



Newsletter
Winter 2016

Chairman's Message

At the AGM in June I reported that the Council had decided to make a grant application to the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) for enhancements to the Abbey Buildings: our earlier enquiries had encouraged us to believe that we have a good chance of succeeding. Major work has not taken place for some years so our goal is to make these Buildings secure for a generation or more and to implement several enhancement projects. These include enabling them to be used throughout the year rather than just the summer months, so improving heating, lighting and disabled access. We plan to modernise the Unicorn Theatre and create a vibrant visitor attraction by bringing alive our one thousand years of history.

As a first step on our 'Enhancement Project' journey, we were advised to undertake a public tender for consultants in three areas; conservation architects, cost consultants and interpretation and exhibition design. We received Europe-wide interest in our project and have appointed one of the UK's leading conservation architects, Purcell, who will run the project from their Oxford office and another nationally recognised firm, Greenwoods with a Witney office, as our cost consultants. We are close to appointing the third team for interpretation and exhibition design. NB we will not be committed to any fees until/unless we get the first tranche of HLF funding. This is a very significant project for your Society so I will report progress regularly.

Although it is at the core of the town's history, the great Abbey of Abingdon is sadly unknown to many of our fellow townspeople so a challenge which the HLF will expect us to address is to engage our community more widely. We want a greater cross section of our community to get to know and enjoy our Buildings so have organised a wide variety of events this year, and are keen to encourage

more local people to use them for weddings and parties. Our final event for the year is the first Abingdon Abbey Christmas Beerfest on 9 - 10 December: beer has been brewed at the Abbey since its early days, so, it is a revival festival.

Trustees are involved with a range of community activities. For example, I represent the Society on the newly formed Abingdon BID (Business Improvement District) Board, which is financed by the business rate payers. Various initiatives have been started to bring more people, locals and visitors, to the Town centre. These include working with the county's tourist organisation, Experience Oxfordshire, to encourage more of Oxford's 9 million annual visitors, to visit our beautiful town.

Our new Curator/Manager, Sarah Jones, has settled in and deserves thanks for getting to know the foibles of our Buildings and helping to pull together a strong bookings programme. As ever with our ancient Buildings various emergencies arise such as lighting and heating failures and falling tree branches so thanks are due to Trustees Peter Clarke and Richard Charles for their expertise and willing help.

As a relatively new chairman, I am very impressed with our hard working and committed Trustees and volunteers. On behalf of the membership, I would like to thank them wholeheartedly. People clearly enjoy doing things for their community and the social interaction that volunteering provides so I would encourage more members to get involved.

My best wishes for Christmas and a purposeful 2017.

Bryan Brown

A gift for future generations

In 2019 your Society will celebrate its 75th anniversary - an occasion when we can thank our far-sighted predecessors who saved the remaining medieval Abbey Buildings from demolition. Several of our founders and their successors gave generously to our Society and generations of Trustees have been able to maintain our inheritance for us to enjoy today. Our annual income is not enough to fulfil our obligations so we do need to build our reserves which have been created in the past from donations and legacies. Hence the Society and future generations would be very grateful if members could consider a gift or remember the Society in your will.

Please contact our Treasurer, Bruce Hunt to discuss how this can be achieved.

As the well-known 19C artist, craftsman and pioneer conservationist William Morris so aptly recorded 'old buildings are not in any sense our property, to do as we like with. We are only trustees for those that come after us'.

Weddings and Celebrations



We were delighted to hear earlier this year that we have been granted a Licence for Wedding and Civil Partnership ceremonies to be held in the Abbey Buildings. People can now choose whether to have just the ceremony, just the reception, or both in any part of the Buildings except the Undercroft. Sadly ceremonies are not allowed in the garden, although it would be OK to have the ceremony under the archway by the Lower Hall, with the guests seated on the lawn at the front. Although the Buildings are too cold for receptions from October-April, we will consider requests for a short ceremony at any time of year.

We have had a lot of interest in the new arrangements and will be hosting our first ceremony at Easter. We now offer a 10% discount to Life Members who hire the Buildings for close family weddings and parties and one year's free membership as a gift to couples having their weddings or receptions here. Please contact our Curator/Manager Sarah Jones, for details.

Events 2016

The Friends of Abingdon decided to present a new and dynamic programme for 2016 - something that would appeal to everyone.

