

## Newsletter – Spring 2011

### From the Chairman

As you will see from this newsletter the Friends are continuing to spread their horizons. Our new Strategy Committee under Alan Bryden is busily investigating areas in which we feel we can make a mark on the future of our town. The responses to most of our ideas have been very positive and I hope that we will be able to give the leadership and inspiration that they need but we do also need YOUR help as members of the Society to bring these schemes to fruition. Do please let us have your thoughts about them and, if you can, join us in the work.

I am happy to see that the Abbey Buildings and the Theatre continue to attract an increasing number of lettings for a widening range of events. You will see from his report that Peter Clarke is continuing his sterling work on the fabric of the buildings all of which enables us to attract new lettings and increase our revenue flow (which is badly needed)

It is always fascinating to hear of new discoveries and conjectures regarding the buildings and I very much welcome the work of the Oxfordshire Buildings Record. I am sure that there are many more hidden secrets to be revealed from these ancient stones.

We continue to monitor and comment on the progress of schemes such as the Old Gaol, the Shopping Centre and the Guildhall but are unimpressed by the air of secrecy that seems to surround them. Much more transparency is called for from the public bodies which are supported by our money.

My thanks must go to all the hard working members of the Council of the Friends and of course to Jenny Berrell our wonderful curator (and everything else).

### Projects

#### Town Maps

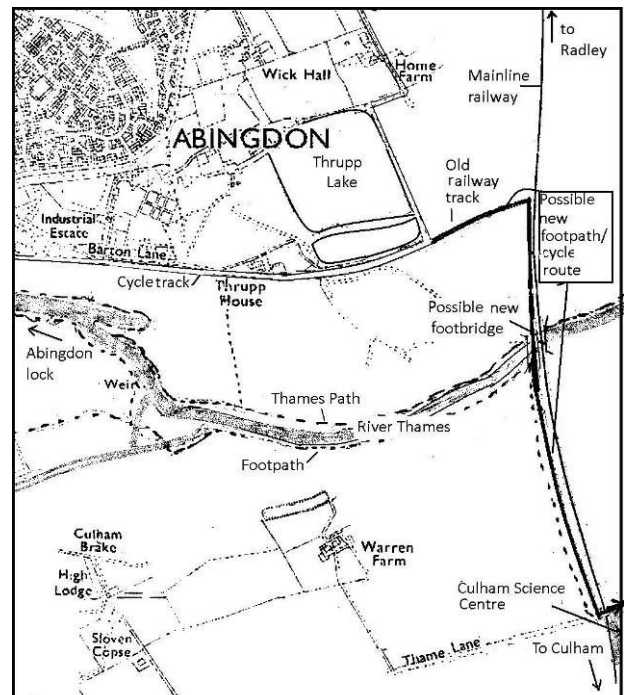
We reported on this in the last newsletter. The project is now virtually complete and the first maps should be in place for the start of the main tourist season.

Our new projects are summarised below: please contact the person named if you would like to know more or get involved with any of the projects.

#### Thames Bridge Proposal

*(Pat Bryden or John Burren)*

We have recently made a submission to Oxfordshire County Council asking for a footbridge/cycleway over the Thames to be included in the Oxfordshire Transport Plan under the heading "Encouraging Cycling and Walking". The bridge would be next to the mainline railway bridge and would link two public footpaths – one each side of the river as shown below:



There are several advantages to such a bridge. Apart from stopping people from

being tempted to climb up onto the railway line to get across (and several people have informed us that they have done this despite the obvious danger involved!) it would provide:

- a link between the Oxfordshire Green Belt Way and the Thames Path.
- a link between Radley Lakes and Culham, Sutton Courtenay and Long Wittenham.
- attractive round walks from Abingdon along the south bank of the river and then back on the other side or via Radley Lakes and the cycle track.
- additional options for the Health Walks from the Tennis and Leisure Centre.
- additional options for the Ramblers walks from Abingdon Market Place.
- an alternative river walk between Radley and Culham avoiding Abingdon bridge.
- a shorter and more pleasant cycle route from North Abingdon and Radley to Culham and Wallingford cutting out Abingdon town centre and bridge and so helping to reduce rush hour traffic through the town centre.
- a short link between Abingdon Science Park and Culham Science Centre.

