lease this space to commercial restaurant operators, they wish to do the job themselves rather than leaving the ground floor in the current unfinished state. The proposed works will consist of division of the central space into approximately one-third and two-thirds with two internal walls (already constructed). The larger space will be converted into a wine-bar/café, and the smaller space together with the south-west wing will be converted into three flats facing on to the riverside garden. Initially, the Friends objected to this but, following a site visit and meeting with representatives of Cranbourne Homes and the Old Gaol Residents Association), we decided to withdraw our objection. It had been based on the subdivision of the central space, which, we believed, had originally been open with the spiral staircase as a central feature, and concerns about restrictions on public access to the garden because of privacy issues for the residents of the proposed flats. However, having now seen the 2007 report of the Conservation Officer and the 1804 plans, we realise that the central space was originally

subdivided and that the dividing walls were demolished in the 1970s when the Leisure Centre was constructed. We were also assured that public access, as defined in the Section 106 agreement, would be maintained, and in fact would be encouraged with outdoor seating for the wine-bar. Overall, this proposal, although not what was originally intended, will complete the Old Gaol project, enabling public access to the ground floor of the central octagon and should add to the vibrancy of this corner of Abingdon as was envisaged in the 2009 plans.

Herald articles

The Friends have come to an agreement with the Abingdon Herald on publishing regular short columns on the theme of 'Civic Pride'. Two have already been published, and we plan to collaborate with other community groups to make this column a regular feature in the Herald. There should be one from Carbon Cutters in the 23 May edition. If you do not see the Herald, the articles are on our website.

Other planning issues

As usual the Friends have kept a watchful eye on planning applications in Abingdon. We have objected to a plan to demolish a bungalow in North Avenue and replace it with a block of seven (later reduced to six) flatlets and conversion of the garden into parking for seven cars. Unsurprisingly, the neighbours were horrified by this, particularly with respect to impact on their privacy and parking problems. Permission has been refused by the Vale Planning Committee.

We also made representations to the Vale Planning Department with respect to conversion of the offices on the floors above the TSB bank at 1 Stert Street into six flatlets. Unfortunately, we were unable to prevent this from happening, as it was a Permitted Development Order (PDO), rather than a standard planning application. Only transport and highway impacts of the development and contamination and flooding risks of the site are taken into consideration in assessing PDOs. Other issues, which would normally be relevant material planning considerations, cannot be taken into account.

AAHS 50th Anniversary

The Archaeological and Historical Society is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year – it spun off from the Friends of Abingdon in 1968. They are celebrating with a number of events, most notably:

Abingdon History Day – Saturday 30 June. Full details on their website, no charge, but booking essential <https://www.aaahs.org.uk/>
Exploring Abingdon's Past – Exhibition in the Museum from 7 July – 23 September.

Friends of Abingdon Events 2018

Monday 28 May: *Bank Holiday Walks* - Abbey Buildings open all day – with refreshments

Saturday 2 June: Abbey Buildings open all day during *Fun in the Park*

Wednesday 13 June: *Friends of Abingdon AGM* and talk on the Enhancement project

Tuesday 10 July: Talk: "*Castles in the Desert; Stonemasons of the American Southwest*" by Bobbie Nichols

Saturday 18 August: *Members' Lunch*

Fri 7 - Sun 9 September: *Heritage Open Days*

Tuesday 31 October: *Halloween Party*

Friday 2 - Sunday 4 November *Abingdon Traditional Craft Fair*

Friday 7 – Saturday 8 December: *Beer Festival*

Data Protection (GDPR)

Just a quick reminder to those of you who haven't yet returned your GDPR forms to do so ASAP. From 25 May we can only communicate with you if we have your consent to do so. Please return your form to Barbara Beach at 21 Gardiner Close, Abingdon, OX14 3YA. If you have lost it, please contact her on 01235 888091 or by email to barbara@mjbk.uk

Other Abbey Buildings Events (June-September 2018)

(see organisers' websites for details)

Monday 4 – Saturday 9 June: *ODN Annual Festival of One-Act Plays*

Thursday 14 June: Music at the Unicorn - *Anna Ryder*

Wednesday 20 – Saturday 23 June: Studio Theatre Club – *And Then There Were None* by Agatha Christie

Friday 29 June – Kevin Tomlinson's Kepow Theatre Company - *Beneath the Blue Rinse*

Saturday 30 June – *The Kesh Quartet* – concert

Wednesday 4 – Saturday 7 July: Abingdon Drama Club – *Flare Path* by Terence Rattigan

Thursday 6 September: Music at the Unicorn – *Sally Barker*

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