Our first event, in April, was a Wedding Fair. Our models looked beautiful, with wonderful gowns that were changed during the course of the day. The Toastmaster, resplendent in his red outfit, greeted everyone on arrival, food and drink flowed and the varied stalls and flowers were complemented by classical music from the Cotswold Ensemble. The press attended and took photos, which appeared in several publications.

We had three talks during the year: in May Colin Fox of the Mary Rose Trust told us about Henry VIII's famous ship and a good audience were treated to fascinating insights into life on board and the latest news on its restoration and display. At the AGM in June Simon Wenham talked on the history of Salters' Steamers - a well-known local firm still run by the descendants of those who set it up in the 1850s and who over the years have built not only pleasure boats but also competitive rowing boats, life-boats and vessels involved in both World Wars. In July we heard from the Street Pastors about their wonderful work taking care of people on the streets of Abingdon after most of us are safely tucked up in bed.

In June, we hosted a networking event by ROBIN - an organization which creates links between the voluntary sector and commercial companies. Many of the participants had never visited the buildings and it was a successful event, which will lead to future bookings of our buildings.

In July and August we ran three children's events. Ben Heaney presented two fairy tales set to music. The show was highly original and amused the children, who soon became absorbed by the tales and were invited afterwards to see and try the instruments themselves. In August we had a performance of The Lambton Worm: puppeteer, Paul Batten enthralled us with the magic of the tale accompanied by music, sound effects and mechanical objects. He will be joining us for a second show next year. Our third children's event was Spymaster, for slightly older children, combining quizzes, talks and an audience-participation event.

We had two classical concerts – the annual “Music for a Summer Evening” event with Abbey Strings in July and a concert in October by the Pavlova Wind Octet, under the leadership of Simon Payne.

In addition we had our usual heritage and community-related events including the ever popular May Bank Holiday Walks, in conjunction with other local groups, such as the Ramblers, Green Gym and Friends of Radley Lakes and Heritage Weekend.

Our final event of the year – another new venture – will be the Abingdon Abbey BeerFest on 9-10 December – more details on page 6.

All in all, it has been a memorable year which has been entertaining in its varied content and has introduced the Abbey Buildings to a wide range of people who did not previously know they were there. We look forward to seeing them again.

St. Edmund Project



Following our visit to St Edmund Hall earlier this year, September saw the Launch of the wider St. Edmund Project. This is being co-ordinated by Rosemary Allan, on behalf of Friends of Abingdon, working closely with St Nicolas Church and the St. Edmund Memorial Trust who look after the St Edmunds Chapel at Dover. Incidentally, the latter is a wonderful example of conservation and restoration – it has survived even greater threats than our own Abbey Buildings!

On 16 November, St Edmund’s Feast Day, the project team organised a celebration at St Nicolas Church. A choral Evensong, with the combined choirs of St. Helen’s, St. Nicolas and St. Edmund was followed by a reception for around 80 people, including the Deputy Lord Lieutenant (and Vice-President of Friends of Abingdon), Felicity Dick and the Mayor, Alice Badcock. It was a very enjoyable evening and an opportunity for all to find out more about one of Abingdon’s most famous sons.

The team are now working on ideas for future events and will publish details in due course.

Visit to Broughton Castle

The Friends of Abingdon are affiliated to the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB) which was founded in 1877 by William Morris “to counteract the highly destructive ‘restoration’ of medieval buildings being practised by many Victorian architects”. Among their other activities SPAB organise occasional visits to heritage buildings in the region and in September a few of us were lucky enough to be able to go to Broughton Castle, near Banbury. Those who have read “The Music Room” by William Fiennes, will remember that Broughton Castle was a major focus of the book.

The visit was absolutely fascinating: we were shown round by Martin Fiennes, whose family have owned the castle since 1447 and he took us to every nook and cranny – including areas not normally open to the public. After the tour we were given time to explore the castle on our own, or under the guidance of a SPAB buildings historian. From the FoA point of view it was also very interesting to hear Martin’s insights into maintaining and conserving a historic building – including some tips on dealing with Historic England. It was also instructive to see how a medieval building can be sympathetically adapted to 21st century life.

Heritage Weekend



Heritage Open Days 2016, which were jointly organised by the Friends of Abingdon and the Museum, were a great success despite the atrocious weather on the Saturday. About 2000 people attended the Medieval Market and the open houses all reported plenty of visitors. We had 68 people on the Sunday walks and at least 310 visitors to the Abbey Buildings – including lots of children. The *1950s Abingdon* Exhibition in the Community FreeSpace attracted over 1200 visitors – and we learned lots of fascinating information from many of them during its one-week run.

