

# THE FRIENDS OF ABINGDON

## Abingdon's Civic Society



*Caring for our past, present and future*

### Newsletter – February 2012

#### Message from the Chairman

May I first wish you all a very good 2012. It looks like being a difficult year for the country and the world in general but as you will see from this newsletter The Friends of Abingdon remains an active and forward looking organisation. Various members of our council are pursuing projects some of which are quite long term. We are working actively with other local organisations such as the Archaeological Society who have joined us in meetings with the new leaders of both the District and Town Councils. We hope that we can all work together with the decentralisation of planning powers under the new Localism Act. As you will see in our planning report we already make our position clear over certain planning applications in Abingdon and we believe that our voice is now being heard (the more members we get, the louder our voice).

We are looking at long-term plans for an extended Riverside Walk incorporating a new footbridge across the Thames so as to create a circular route. Initial reaction from a number of bodies is encouraging.

We have now assumed responsibility for Heritage Day which the excellent Alistair Fear is continuing to run for us. The national organisation of Heritage Open Days is now with Civic Voice of which we are members. In the same area we are hoping to progress the Blue Badge Scheme of commemorative plaques in appropriate places as well as identification of buildings of special note.

We continue under Peter Clarke to look at ways of improving the facilities of the Abbey Buildings and Unicorn Theatre. The new cupboards for the archive store will protect

our growing and valuable archive and hopefully make it a little more accessible.

Appropriately in this year of celebrations you will see that in our list of forthcoming events we have included a celebration of our own. Pauline Burren is organising a luncheon to mark the anniversary of the founding of the Friends of Abingdon in 1944. We hope that you will come to what should be a very pleasant occasion. If it is successful, we hope to make this an annual event to celebrate our society.

Finally I must thank Pauline Burren for putting together such an interesting programme for the first half of the coming year and Pat Bryden for our new membership leaflet and website: both have attracted many compliments. Thanks also to Jenny and Belinda Berrell for their continued success in managing the buildings.

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#### Abbey Buildings report

We might think that the buildings are quiet in the winter months, but the following highlights from Jenny Berrell's report on hirings from October to January certainly disproves that.

- October was dominated by the Craft Fair – very successful once again, and a welcome source of funding for the Friends – but as always very hard work and stressful for Jenny.
- "Folk at the Unicorn" has been set up to reinstate the much appreciated tradition of bringing nationally-known folk singers to the theatre. Their first concert in

November was very well attended and well received and several more are scheduled for the coming months.

- Also in November we hosted the John Mason Charter Day, enabling their entire Year 7 to find out about the buildings and the Abbey. This was the second year we have done this: we hope it will become a permanent feature and that it will bring our buildings to the attention of a wider range of the local population.
- There have been several pantomimes in the Unicorn most notably Jennifer Sugden's "Impro Panto II - Aladdin's Revenge" which ran to packed houses for four nights, raising funds for the Pathway Workshop for disabled people; and Abingdon Drama Club whose choice this year was Alice in Wonderland.
- Two other events which highlight the variety of uses of the buildings: on 31 December the Theatre hosted a naming ceremony for twin babies, and in November the Lower Hall and Theatre were used by local band "Alphabet Backwards" for filming a promotional video which can now be seen on YouTube.

The year ahead is already looking very busy: see page 6 for some of the events which are open to the public; there are of course many private bookings as well.

### **The built environment**

The Autumn and Winter months do not lend themselves to major works - the climate together with the very busy hiring period does provide various constraints. However, a couple of small items have progressed:

The river bank north of Long Gallery has been opened up with the removal of two trees, a small willow and cherry, both of which were growing over the water and providing little visual amenity to the garden; coupled with this two lifebelts have been installed which keep us up to date after a risk assessment was carried out.

Various cupboards have been constructed, to keep our archives and store of printed matter physically secure and dry.

Our future maintenance and improvement programme revolves around agreement with English Heritage to pursue the remaining items from the last Quinquennial report together with provision of further discrete and useful storage space to support the wide range of uses to which the Buildings are now being put.



