



Newsletter – January 2010

Chairman's remarks

A Happy New Year to you all. As you will see from this newsletter, these are interesting times for the Friends and others who care about this town. We hope that the Choose Abingdon partnership will be able to break down some of the barriers that have hitherto prevented good intentions being turned into actions: we will be offering comments and assistance on those of their projects which are relevant to our aims. We also hope that the new national Civic Society Initiative will provide support and guidance to local groups such as ours to help us to be more dynamic and effective.

To do all of this effectively we will need help from our members and would very much like to hear from any of you who would like to be involved. This does not necessarily involve a long-term commitment: "pairs of hands" to help on the day with events or do an hour on a Friends stall would be very welcome, as would assistance with any of the projects mentioned in this or future newsletters.

You will find our contact details and a couple of specific requests later in this newsletter.

Bill Wivell

Bill Wivell died just before our last newsletter went to press and we were not able to include a proper tribute at that time.

Bill was elected to the Council of the Friends in 1995 and served as a very active member for ten years, retiring in 2005. He joined the Building Maintenance Group and soon became its leader. He did much very valuable work in the preservation of the fabric of the Abbey Buildings and was skilled in his negotiations with both English Heritage and our advisory architects. He took the lead in such matters as the re-pointing of the walls and the re-roofing contracts as well as the multitude of smaller

matters such as repairing locks and fitting light bulbs.

Bill continued to be very active until his deteriorating eyesight forced him to resign, which came as a blow to both him and the Council. As a member of the Council he also took an active part in all the multitude of discussions on the general work of the Friends and his advice from his past experience as a local councillor and Mayor of Abingdon was always valuable.

Civic Society Initiative

The Friends of Abingdon continue to follow with interest the work of the Civic Society Initiative and their plans to create a successor body to the defunct Civic Trust. Much work and discussion is taking place and it seems likely that the new organisation will perform three main roles:

- Providing information, support and advice to civic societies e.g on planning issues, local campaigns and fundraising
- Helping civic societies to network among themselves and share good practice
- Being a national lead voice for civic societies, raising their profile and influence, lobbying and research.

Tony Burton, the Initiative's Director, will be visiting us on 28 April, by which time the new body should have been launched. We hope to see as many of you as possible at his talk: he is a dynamic speaker and should give us some good ideas to help us make the voice of Abingdon people heard.

In the meantime, members interested in the progress of the discussions can find out more at www.civicsocietyinitiative.org.uk

Abingdon news



Choose Abingdon Partnership

As mentioned in previous newsletters, the Partnership has been set up to help improve the town's vitality – economic, social and cultural. Although it includes representatives from the Town, District and County Councils it is independent of them and has other members including representatives of local businesses. The intention is that it should be able to identify and drive projects which might otherwise fall between the remits of the various councils and other bodies. In September the Partnership appointed an unpaid Chair, James White, who has recently retired from senior positions in the retail sector and a paid Manager, Heather Brown, who has experience in fundraising and revitalising market towns as well as running her own businesses.

They have spent their first few months taking soundings from local people – including business and community representatives – about what is needed and are now prioritising the suggestions and working towards a list of specific projects in some or all of the following areas:

- Improving the visitor experience – making better use of what we have
- Promoting events to bring local people in to the town centre
- Major events to “put Abingdon on the map”
- Better marketing and publicity – to local people and visitors
- Improving the range and attractiveness of the town centre businesses

They will also seek to encourage and influence progress on issues such as:

- Parking and transport
- Larger long-term projects (major developments)
- General improvements to amenities including those for the old and the young

The Partnership itself only has limited funding: having identified priority projects their next task will be to put together funding by negotiating with the constituent councils and/or business representatives and by making applications to other funding sources.

As a start they have secured funding for a promotional leaflet to go out in March promoting the April Craft Fair and other events/activities taking place in the spring and early summer. They have also applied for funding for replacements for the tourist information maps which are mounted on boards in key positions around town. Friends of Abingdon are helping with the design of the new maps.