We had two well-attended talks in St Nicolas Church – Jackie Smith telling us about the 600-year history of Abingdon’s Bridges and Father Oswald McBride talking about Life in a Benedictine Monastery in medieval and modern times. Father McBride also came on the Lost Abbey Walk with us on the Sunday and helped us to imagine much more clearly what Abingdon’s Great Church would have been like.

Civic Matters

Earlier this year the Friends set up a small sub-committee to deal with planning and civic matters and this has proved to be a good move because there are some major issues in this area.

Unitary options for Oxfordshire

There has been very little positive progress on this since the last Newsletter. Both the District Councils and the County Council commissioned reports from consultants on their proposals. It is recognized that reorganization would bring technical benefits, but there is still no decision about the best way forward. Political issues are currently preventing agreement. Therefore the status quo may be the most likely outcome, though efforts will be made to improve joint working, reduce duplicated effort and resources, and make some of the cost savings identified in the consultants' reports.

This is very disappointing as a sensible reorganization would probably make sufficient financial savings to relieve at least some of the pressure on the funding of children's centres and adult social care, to name just two areas which are facing unsustainable financial cuts. Friends of Abingdon are working with the Oxford Civic Society in an attempt to produce proposals which might help to break the logjam and move forward. We hope that other civic and community groups will also become involved in this effort.

Neighbourhood Plan

We have been pressing for several years for the Town Council to set up a Neighbourhood Plan – not only does this give local people more input into developments planned for the area, but it also means that the Town Council would have control over a much larger amount of the infrastructure money arising from any developments. At the Town Council meeting on 5 October, it was agreed that since no progress had been made on the neighbour-hood plan, a dedicated working group should be set up to take this forward. The aim is to produce a Community Led Plan (CLP) by February 2017, and then move on to a Neighbourhood Plan. The working group will "seek assistance from, and possibly co-opt, stakeholders". We anticipate that, as the town's Civic Society, Friends of Abingdon will be invited to take part.

Guildhall, Old Abbey House and Upper Reaches

There have been no further developments on these. There are concerns that government

proposals to cap any increase in parish council precepts for larger towns/parishes may limit the funding available for the Guildhall refurbishment.

North Abingdon Development

A slightly revised plan has been produced for the 900 houses on the area between Tilsley Park and Peachcroft Farm, taking into account comments from the earlier consultation. Our main concerns are still over infrastructure – especially roads leading to and from the new houses. The plans are based on the expectation that the Lodge Hill interchange will be upgraded to 4-way by 2020 and approval for this was expected in the government's Autumn Statement (but no news yet). There is speculation that the recent announcement of the closure of Dalton Barracks, with the possibility that the Abingdon airfield site might be available for housing, could impact on the decision to go ahead with the North Abingdon developments: the Friends of Abingdon's understanding is that the airfield site is unlikely to become available in time to meet the housing targets imposed on the District Council and that the requirement to identify sites to meet Oxford City's additional housing needs means that both sites will be needed. However we are monitoring the situation and will report on future developments.

65 Oxford Road

Following pressure from FoA and others, saplings have now been planted to reduce the visual impact of the modernist houses built on the site.

Old MG Works

The owners of the site along Colwell Drive which is now occupied by a row of warehouses, the last remaining bit of the MG Works, have applied to replace the buildings with 93 houses. The warehouses are the original buildings with exterior cladding, but they are of no architectural merit. However, they are of some historical interest, bearing in mind the importance of MG in Abingdon's history so it is hoped that whatever is built there will incorporate some recognition of that.

Buildings Matters

Regular maintenance is a fact of life in buildings of this nature and will continue. Last year saw us undertaking major work on the fabric of the Buildings: that side has been

quieter this year, but we took the opportunity to do a major update to the Curators Cottage during the gap between Jenny Berrell moving out and Sarah Jones moving in. We have also done a lot of work on the electrical systems throughout the Buildings to make them more robust under the pressure of increasingly demanding events, and to improve lighting, upgraded the IT connectivity in the Curator's cottage and extended the Wi-Fi to the theatre and West Checker. There is also an ongoing programme of work for health and safety compliance.

The gardens are a vital part of the Buildings' attraction and there is continuing work to be done there. At the start of the season we were enormously grateful for the efforts of the "Groundforce" team of members who helped Sarah get them into shape for the first weddings. Since then we have had some major work done on the beautiful ash trees and engaged the services of an excellent gardener who is getting to grips with the bigger tasks, but we would still appreciate help from volunteers with ongoing jobs such as weeding and watering in the warmer weather. Do get in touch if you would be willing to lend a hand.

