



## Newsletter Spring 2019

### Chairman's remarks

Dear Friends

As I write, a new Spring is gently breaking; the first snake's head fritillaries and cowslips are appearing and the welcome song of the blackbird enhances the evenings.

#### Update on the 'Enhancement Project'

As members know, last year we undertook a feasibility study on the future of the Abbey Buildings which was funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund now called the National Lottery Heritage Fund. We made presentations of our progress to invited guests, Friends and the community during Heritage Weekend last September. This work was completed at the turn of the year. With the help of our excellent consultants, we submitted our responses to five briefs; governance and organisation, an architectural planning study linked to a business plan, a community engagement plan and a fundraising plan. So, we now have a clear vision and strategy for the future.

The next step is a big challenge: to raise the funds to undertake the detailed design and implementation. The overall project cost is estimated at £4.5 million. The NLHF seem pleased with our feasibility study and we are now proceeding with a bid to them for the lion's share of the budget. However, we need local support from around the county, including our Local Authorities, grant giving bodies and

individual donations. This match funding is vital both to show commitment and to top up the national funding from NLHF. So we are working hard to achieve this objective. Once we have a reasonable proportion of the match funding in place, we hope to make our bid to the NLHF later this year.

#### The value of our project

We are very grateful for all the support we have received from our members and the community in sharing our vision. We believe that the enhanced Abbey Buildings will be transformative to our town, creating an important visitor attraction with interpretation illustrating 1,000 years of history. It will also champion Abingdon's remarkable heritage, the distinction of our beautiful town as the longest continually inhabited settlement in the country with over 300 listed buildings reflecting its historical importance as a key centre of trade and the former county town of Berkshire. Our heritage and history should be celebrated more fully to help generate civic pride and to deliver economic benefit to the town at a time when physical retailing is very challenged. Heritage has become big business, driving footfall, and the leisure spend can supplement and support other forms of town centre trading.

#### Business as usual

However as well as facing these new challenges the Friends are carrying on with all their normal activities and this newsletter gives

an update on many of those. Thank you to all our members, new and established, for your support and contribution to our Society and I hope to see many of you at our events during the summer.

*Bryan Brown*

## Update on organisational changes

It is now nearly a year since the Special General meeting which approved the proposal to separate the existing charity into two "Charitable Incorporated Organisations" – the Friends of Abingdon Abbey Buildings Trust and the Friends of Abingdon Civic Society. We gave our members more details at the AGM in June and at the end of September submitted our proposals to the Charity Commission. And then there was silence!

To be fair, the Commission did tell us that they had about a 5-month backlog so we realised we would probably not hear anything till about now, but it has been a frustrating delay. The core teams for the new CIOs are now set up and looking after operational matters (see their reports below), but so long as the Friends of Abingdon is the approved charity, major decisions have to be taken by the existing Trustees. The good news is that the Commission has now started looking at our application and we have had the first questions. We have provisionally scheduled our AGM for 17 June so, if all goes well, we should be able to start formalising the changes then.

As previously reported, the changes should not have any immediate effect on our members: all existing members will for the time being be members of both CIOs and will continue to receive newsletters and invitations to events as at present. At some stage the Buildings Trust may set up its own membership scheme, at which point our Life Members will (if they wish) remain members of both, but our annual members would have to apply separately to join the Buildings Trust.

### Abbey Buildings Trust

The founding trustees for each CIO have been drawn from the existing Society Trustees. Bryan Brown, Kevin Senior, Pat Bryden and Peter Clarke were appointed for the Buildings Trust and Bobbie Nichols has joined them as a nominee of the Civic Society. In addition there are three new trustees: Roger Thomas, recently retired from Historic England and a well-known local archaeologist, Matt Stevens, qualified historian, recently the Manager of the

Abingdon Museum and currently working on heritage buildings, and James Macintosh, an architect specialising in building conservation. Brandi Simpson Miller, Tim's wife, has been appointed as the trust administrator. So, we have a well-qualified team of diverse experience to lead the 'Enhancement Project' into the next phase and, in the meantime, to continue to manage the Abbey Buildings.



### Civic Society

Caroline Bullock, Hester Hand and Bobbie Nichols are the founding trustees for the Civic Society. The constitution provides for up to 12 trustees and

although we probably won't need that many, we certainly need a few more and would be happy to hear from any members who would like to join us. Being a Trustee will not be an onerous role – it is mainly a question of ensuring that we act within our remit and comply with our obligations as a charity.