### **Projects**

In 2010 we completed two major projects: the new website and the new membership leaflet. We also started investigating other possible projects, some relating to walks in and around the town and others involving a more proactive role to preserve the town's heritage and character.

### **Walks**

We now lead the twice-yearly Boundary Walk and will be repeating the tours of the old Abbey sites which we introduced successfully last summer. The Abbey Trail boards will enhance this walk. We hope also to organise some new walks, perhaps including parts of Abingdon which may surprise even our longstanding residents! We have put a comprehensive list of existing walk routes on our website.

For the longer-term we continue to investigate the possibility of a creating a circular riverside walk, including a new footbridge over the Thames.

### **Characterisation Study**

The new Localism Act is intended to give communities more influence in local planning. We are investigating how this is likely to work in practice and how we can effectively contribute to the process. One way might be to draw up a comprehensive report on the various areas of our town - highlighting what makes each area special, whether it be interesting or historic buildings, green spaces, community facilities, foot or cycle paths etc.

We will let you know more about the walks and the study in our May newsletter but in the meantime would very much like to hear from our members - or others - if they have any ideas or comments or would like to contribute in any way.

**Visit to The British Library and The Wallace Collection - 8th March 2012.**

For the Library tour, we will be in four groups, each with a guide. Tours set off at 15 minute intervals and last about 75mins. (Our booked times are 10.30, 10.45, 11.00, 11.15.) It is a walking tour and includes stairs, lifts, and escalators. We meet our guides just by the information desk. During this tour it may be possible to view some documents associated with the Abbey.

Separately from this tour you will be able to visit the Royal Manuscripts Exhibition; you will be given a ticket for this on the coach. The Library Website is [www.bl.uk](http://www.bl.uk)

There is a restaurant, cafe and two coffee bars, always busy; plenty more in the streets outside.

*The Wallace Collection*, Hereford House, Manchester Square, is home to one of Europe's finest collections of works of art, paintings, furniture, arms, armour and porcelain. It is in a beautiful building and has an atmosphere of quietness and unhurriedness. Everyone who comes to visit is impressed and swears to return. You will be amazed. There is an excellent cafe/restaurant; you can even have a champagne tea!

(If you would rather go shopping, Selfridges and Oxford Street are very near. In fact if you face Selfridges and walk up the right hand side of it, you arrive at Manchester Square.)

Pick-up times and departure details are included on the application form. Cost £27 per person. This visit is limited to 51 persons, application forms are included in this package, only completed forms with appropriate cheque will be accepted. First come first served.

**Celebrating 68 years: 1944 – 2012 The Founding of 'The Friends of Abingdon' - Sunday 20th May**

We are hosting a very special lunch for us all at Coseners House on Sunday, 20th May 2012 and we hope that you will be able to join us. With all the celebrations going on this year it is good that we can join in with our own celebration. It will be a great time to meet and talk to other members and friends and enjoy an excellent meal in lovely surroundings. Feel welcome to bring along some friends yourself; we look forward to seeing you there. Cost £18 per person: an application form and menu are enclosed.



**Abingdon news**

Abingdon Town Council has voted to change the town's name to Abingdon-on-Thames and its proposal will be considered by the District Council on 22 February. Those supporting the proposal believe that it will help to raise awareness of the town's riverside location and increase the number of visitors.

It is not intended that the change would be mandatory i.e businesses would not have to change letterheads and signage would only be changed when it needed replacing.

Members of the public are invited to submit their views on this proposal in advance of the meeting by email to:

[democratic.services@southandvale.gov.uk](mailto:democratic.services@southandvale.gov.uk)

**Guildhall**

Work has started on the refurbishment of the old part (Royse Room etc) so these rooms are out of action till Easter. This work will not involve significant changes to the appearance of the rooms, but should make them easier to use - including wi-fi access.

Thinking is now well under way on more significant changes to the modern part of the building. The Town Council has received a report from the consultant who is advising them on the viability of turning this into an attractive multi-purpose entertainment venue, including use as a cinema. In parallel they have engaged other specialists to advise them on the possibilities for structural changes to the Abbey Hall, entrances and foyer/bar areas. This report is due in early February and once they have digested both reports the Town Council will arrange to present proposals for consultation with community groups. Friends of Abingdon will be involved in that consultation.