Abingdon in Bloom

In 2009 Abingdon gained a Silver Gilt Award in the Regional Britain in Bloom competition. This showed a great recovery after the floods in July of 2007. Each year a wide spectrum of the town's people, businesses, schools and clubs contribute to the effort to achieve the best for Abingdon in making our beautiful town look its best. Children and schools build on the relevant work in their curriculum as it relates to a theme chosen for the year; residents across the town show creativity and talent in gardens large and small; pubs, hotels and other businesses contribute through their many different floral displays; business parks and the two local councils do so too.

Abingdon's Town Crier was on the streets to greet the Britain in Bloom judges for the big day of judging at the beginning of August. The route for the judges was carefully planned to include the main efforts, projects and displays offered as representation of the town as well as showing the variety of excellent residents' gardens in estates and areas around the town. The Abbey Buildings were included in the route, and the judges were pleased to meet our curator, Jenny Berrell and her volunteer helper, Roger Cox. The newly redeveloped formal Abbey Gardens displays were described in their report as the jewel in the town's crown. The care of both the old and new cemeteries was commended and the floral displays and new planters around the town centre completed the success.

Abingdon in Bloom welcomes the opportunity to improve on all of this in 2010, so watch out for details of how to get involved.



District Council Plans affecting Abingdon

In January 2009 the Vale of White Horse District Council published options for development in the Vale up to 2026 setting out where new homes, jobs, shops, roads and community facilities should go. The Council is now asking people to comment further before finalising its draft Core Strategy.

Changes and ideas affecting Abingdon include the following:

Housing

The council will not take forward ideas for a major housing development south west of Abingdon because no feasible solution to the serious transport problems in the town has been identified.

Because of high local house prices there are plans to increase the proportion of affordable housing in new developments.

Roads

The County Council says that at the moment there is no transport justification for a major road scheme such as the Abingdon southern bypass so land for this will not be safeguarded in the core strategy.

The Lodge Hill diamond interchange is still under discussion.

The Abbey Shopping Centre and Charter

The Bury Street Precinct has been renamed as the Abbey Shopping Centre. There are plans to refurbish the upper storeys in the next year or two and take away the canopies so that it will look more like an attractive pedestrian shopping street with a variety of facades. Some of the shops will be increased in size to attract new tenants.

There are also longer term and less definite plans. The preferred option included the following:

- Rebuild the Cargo and Somerfield stores with shops on the ground floor and a new library and health centre above.
- Redevelop the whole Charter area including the multi storey car park to create a major new store (probably a supermarket) with car parking above for about 500 cars (compared to about 250 in the existing car park).

Other options showed street level car parking between the existing shops and the new store.

Currently the project is at the concept stage and no detailed designs have been produced. Members of the public have until 12 February to give their views. More information is available at <http://tinyurl.com/yc3gz2t>

The Friends Council will be submitting a collective response: if you would like us to reflect your views please contact Pat Bryden – see page 6.

Abingdon Museum

There was a lively meeting in the autumn about the plans for the Museum redevelopment. Subject to getting the necessary approvals from English Heritage, work will start later this year. We have offered to work with the Museum and Town Council to see how the Friends and the Abbey Buildings can help fill the gap while the Museum is closed.

Business Forum

Discussions are underway with a view to creating a new business forum with a wider membership than the current Chamber of Commerce. The new forum would aim to enable businesses to work together – and with the Councils and the Partnership – to support one another and improve the vitality of the town.

Note: if you would like to discuss issues such as these with other Friends of Abingdon members, and help us to accurately represent your views, why not join our Google Group friendsofabingdon@googlegroups.com



Forthcoming Friends events

For Friends events please contact Pauline Burren or Jenny Berrell (contact details on page 6) to book your tickets – places are limited. To book for other events please contact the organiser)

“The History of Abingdon School”

Talk by Mark Turner M.A - Headmaster of Abingdon School. Tickets £6 incl. glass of wine. Tuesday 23 February 19.30 Unicorn Theatre

Talk by Tony Burton, Director of the Civic Societies Initiative

Wednesday 28 April 19.30pm Unicorn Theatre Tickets £6 incl. glass of wine.