The actual work of the Civic Society – the fun bit – is done by a wider group, each of whom can focus on the areas of most interest to them, whether it be heritage, conservation, planning, organising events such as the walks programme and Heritage Weekend, looking after the Community FreeSpace or just generally trying to make Abingdon an even better place to live. At the moment this group consists of the 3 Trustees plus Bryan Brown, Roger Thomas and Richard Tamplin. The last two are both interested and knowledgeable in heritage and planning matters. We also have Keith and Linda Butler who have agreed to help with FreeSpace and Helen Flynn doing a fantastic job leading the AbiBinit litter campaign. Two or three others have offered to help with specific projects, which is great, but we need more people for the core team. So do please get in touch with us if you would like to know more.

Projects we are working on – or hope to be working on – in the coming months are May Bank Holiday Walks, Heritage Weekend (slightly later this year – 21/22 September), Conservation Area Appraisals and a competition. All of these are in addition to our ongoing work, monitoring and responding to planning applications, lobbying for solutions to long-running problems such as Old Abbey House and the Upper Reaches, managing the Community FreeSpace and supporting AbiBinit. We also have a wider objective which is to establish closer relationships with the Town

and District Councils: we hope that like many other Civic Societies, we can be seen as partners rather than adversaries and will be looking to set up discussions with them after the May elections.

## Curator's Report

The Abbey Buildings have been busy in spite of the season due to an increase in bookings as well as the continued presence of the cinema. Since the beginning of the year, there have been sixty-nine days of cinema. We've also had three MATU (Music at the Unicorn) concerts, two plays (Black Comedy by ADC and Dogg's Hamlet & Cahoot's McBeth by STC), and we hosted several meetings, one birthday party, and one wedding. I've given twenty-one tours to potential hirers as well as six group tours. These included the Oxford Medieval Studies Pilgrimage Day and the new staff at the Hilton Garden Inn. The fire inspectors came last month, and members will be happy to know the building is as safe as it can be. All of the extinguishers are fully charged, as are the staff for a busy Spring season.

Coming up in April, a local band The Counterfeit Hit will be filming a music video in the buildings. ASTRA (the local residents association) will be meeting here, and the "monk" will be going to Old Station House.

Interest continues to grow in the Abbey Buildings for both weddings and receptions - there are only three wedding dates remaining in 2020, all of them in September.

Finally, from the historical files: King William I celebrated Easter at the Abbey Buildings in 1084 and Abbot Walkelin died here on April 10, 1164. Most famously of all, Henry VIII, Katharine of Aragon and their court spent three weeks at the Abbey at Easter 1518 - resulting in complaints from the monks that they had been eaten out of house and home and grumbles from the King's retinue about the quality of the food. The pageantry at the Abbey around Easter must have been splendid to behold - with the Maundy Thursday ceremony then the Easter celebrations.

*Tim Miller*

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## Education Outreach

Because of the need to demonstrate community engagement in our Heritage Lottery Fund application, we have been increasingly busy with schools since 2018.

Building on the work of Bobbie Nichols and Caroline Bullock, we have contacted 36 schools in the Abingdon area, including all types of primary schools, secondary schools, and universities. The primary schools curriculum requires them to incorporate local history and, since we are well positioned to assist them in meeting this requirement, head teachers have responded positively to our offer to visit schools and to have students visit the Abbey Buildings.

Since the beginning of this year, the staff of St. Blaise Primary School in Didcot have held their January staff meeting at the Abbey Buildings. The "monk" visited Rush Common School and the students from OLA (Our Lady of Abingdon) have been to the Abbey Buildings for lunch and a tour. Coming up in April, the students of Rush Common School will visit the Buildings.

Later in the Spring and Summer, The Unicorn School will be performing two plays in our Unicorn Theatre and the students from St. Blaise will be visiting several times to learn more about the Abingdon Abbey and the history of our Buildings. Approximately fifteen schools have engaged with the Buildings since 2018 and several of them are on the more distant calendar. We continue to negotiate with the remainder to see how we may assist them.

*Tim Miller*

## Old Abbey House and the Upper Reaches

We hear expressions of dismay over the state of these buildings from everyone we talk to - particularly visitors to the Abbey Buildings who have walked past the two eyesores. We continue to lobby the District Council, on whose land both sit, to take action. With work on the Guildhall now nearly complete and with our plans to enhance the Abbey Buildings, it would be wonderful if a scheme could be put in place for these other key buildings in the area - maybe to create an "arts and heritage quarter", with facilities for a wide range of interests and events in this stunning and historic location. That would require vision and money: there are a number of ideas circulating

which could become a vision and numerous examples around the country where public bodies, grant-givers and philanthropists have worked together on similar projects. In the meantime, discussions are still continuing on less ambitious proposals.