We have received a lot of encouragement from groups such as Oxfordshire Ramblers, CPRE, Friends of Radley Lakes, Culham Science Centre and local Parish Councils. Funding will of course be a major issue, but we are hoping that, having flagged up the idea, something might be forthcoming from sustainable transport funds in the future. Please get in touch if you think you can help with this venture.

### **Riverside Lands**

*(John Burren, Pat or Alan Bryden)*

Associated with, but not dependent on, the bridge proposal, we would also like to work with other environmental groups and the Choose Abingdon Partnership to improve the opportunities for local people and visitors to enjoy Abingdon's riverside.

### **Plaques**

*(Pat or Alan Bryden, Hester Hand)*

We are keen to help provide more readily accessible information about Abingdon's

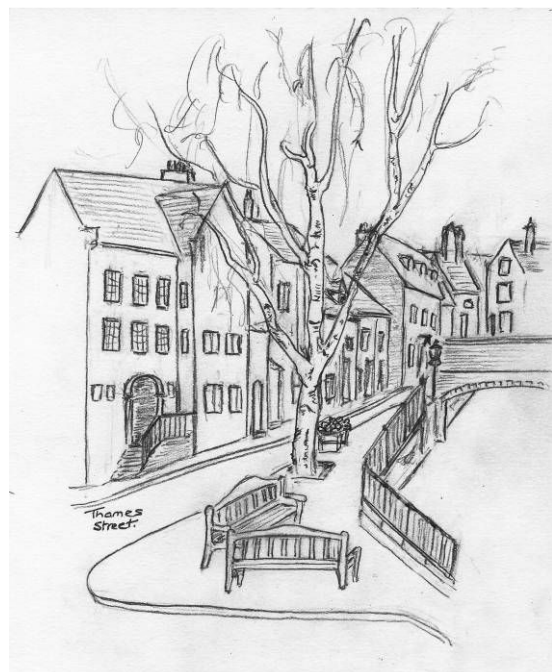
historic buildings. A small team is being set up to work (probably with Choose Abingdon Partnership) on producing information plaques using new technologies which will be sited at key points in the town. This will involve designing the plaques, compiling the information, obtaining any necessary permissions, identifying funding source(s) – and organising the production and installation of the plaques.

### **House Histories**

*(Hester Hand)*

Abingdon has many fine individual houses which, while not listed, nevertheless have interesting histories. The Land Registration Act of 2002 provided for the traditional Title Deeds to be replaced as proof of ownership by electronic data held by the Land Registry. Deeds are therefore becoming redundant and are being discarded which will mean that tracing these histories may be difficult – or at least costly - in future.

The importance of maintaining access to this information has been highlighted by several recent planning proposals - some successful, some not - to demolish such properties. We are investigating the possibility of creating an inventory of these properties and hopefully copies of the Deeds before the information is lost. The project would require preparatory work to identify what data to collect and to set up an effective database to store it, followed by the main task of compiling and storing the information. We plan to talk to other individuals and groups interested in the history of the town about how this can be done.



## **Abingdon news**

### **Guildhall**

The District Council has agreed to hand the Guildhall over to the Town Council with effect from 1 April. The agreement provides for a capital sum of £1.2m to be made available for short and long-term improvements. The Town Council has said that it will consult the community as part of a comprehensive review of the way it is operated. They have also said that they are considering the creation of a charitable trust to operate it – thereby gaining more flexibility than under public sector control and potentially access to grants etc not available to local government bodies.

As the town's Civic Society, the Friends are interested in the Guildhall both as one of the town's key buildings and as a centre for community activities, so we have registered our desire to be involved at early stage in any consultation process.