AGM Tuesday 15 June

Advance notice – put it in your diaries now, more information nearer the time

Unicorn Theatre events

Drama

"All's Well That Ends Well – William Shakespeare"
Studio Theatre Company 10 – 13 February

"Prescription for Murder" – whodunnit thriller by Norman Robbins
Old Gaol Theatre Company 10 – 13 March

Spring Crafts Festival

Thursday 8 – Sunday 11 April 10.00 – 17.00 (16.30 Sunday)
<http://www.abingdoncraftfair.com/>

Medieval Banquet

19.00 for 19.30 Saturday 8 May

Good food and wine, entertainment and a jolly evening. Please support us, book a party, come and have some fun. Tickets (and suggestions for how to dress-up for the occasion) are available now at £29.50 per person from Jenny at the Abbey or Pauline on 01235 521873.

The profits from this event will be shared equally between two charities, "Cementing Futures" www.cementingfutures.org. and funds for the continued "Preservation of St. Nicolas Church, Abingdon", once part of the medieval Abbey complex.

Other events in Abingdon

Civic events - more details on all of these from Abingdon Information Office 01235 522711 or <http://www.abingdon.gov.uk/>

- Mayor's Civic Charity Ball – 19.00 Friday 26 February. Tickets £37
- Annual Parish Meeting Wednesday 17 March
- Clubs and Societies Day 10 April
- Mayor-Making Wednesday 12 May

Abingdon Arts Festival 11 – 28 March

Programmes to be distributed shortly or see <http://www.abingdonartsfestival.org.uk/>

Talk on Victorian Abingdon by Jackie Smith – Town Archivist

Abingdon Museum Friends : 4 February 19.00
St Helens Church Hall

“England's Oldest Town? The Archaeology of Abingdon”

Talk by Roger Thomas for the Abingdon Anglo-German Club
19.30 Thursday 1 April Abbey Chapel, Checker Walk



Please remember that there is no parking at the Abbey Buildings: drop off and pick up only. (Free Parking after 18.30 at Abbey Meadows or Cattle Market car parks)

For up to date information on a wider range of events in Abingdon see the "What's on in Abingdon" Diary at <http://www.abingdondiary.co.uk/> or the Town Council website <http://www.abingdon.gov.uk/> For an informative but light-hearted online commentary on events in the town – and lovely pictures – see "This Abingdon" at <http://www.abingdonblog.co.uk/>

"Who's Who" in the Friends of Abingdon

A series of occasional pen portraits of those who are active in our Society

Pat Bryden

Pat has lived in Abingdon since she was married and has been involved in a variety of activities in the town since then. As a teacher she has worked at some time in most of the town's secondary schools, at the College of Further Education and for the Open University and is now a governor at a local primary school where she enjoys contact with younger children.

When she retired from teaching, Pat combined writing text books with a several other activities including organising trips to exhibitions and concerts for Abingdon Decorative and Fine Arts Society (ADFAS). In 2006, on behalf of ADFAS, she initiated and helped to organise a Children's Art Exhibition in the Long Gallery as part of the 450th anniversary of the granting of the Royal Charter to Abingdon. All the schools in the town were involved and came up trumps with lots of interesting and exciting things to see. Many of the teachers had not seen the Abbey Buildings before and thought it was a marvellous space for the exhibition.

Pat enjoys walking and loves the countryside, but she is also interested in the built environment and has recently taken on the role of vetting planning applications for the Friends of Abingdon - ably assisted by her husband Alan who has had a lot of relevant experience as a town and county councillor.

Can you help us?

Postage makes up nearly half the cost of producing this newsletter. There are two ways you can help us reduce this - and maybe produce it more often: you can have it sent by e-mail (in PDF format) or you can offer to hand deliver newsletters to a few of our members near where you live or work. If you would like to discuss either or both please get in touch (my contact details are overleaf).

We are keen to get more people involved with our Society so members living locally will find a membership application form enclosed with this newsletter: do please encourage your friends or neighbours to join. (more forms available if needed!)