## The Lost Abbey Of Abingdon

The Lost Abbey Project came about after the restoration of Abbey Gardens uncovered the fact that few people were aware that Abingdon once was the site of one of the wealthiest abbeys in England and that remains of the foundations were still under the Abbey Gardens.

The aim of the project was to make the abbey and its history accessible to the public by producing a booklet of the abbey history, interpreting the recent geophysical survey results and a series of interpretation boards on a walking trail, linking the main medieval abbey sites. In addition it was planned to create a new time line of the abbey for the Checker and an education pack to encourage school visits.

The project started in 2009 and has taken three years to complete. Tim Allen of Oxford Archaeology, The Vale of White Horse District Council, Abingdon Town Council, Abingdon Museum and local historians from AAHS, The Friends of Abingdon, St Nicolas church and the Abingdon Schools partnership have all been involved. The project has been primarily funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund, with contributions from Abingdon Joint Environmental Trust, the Vale of White Horse District Council and Friends of Abingdon and additional design assistance generously donated by West Waddy ADP, Oxford Archaeology and Wessex Archaeology.

An archaeological student from Swindon College has produced a series of excellent 3D digital reconstructions of the church over various developmental stages taken from the geophysical results and based on generic architecture.

In September 2011 the opening of the *Heritage Trail* was a great success and an accompanying leaflet with a map describing the nine boards on the trail is available from the Information Centre. The trail starts at the Gateway, then on to St Nicolas church, Roysse Court (the site of Abingdon School and St John's Hospital in the town centre), on to the abbey buildings, through the Abbey Garden and along the millstream to end at Barton Court ruin. Visitors can then retrace their steps or go over Abingdon weir and lock to walk back along the river bank to the bridge.

In late 2011, Oxford Archaeology published *the Lost Abbey of Abingdon booklet*, written

by Tim Allen with contributions from local historians. Using recent archaeological excavations and historical accounts he traces the history of the abbey and its effects on the town from its foundation through the various traumas of the early centuries to the constant re-building of the abbey church and the increasing wealth, ending at its demise in the dissolution of the monasteries. Tim has interpreted the geophysical survey results to provide an understanding of how the church might have grown to its final form, using the 3D reconstructions to illustrate how it might have appeared.

*The Education pack* produced by Wessex Archaeology will be completed this February along with a handling box. It will be available on Oxfordshire County Council's web site in the museum section and on the intranet for teachers.

*The Abbey Time Line* will be hung in the Checker in March and depicts the interesting events that have peppered the life of the abbey. It is dedicated to Peter Berrell for his enthusiasm for the abbey buildings and his long service to them.

I hope that everyone will enjoy the results of this project and that it has unveiled more of the story of the abbey. I have certainly enjoyed being involved and look forward to taking the project further with the proceeds of the booklet sales. If you would like to find more in-depth information on the abbey please look on the AAHS website where the un-edited written contributions can be found along with the relevant references.

*Ann Berkeley - Project Co-ordinator*

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## Planning Matters

The Friends continue to monitor the activities of the Vale of White Horse District Council, the local planning authority. We attended the Appeal by the developers against the refusal of planning permission for the replacement of Champion House in Wootton Road by a block of flats, and were pleased that the inspector dismissed the appeal. However the proposal to demolish 42 Wootton Road was allowed on appeal. A second application to replace a bungalow in Northcourt Lane with two 4 bedroom detached houses was withdrawn following criticism by neighbours and The Friends, who are concerned about

its impact on the Northcourt Conservation area and in particular the rural nature of Northcourt Lane.

Other developments on which The Friends have commented are going ahead:

- the controversial replacement of the Ox pub in Oxford Road by a Tesco Express was approved (although one of the advertising signs and the ATM were rejected) and the store opened on 20 January. The Friends are still concerned about the traffic implications and will monitor the situation.
- the first phase of the redevelopment of the Abbey Shopping Centre was approved and work is due to start in February. This involves demolition of five small units and replacement by two larger units, and removal of most of the canopies. It is expected that the detailed consultation on the second phase, involving a large supermarket and re-siting of the library and health centre, will start in the spring. Members are asked to look out for this in the local press and the Friends website, and give their views on the proposals.