### **Abbey Shopping Centre**

Negotiations between the District Council and Scottish Widows, the Shopping Centre leaseholders, on the refurbishment of the precinct, are now in their final stages. The next step will be a planning application and if that goes through work should be done later this year. The Friends will look closely at the planning application when it is published: we are aware of widespread concerns about the removal of the canopies and will make representations about this and any other aspects we consider inappropriate. Pat Bryden would be pleased to hear from any members with views on this so that she can incorporate them into our submission.

Discussions on more major alterations to the Charter area also continue and we will be monitoring these too.

Details of the proposals as published last year can be found on the Vale website at <http://tinyurl.com/6dqjep5>; the consultation results are at <http://tinyurl.com/5uf36mr> (the latter is a long document, the relevant pages are 30 – 40).

### **Nags Head Pub**

Widespread concerns have been expressed about its closure – not so much the loss of the pub as it has recently been, but the potential loss of such a key riverside site – and the negative impression given to those arriving in the town.

According to "Inns and Alehouses of Abingdon" (Jackie Smith and John Carter) the building's history can be traced accurately to 1686, when the rent was 5/- per annum: it is not known how much older it may be. First evidence of it as a pub was in the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century.



## **Abbey Buildings**

### **General report**

I am delighted to report that 'The Abingdon Timeline' which has been on display in the Museum for the last few years is now proudly positioned on the West wall of the East Checker. We will have to move it for Craft Fairs, but other than that it will be there permanently and will be a valuable addition to the material we show our visitors.

The winter does seem to have been long and hard, but a number of activities have been carried out or commenced:

Gutters, rainwater pipes, and rainwater systems have been re-aligned, decorated and generally overhauled: a shower off the gutter as you enter the Unicorn Theatre during rain is now a thing of the past. All ironwork including ferramenta has been decorated with a particularly resilient paint which comes in black/grey.

There are several items pending committee approval: these range from a new display stand, which is intended to be our shop window during events such as Craft Fair, to plans for an office to be formed in 18, Thames Street, to enable the Friends volunteers to enjoy a central work place and storage for archives etc. with the possibility of a computer dedicated to Friends business.

The quinquennial report produced for us last Autumn recommended several actions and we have commenced work on those urgent

items which did not need scheduled monument consent.

Finally, the curator's cottage at 12 Checker Walk, has now had the benefit of central heating installed and I am confident that the property is now a happier abode for Jenny Berrell.

*Peter Clarke*

### **Recording the Abbey Buildings**

*David Clark FSA, Secretary, Oxfordshire Buildings Record*

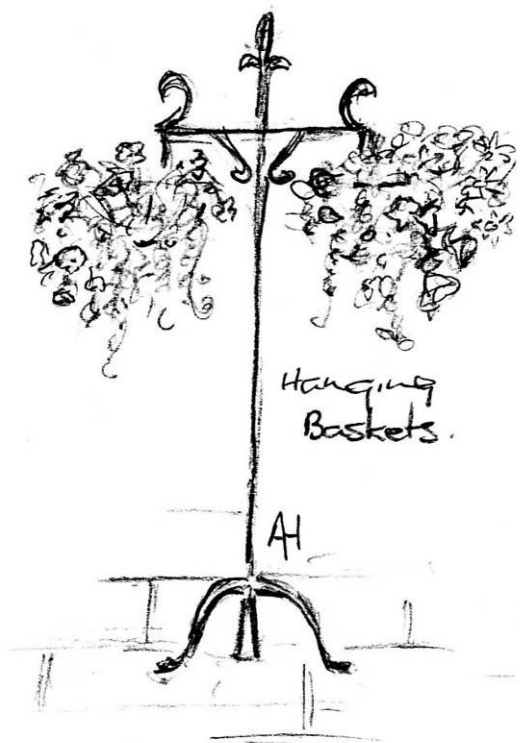
Towards the end of last year members of the Oxfordshire Buildings Record were invited by the Friends to record the surviving Abbey buildings in preparation for a visit in April by the Vernacular Architecture Group\*. You may be forgiven for asking what an amateur volunteer group could add to the studies made over time by the Bucklers, Walter Godfrey, Margaret Wood, and other eminent architectural historians, not to forget the important work done on the documents by Gabrielle Lambrick. I hope to show that we have added to the understanding of the buildings.