As reported recently in the Abingdon Herald, we understand that a new hotel developer has expressed an interest in taking on the Upper Reaches lease (currently held by Contemporary Hotels, part of the Caparo Group). We believe that they also want to build a small number of residential units on part of the car park: provided the scale of the residential element is not too big, this may be a reasonable price to pay for bringing the rest of this unique riverside location back into use for the public to enjoy. We will however be watching closely when the proposals are published.



There is no good news on Old Abbey House. Two different plans seem to be under consideration. The District Council have told us that they are discussing with social housing

providers about using it for that. It is not clear whether this means conversion or demolition and rebuilding: the latter would surely be unacceptable? The Town Council has been told that the future of the building is being considered as part of a county-wide "One Public Estate" review which aims to rationalise all public property, so that it could be brought back into use for services currently provided elsewhere. We have been unable to find out any timescale for this review. The Friends are aware of several people who have contacted the District Council in the last 2-3 years with serious proposals to take on Old Abbey House for various purposes, all involving some degree of public use. It is disappointing that officers and councillors have declined to engage with them. This is in contravention of the Vale's stated policy to "ensure that vacant historic buildings are appropriately re-used as soon as possible to prevent deterioration of condition". In the meantime the building deteriorates in front of our eyes – as I write this, the covering over the porch is hanging loose again, exposing the woodwork to the elements.

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## Planning

The Friends have commented on several major planning applications during the last few months.

In October the Abingdon Vale Cricket Club applied for permission to build a block of 10 flats on the cricket pitch off Northcourt Lane. They wished to develop this land in order to fund improvements at the Club. Although this was a laudable reason for the application, the Friends opposed it on the grounds that it contravened the recommendations of the Conservation Area Appraisal of 2008, and that the proposed access on to Northcourt Lane was dangerous and impacted on the rural ambience of the area. The Vale Planning Committee agreed with our comments, and those of others regarding the loss of sport facilities, and permission was refused.

In January a new application was submitted for the conversion of the Clock House in Ock Street from offices to flats. The Friends had opposed the previous application because of a lack of parking and difficult access via Winsmore Lane. The conversion itself had been designed in consultation with Historic England and the Friends were satisfied with that, particularly as it would bring one of Abingdon's historic buildings back into use after being empty for some time. The new application addressed the lack of parking but the access problem still remained. The Friends suggested that this could be mitigated by removing the bollards at the south end of Winsmore Lane and making it a one-way street from north to south (Ock Street to St Edmund's Lane). A decision has not yet been made.

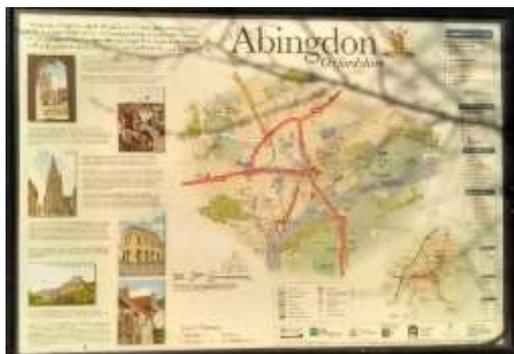
After a quiet period of several months, planning applications are being made for the developments to the north and northwest of Abingdon. An application for a development of 73 houses on the Circus Field (west of Wootton Road) was submitted in September 2018, followed by a revised application in February 2019 for 200 houses on the site to the east of Wootton Road between there and Tilsley Park. Although the Friends do not in principle object to these developments, there are several concerns including the number of houses (a total of 273 whereas the Local Plan specifies 'about 200'), infrastructure, public transport, access, and air quality. We have raised these concerns in our comments on these applications and emphasized that they should not be considered in isolation for each application, but should be dealt with as part of

the overall development in North and Northwest Abingdon.

An exhibition of the plans for the next phase of the North Abingdon development (east of Tilsley park) was held on 5 March. Representatives of the Friends attended and had useful discussions with the developers and members of the Vale of White Horse District Council. Once again, we emphasized the need for ensuring that the necessary infrastructure is put in place in tandem with building the houses rather than left as an afterthought.

We are keeping a watchful eye on the progress of the diamond interchange at Lodge Hill and the Oxford–Cambridge Expressway. We have been reliably informed that the delay to the Lodge Hill improvements is due to Highways England and not to funding problems, or the County Council or to a possibility that the Oxford–Cambridge Expressway will join the A34 at Lodge Hill. However, it is worrying that the work has not yet started: building the new houses is expected to commence later this year, although plans are for the work to be spread over a good many years.