We are also keeping in touch with developments on the national scene. Three members attended a workshop run by Civic Voice in London on the National Planning Policy Framework. In late February we plan to attend a further workshop which will discuss the emerging Neighbourhood Planning process, and enable us to share ideas and experiences with other groups.

Last autumn we held two meetings, with the Leaders of the District and Town Councils, about their plans for Abingdon. We are trying to follow this up with a further meeting involving the Leader and Executive Members of the Vale Council on planning and development issues affecting the town.

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## Abingdon in print

There have been several publications about Abingdon in recent months, both from the historical perspective and to attract potential visitors. These include the AAHS booklet "Celebrating Abingdon's History - Studies in Honour of Mieneke Cox" and the "Lost Abbey" booklet (see page 4). There is also the "Abingdon Waterways Walk" booklet published by Choose Abingdon, which had

input from several of our members, and the "52 things to do... far from the madding beaches" book promoting places to visit and things to do in the Vale of White Horse. Both of these are beautifully illustrated and would be ideal to show to visiting friends and family. All the books are available from the town bookshops and the Information Centre.

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## Down Memory Lane

The Oasis Senior Citizens group, based at the Abingdon Resource and Wellbeing Centre is running an oral history project with local filmmaker Sharon Woodward.

Taster sessions were held when group members shared their reminiscences: there was so much enthusiasm and it was clear that so much material was available that they decided to run a bigger project. The results were amazing and two short pilot films were made (available on Youtube):

- *Ration and Fashion* - with members talking about their experience of rationing and how they improvised
- *Women During the Second World War:* - an interview with a member who spoke of her experience as a bus driver in Oxford during that time.

The Oasis group has made a successful application for Lottery Funding and work will start soon with a range of events, activities and day trips which will all be filmed between April and September. After that they plan an exhibition and hope to show the film at venues around the county.

Sharon would like to hear from individuals or groups who might be interested in running an activity: for example a cookery session using ingredients that might have been used during rationing or a gardening project based on the 'Dig For Victory' campaign. She stresses however that anyone coming forward must be willing to be filmed.

This is a wonderful opportunity to take part in documenting the past for future generations. If you can offer help in any way please contact Sharon Woodward [info@mischiefpictures.co.uk](mailto:info@mischiefpictures.co.uk). There is more information about the project at <http://sharonwoodwardmischiefpictures.blogspot.com/>

## Friends of Abingdon Events

*Thursday 8th March - Visit to The British Library and The Wallace Collection.*

For more details see page 3. Pick-up times and departure details are on the application form.

This visit is limited to 51 persons - first come first served.

*Wednesday 11th April*

*7.30pm. Unicorn Theatre*

*"The Neighbour's pigs and running water" - a talk by Ruth Weinberg.*

How George Winship, Abingdon's Borough Surveyor for 41 years, brought the town into the 20th century, from Victorian Horse and cart times, though the advent of the motor car to the end of World War 1.

An 'excellent talk', highly recommended  
Free to members; non-members £2. The Buildings and pay bar will be open from 7pm. Light refreshments available after the talk.

*Spring Craft Fair - 19th to 22nd April*

Open Thursday to Saturday, 10am to 5pm

Sunday 10am to 4pm. (Discount on entry for FoA members - vouchers enclosed)

<http://www.accraftfairs.com/abingdon/>

*Tuesday 1st May - 7.30pm Unicorn Theatre*

*Abingdon Branch Railway - illustrated talk by Ivan Cadge*

Ivan will bring some of the old time tables and tickets and other interesting items. "Those were the days"

Free to members; non-members £2. The Buildings and bar will be open from 7pm. Light refreshments available after the talk.

*Sunday 20th May*

*Celebrating 68 years: 1944 - 2012 The Founding of 'The Friends of Abingdon'*

Lunch at Coseners House More details on page 3. Cost £18 per person: an application form and menu are enclosed.