Firstly, I confess that the Checker Hall (Unicorn Theatre) remains as enigmatic as ever. It was clearly built between two earlier buildings, the Checker and an abbey barn, probably in the 15th century, but whether for domestic use (the granator's house?) or for additional storage was not possible to say; the alterations since it was built have been too extensive.

The Checker has in the past had a great deal of attention, but earlier writers do not seem to have mentioned the remaining battlement high up on the north front. This seems to be a survival of the work done to the abbey under a licence to crenellate in 1330 granted after the riots of 1327 which damaged a great deal of abbey property. This date is also consistent with the division of the upper room of the Checker into two, and probably when it was changed from a rather grand heated chamber (for one of the abbey officials) into two accounting rooms – perhaps one for receipts, the other for payments. The undercroft never seems to have had a connecting stair to the upper room, suggesting that it had a different (probably storage) function from the start. The Long Gallery proved very rewarding. We searched in vain for the source of the suggestion that it extended at one time

further east. Our study of the eastern truss showed that there was no extension to the east (it may have been rebuilt but there is no evidence of that either). Thus the room layout was of three individual rooms at the west, all but the third accessible from the gallery corridor, two three-bay rooms with fireplaces and windows, and one small room at the east, with a door and window to the corridor. The different framing of one of the central bays suggests the staircase may have risen up here externally. The framing of the gallery is similar to that of the great barn of Harmondsworth, built in 1426. Thus we believe the gallery to date from about 1430 as a lodging range, perhaps for the retinues of high status guests who were put up nearer the abbot's private rooms. An exciting find was a scratched portcullis on the lintel of a fireplace. This was the badge of the Beauforts, and may have been scratched there by one of those accompanying Margaret Beaufort on her fateful visit in 1458 when her companion the Earl of Devon died mysteriously at the abbey. Perhaps the long gallery has even more secrets to uncover – after all these years.

*\*Editor's note: we hope to include feedback from this visit in a future newsletter*



## A Letter from our President

At Christmas time our Secretary, Tony Legge received a letter from our Honorary President, the Earl of Lindsey and Abingdon, wishing us well, saying that he enjoys receiving news of our work and regretting that because he now lives so far away (Scotland) he is unable to visit the Town as often as he used to.

He also sent us an article which he had recently seen about Abingdon Square Park in New York. The Square, which is in West Greenwich, was part of a three-hundred acre farm purchased in the early 1700s by Sir Peter Warren who had risen to vice-admiral in the British Navy before settling with his family on the banks of the Hudson River. His eldest daughter, Charlotte married Willoughby Bertie, Fourth Earl of Abingdon and her dowry included the piece of land which came to be known as Abingdon Square. After the American War of Independence most New York places with English names were re-named, but Abingdon Square survived – possibly because the Earl had sympathised with the rebels and had argued on their behalf in the British Parliament. The Square became a public park in 1831 and remains an attractive spot. Those of you with internet access can read the article at <http://tinyurl.com/6535y3l>: if anyone else would like to read it I can send them a copy.



## John Mason Charter Day

On 25th November 2010 the Friends welcomed teachers and Year 7 students from John Mason School to the Abbey Buildings as part of their Charter Day event. Every year Year 7 students (age 11–12) visit some of Abingdon's important buildings to learn about the history of Abingdon. This was the first time that the Abbey Buildings had been included in the tour. We offered it as a replacement for the Museum which is normally part of the itinerary but is currently closed.