Volunteers

Following the call in the last newsletter for volunteers to help man the Buildings during summer open afternoons we now have the nucleus of a team and are very grateful to those who came forward. I hope that most of them would agree that it can be a pleasant and interesting way to spend an afternoon – especially on a sunny day when there is a steady flow of visitors.

We are now looking for a volunteer to co-ordinate the rota: the idea of using volunteers for the open afternoons was to free up Sarah's time to do other work, but managing the rota made substantial inroads into the time saved! We have a list of members who are willing to help with certain tasks and hope to expand it in the coming months: the role of the co-ordinator would be to manage that list and use it to organise people to do the tasks as required. The open afternoon rota would be the main one, but it could also include people for gardening, newsletter delivery etc.

If you would like to know more – without any obligation (!) please get in touch with Hester Hand (contact details overleaf).

Friends of Abingdon Events 2017

Events currently scheduled are:

11 February - Family puppet show - *Sinbad the Sailor*

20 April – Annual Lambrick Lecture: "*The Long Gallery at Abingdon Abbey - putting this in context of communal living in the middle ages*" by David Clark. (AAHS event jointly hosted by Friends of Abingdon)

May (date tbc) - "*Open Abbey*" event: to promote the Friends of Abingdon and the Abbey Buildings

Friday 16 June (possible) *Early Music concert*

Thursday 29 June – *Friends of Abingdon AGM and talk by Ian Harvey, Director, Civic Voice.*

Sunday 30 July - *Music for a Summer Evening concert*

September 9/10 - *Heritage Weekend*

October/November - *Autumn Craft and Gift Fairs*

Still to be arranged: new members' event, members' lunch, further talk(s).

Unicorn Theatre Events Spring 2017

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

Thursday 12th January - *Hannah James & Tuulikki Bartosik*

Thursday 9th February - *Dalla*

Thursday 16th March - *Said The Maiden*

Thursday 6th April - *The Urban Folk Quartet*

Drama

25-28 January – *Much Ado About Nothing*
Studio Theatre Club

8-11 March - *Brief Encounter*
Abingdon Drama Club

22-25 March *Hedda Gabler* - Breakaleg Productions

ATOM Science Festival event

Sunday 26 March: details to be announced



Abingdon Abbey Christmas BeerFest

As part of our programme to bring our Buildings to the attention of a wider range of Abingdon people, the Friends of Abingdon are delighted to present our last event of the year – the Abingdon Abbey Christmas BeerFest.

Our Buildings previously housed one of Abingdon’s traditional breweries and we have joined forces with the local Loose Cannon Brewery to celebrate this with the very best of modern Oxfordshire beers. There will be food from local suppliers and music from local bands – plus guided tours of the buildings.

So, we hope that you and your friends will help revive an Abingdon tradition and support the upkeep of some of Abingdon’s oldest buildings.

The Festival will run from 6 – 11pm on Friday 9 December and from 1 – 11pm on Saturday 10th. Entrance is free: tokens (£7) will buy 2 pints or 4 halves. Other drinks will be available.

Membership Subscriptions – Important Information

Those of you who were at the AGM in June will remember that the meeting voted to approve increased membership rates from 1 January 2017. This is the first increase since 2008. The new rates are:

- Single Member: annual £10, life £100
- Couple: annual £16, life £160

However, any existing members who wish to convert to Life Membership and do so before the end of 2016, can do it at the current rate of £55 single, £85 couple. If you wish to do this, please send a letter and your cheque to Barbara Beach, 21 Gardiner Close, Abingdon OX14 3YA to reach her by **31st December**. If you have previously paid by standing order, please remember to cancel it!

For those who wish to continue paying annually, subscriptions are due on 1st January: if you already pay by Standing Order **please amend it to the new amount**; if you pay by cheque, we would like to ask you to consider converting to Standing Order as it is very much easier to administer. Please contact Barbara for a form. However if you prefer to continue paying by cheque that is, of course, fine.

Late news: we are sad to report that Alan Bryden, a former Trustee and husband of current Trustee, Pat Bryden, died earlier this week. Our condolences go to Pat and her family.

Contact us by telephone or email

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Newsletter published by: Friends of Abingdon, Abingdon’s Civic Society,
18 Thames Street, Abingdon, OX14 3HZ. <http://www.friendsofabingdon.org.uk/>