*Bobbie Nichols*



## Abingdon Town Maps

Several Friends of Abingdon members were involved some years ago in a Choose Abingdon project to create the attractive maps which are located around the town, to direct visitors to places of interest. One of those originally involved was Pat Bryden and she has maintained an interest in the project ever since. She has given us the following report:

“The replacement of the Abingdon Town Maps at Rye Farm Car Park and by the riverside near the Cricket Field has ended up being a two year project, starting with an idea about relocation and ending with the complete redesign of the maps which involved a great many changes and corrections. I would like to thank all who have shown an interest and/or

helped with proof reading: the publishers and installers Fitzpatrick Woolmer have borne the many corrections very patiently. I have also had a great deal of help from Richard Ballard, head of the Parks Department for the South and Vale district councils. (It is fortunate that the officers cover both councils since, despite being only a few hundred yards apart, one is on Vale land and the other is in South Oxfordshire!)

We have now heard that the two new maps will be installed at the beginning of April. The riverside map will be two sided and friends from the AAAHS are working on the reverse which will be about the River Thames and will include historical and modern photographs. This again has been an expanding project so it might not be ready by the installation date but, if not, look out for it later.”

Our congratulations go to Pat for her persistence in seeing this through and we look forward to seeing the results. We may well be seeing more maps and visitor information soon as a new Economic Development Officer, Karen Roberts has been appointed for the Vale Towns. She is working on a range of projects to bring more visitors to Abingdon – and improve the information for them when they get here. We are delighted to see effort going in to this and will give Karen any help we can.

## Fundraising Events

In recent years we have run two big autumn fundraising events, the Abingdon Traditional Craft Fair and the Abingdon Beer Festival. In 2017 we took the Craft Fair back in house so that we could ensure that it is a high-quality event. It did well that year but we learned from feedback received and 2018 was bigger and better. Thanks to the efforts of our friends at Mushroom Communications who do most of the organisation, and to a staunch team of FoA volunteers, we had more stalls and a café, visitor numbers were up 10%, and the event generated a valuable £5,500 for our funds.



December’s Beer Festival was our third and it has become an established event in the local calendar. The beer (plus cider and wine) is managed by our local brewery, Loose Cannon, who select the best beers from Oxfordshire breweries. It celebrates brewing at the Abbey which took place for a remarkable 1,000 years, first with the monks

and then with the Abbey Brewery, which was founded not long after the Reformation and existed until the 1890s when it merged with Morlands. The Festival is financially successful: we sold over 2,000 pints during 10 hours in two evenings, delivering a contribution of over £2k to Society funds.

Importantly, these events, together with the drama productions, concerts and cinema, bring to our Buildings a broad cross section of our community, many of whom were previously unaware of the Abbey foundation and its contribution to the development of our town.

## Changing roles

As mentioned above, the existing charity Trustees remain responsible for its governance for the time being. There has been one change, in that Bruce Hunt, who has done sterling work as Treasurer since 2015 has stood down from that role, but remains as a Trustee. Kevin Senior has taken over the treasurer role until the AGM. Our sincere thanks go to Bruce for all he has done to keep our finances in order.

## Member Events 2019

AGM – Monday 17 June

Members' Lunch – Saturday 20 July

We plan to arrange more events later in the year, including one to celebrate the 75 years since the Society's founding and the move to the new structure. Watch out for details in the monthly bulletins.

## Public Events

Bank Holiday Walks – Monday 27 May

Heritage Weekend – 21-22 September

Craft Fair – 8-10 November

Beer Festival – 6-7 December

## Other Abbey Buildings Events (April -July 2019)

(see organisers' websites for details)

IOTA - Music at the Unicorn

Thursday 4th April

Abingdon Jazz Festival

Friday 10 – Saturday 11 May

Mark Harrison Band - Music at the Unicorn

Thursday 16th May

ODN Drama Festival of 1 Act Plays

Monday 3 – Saturday 8 June

Kevin Dempsey - Music at the Unicorn

Thursday 13th June

'Allo, 'Allo - Abingdon Drama Club

Wednesday 26-Saturday 29 June

Cream Tease – Burlesque Show

Thursday 4 – Friday 5 July

London Assurance by Dion Boucicault

Studio - Theatre Club 17-20 July

Plus Regal Cinema showings – full details at

<https://theabbey.ac/>

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