*Tuesday 12 June*

*AGM and Summer Party.*

Guest speaker Debbie Dance, Director of the Oxford Preservation Trust, the successful Oxford based charity which owns over 900 acres and listed buildings in and around the City. Debbie is an inspiring speaker and has completed a number of award winning conservation projects including the regeneration of Oxford Castle. More details in the May newsletter but book the date now.

## Unicorn Theatre events

For more information and bookings see [www.abingdonabbey-unicorntheatre.org.uk](http://www.abingdonabbey-unicorntheatre.org.uk) or contact the organisers.

*Mirthquake - a sketch show - Oxford Comedy Deathmatch*

Friday 10 - Saturday 11 February 19.30

Tickets £7 (£6) on the door or from

<http://www.oxfordcomedydeathmatch.com/>

*The Comedy of Errors - Studio Theatre Club*

Wednesday 22 - Saturday 25 February

Tickets £8.50 from or 01865 778105 or

[tickets@studiotheatreclub.com](mailto:tickets@studiotheatreclub.com)

*Folk at the Unicorn - the Fay Hield Trio*

Tuesday 28 February

Tickets £10 in advance from Remade Guitars

or <http://www.folkattheunicorn.co.uk/> or

£12.50 on the door.

*How the Other Half Loves by Alan Ayckbourn - Breakaleg Productions*

Wednesday 7 - Saturday 10 March

Tickets from the Bookstore or 01235 821351

or [info@BreakaLegProductions.co.uk](mailto:info@BreakaLegProductions.co.uk)

*Rhinoceros by Eugene Ionesco - Abingdon Drama Club*

Wednesday 28 - Saturday 31 March

Tickets £8 (£7) from the Bookstore or

<http://www.abingdon-drama-club.com/>

*Crazy Little Thing Called Love - Kevin Tomlinson comedy show*

Sunday 1 April 19.00

For tickets phone 01235 203487 or see

<http://www.kevintomlinson.co.uk/>

*Folk at the Unicorn - Keith James*

Thursday 5 April

Tickets £10 in advance from Remade Guitars

or <http://www.folkattheunicorn.co.uk/> or

£12.50 on the door.

*Folk at the Unicorn - Reg Meuross*

Thursday 10 May

Tickets £10 in advance from Remade Guitars

or <http://www.folkattheunicorn.co.uk/> or

£12.50 on the door.

## Other events in Abingdon

Abingdon Arts Festival: 15 March - 1st April

Annual Parish meeting: Wednesday 14 March  
19.30 Guildhall

St George's Day Parade Sunday 22 April  
13.30 Town Centre

## The Friends of Abingdon - online

The new Friends of Abingdon website <http://www.friendsofabingdon.org.uk/> was launched last summer and since then Ray Hand and Pat Bryden have continued to add features to make it even more interesting and informative for users. There is a search facility to help you find things more quickly and a section About Abingdon with lots of information about aspects of the town which are of interest to the Friends. Here you can find out about the projects we are working on or click on Abingdon Walks to find opportunities to explore the town.

Down the years Friends of Abingdon archivists, including our present archivist Elizabeth Drury, have collected photographs of the town and kept these historical gems in good condition. Ray Hand has spent many hours digitising these photographs and you now have a great opportunity to see some fascinating pictures of the town as it once was by selecting the photo gallery, again in the section About Abingdon. The gallery will

change from time to time, as there are so many pictures available - so keep looking! We would be grateful if any members who have the odd moment to look at the website would let Pat or Ray know if there are any improvements which could make it easier to use or more informative. All suggestions will be welcomed and we'll act on them whenever possible.

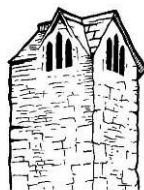
Finally we also have a Friends of Abingdon Facebook page which provides an alternative route for people to catch up with latest news and feed comments in to us.

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### Message from the Editor

This edition of the newsletter is going by post to everyone because it has enclosures which can't go by e-mail. The same will apply to the next one because it will include the formal AGM notification. If you would like normal newsletters to come by e-mail and have not yet opted for that, do please get in touch: it is much cheaper and saves paper - and my time!

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Civic Society

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