The students were divided into three groups, each of which spent about 30 minutes in the Abbey Buildings. They were first given a brief history of the Abbey from its original Saxon foundation up to the dissolution. They were then given a tour of the Buildings and finally

were able to spend some time looking at the Abingdon Timeline. Lots of questions were asked. Almost none of the students had visited the Abbey Buildings before, and few of them even knew they existed. We hope that they went away with a little better idea of the rich history of Abingdon.

*Bobbie Nichols*

## Advance Notice

### Friends of Abingdon AGM and Summer Party 19.30 Tuesday 14 June – Unicorn Theatre

After the formal business of the AGM there will be a presentation by Claire Chidley, her subject: *'What makes a great place to live, work and play.'* Claire works internationally as a consultant encouraging managers and developers to think more widely and creatively about city and town development.

Come and be stimulated by her talk.

Then join us for refreshments in the garden - put the date in your diary now - more details in May.

## Abingdon Green Gym

Friends of Abingdon is one of over 60 clubs and societies in Abingdon and in the course of our activities we interact with many of them. We are happy to occasionally use this newsletter to highlight activities of other groups with similar aims to ours:

Abingdon Green Gym is a group of conservation volunteers who meet on Saturday mornings from 9.30-12.30 to carry out tasks in and around Abingdon such as cutting back brambles and scrub, pulling up Himalayan balsam, making woodchip paths and litter picking. We are part of a national network and affiliated to BTCV. We cater for people of all abilities and one of our aims is to improve people's physical and mental health through work in the open air. If you are interested, contact Eleanor Dangerfield: [eledanger@hotmail.com](mailto:eledanger@hotmail.com) or phone 01235 531857.

## Message from the Editor

We would like to make more use of e-mail for contacting members: if you have not yet given us your e-mail address but would be willing for us to use it please send an e-mail to

Pauline Burren <[friendsofabingdon@btopenworld.com](mailto:friendsofabingdon@btopenworld.com)>

## Events in Abingdon

### Friends' Events

*Tuesday 14 June:* AGM and Summer Party – see previous page.

### Abingdon Spring Craft Fair

*Thursday 7 – Sunday 10 April. 10.00 – 17.00 (16.30 on Sunday)*

The Craft Fairs remain a major source of income for Friends of Abingdon – and the Spring event provides an opportunity to attract people to our town at a time when the weather makes browsing a more attractive prospect than at Christmas.

Tickets £4, concessions £3, Children £2.20

### Unicorn Theatre events

*11-14 May: GK Chesterton's "The Man who was Thursday"* – Studio Theatre Club

*5 – 11 June: Oxford Drama Network Annual Festival:* two or three one-act plays each evening

**NB** For information about Unicorn Theatre events or to book please contact the organiser or Abingdon Information centre, **not** the Friends.

## Other events in Abingdon

*Saturday 9 April*

*Abingdon Museum Friends Quiz Night* in aid of Museum redevelopment. 19.00 for 19.30 St Helens Church Centre. Tickets £7.50 to include fish and chip supper from Ruth Weinberg 01235 524119 or Sheila Hills 01235 521077.

*Sunday 17 April*

*St George's Day Parade* (early this year to avoid Easter). Parade starts 13.00, service at St Helens 14.00.

*Saturday 23 April*

*Choose Abingdon Local Excellence Market:* 10.00 – 14.00 Market Place. Seasonal food and crafts from local producers.

*Friday 29 April*

*Royal Wedding Celebrations.* Market Place Activities start 16.45, bun throwing 18.00.

*Sunday 8 May*

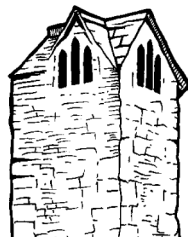
*Abingdon Air and Country Show* – Family spectacular at Dalton Barracks

*Sunday 15 May*

*Dragon Boat Racing:* annual charity fundraising event organised by Abingdon Rotary Vesper

**Contact us by telephone as below or by e-mail using the format: name<friendsofabingdon@btopenworld.com>**

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