Hester Hand

"It'll do him more good than going to school"

This was the fierce-sounding title of a fascinating talk on child labour in 19th century Oxfordshire given in November by Liz Woolley.

The plight of poor children in industrial and urban areas of Victorian England is well-known but life was far from idyllic for those growing up in rural areas. Although early 19th century legislation had brought in some controls on the exploitation of children in mines and factories, there was no protection until the 1860s for those in rural areas: many children did not attend school at all and most boys who did left at age 10 or 11. There was a dual disincentive for parents to send their children to school: the families need their earnings, and it cost money to send them to school: basic elementary education did not become free until 1891. In 1873 children under 8 were banned from working in agriculture and from 1878 no children under 10 could be employed anywhere.

Children in Oxfordshire worked in agriculture, domestic service, lace-making, gloving, and many smaller-scale employments, both casual and full-time. Many worked for their families or close to home, but some were sent further afield, for example to work "in service". In Abingdon there would have been children working in the small industries based around the river - most of which would have had hazards especially for the young.

Work on the land or in the domestic setting was by no means a soft option: days were long and much of the work was physically hard, often dangerous. Even a job like lace-making could be hazardous: in winter each girl would bring a few hot coals from home in a bucket, which would then be placed under her work stool (and her long skirts!) to provide warmth for at least part of the day.

Liz is a popular speaker at Friends' meetings and always gives us plenty of food for thought. We look forward to welcoming her back soon.



Mieneke Cox - Abingdon Historian (1928-2009)

Mieneke Cox, who died in December, was one of Abingdon's best known local historians. For many people their first introduction to the town's history will have been through attendance at her WEA classes, lectures, tours, or through her books and published articles (many of them in the North Berks Herald and its successor the Abingdon Herald).

Mieneke was born in Holland where she studied history at the University of Utrecht. She met her future (English) husband, George, on a walking holiday in the Lake District. After their marriage she settled down in Abingdon as a 'Harwell wife' attending St Helen's Church where her interest in history was rekindled by the Vicar, Rev John Dixon, who granted her access to the church's archives. This led to the publication of her guide to St Helen's Church in 1965. The Vicar also introduced her to the historian, Mrs Gabrielle Lambrick. Both were present in 1968 at the inaugural meeting of then Abingdon and District Archaeological Society. Following Mrs Lambrick's untimely death in 1968 Mieneke was invited by the WEA to arrange the first of many courses in local history.

Shortly afterwards, the curatorship of Abingdon Museum (then run by Abingdon Borough Council) became vacant. In 1970 Mieneke took up the reins there, serving as curator until 1974. In addition to her work at the museum, her position as St Helen's Archivist and looking after three young children, she found time to continue with her research, publishing *Abingdon - Abbey to Borough* in 1974. This was the first of many successful titles produced over the years: Mieneke produced works on Abingdon Abbey, St Helen's Church, pageants and the four volumes of *The Story of Abingdon* - the first substantial history of the town since 1910. In the early 1990's Mieneke led a group transcribing St Helen's parish registers - a boon to family historians. She was already an Honorary Vice-President of the Abingdon Area Archaeological and Historical Society when her outstanding contribution to our knowledge of Abingdon was recognised in 1997 by the presentation of a Mayor's Award, an honour introduced by Abingdon Town Council to recognise service to the community. Despite retirement and ill health she remained an active member of the society, contributing her knowledge and experience via the local history group email to any member who sought it.

Jackie Smith
Abingdon Archivist

Contact us:

| | | |
|---|------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Chairman: Michael Matthews | 01235 520027 | mw.matthews@tiscali.co.uk |
| Secretary: Tony Legge | 01235 520768 | tonylegge@btinternet.com |
| Membership Secretary and Events Organiser: Pauline Burren | 01235 521873 | paulineburren@maryholland.co.uk |
| Newsletter Editor: Hester Hand | 01235 529044 | hester@hand-abingdon.net |
| Planning Matters: Pat Bryden | 01235 524081 | pat@brydens.me.uk |
| Abbey Buildings Curator and Bookings: Jenny Berrell | 01235 553701 01235 525339 | |

