

THE FRIENDS OF ABINGDON

Abingdon's Civic Society



Newsletter – September 2012

Chairman's Message

I hope that you have all been able to enjoy the few short spells of summer that we have seen this year. Our buildings look their best on a sunny summer's day and have been appreciated by a growing number of visitors. On 1st July we hosted a visit to the town by a party from the Northern Architectural History Society. They were given a talk and tour of our buildings before dividing into smaller groups who then visited 26a East St. Helen St, St.Helen's Church and Long Alley Almshouses and a brief visit to St.Nicolas Church before they drove off to Ewelme. Their report back with generous donations to us and other bodies in the town shows what gems we have to show in Abingdon and how they are appreciated by visitors. I hope that we can broaden our welcome to many more visitors in the future. I must thank those who helped to organise this visit especially our curator who was, as ever, leading us forward.

The installation of the second Timeline in the Checker along with the new lighting system has proved a very great new attraction for us: we have noticed that visitors now spend a lot longer in the buildings. If you haven't seen the Timelines I do urge you to pop in one day – the buildings are of course open most afternoons until the end of September.

Our first commemorative luncheon, held in Cosener's House, on 20th May was very successful and over subscribed (naturally as it was organised by the indefatigable Pauline Burren): we have already booked the venue for 19th May 2013 so enter it in your diaries now.

Another new initiative is to organise a Welcome Evening for members who have joined us relatively recently, to give them a chance to meet other members and find out a bit more about our activities. Invitations to the event on 5 October have recently been issued and we look forward to seeing many new (and some not so new) faces.

This July saw the re-opening of the Abingdon Museum after its major refit. The Stone Cross and other artefacts which we have loaned to the museum are being displayed to very great advantage and hopefully will encourage more people to venture down to our buildings to learn more about the Lost Abbey. We were delighted when Jane Bowen, the new curator of the museum, came and spoke to us about all her plans.



We were pleased to welcome Bruce Hunt on to the council at the AGM and are sure that he will add to our strength. As you will see in other parts of this newsletter our various sub groups are working hard on a number of our civic schemes. We remain concerned over the local planning situation and continue to press for more dialogue between the planning authorities and the local people.

Abingdon News

With the exception of the building sites at the Shopping Centre and the Old Gaol (which we hope are all in a good cause), most of Abingdon town centre has been looking great this summer and many visitors have commented favourably on it: the Jubilee decorations have, as hoped, lasted for the Olympics and Paralympics and the refurbished County Hall looks magnificent.

There is little news to report – possibly because of the holiday season. The Herald recently had a front-page story about the Guildhall but it contained nothing that wasn't reported in our May newsletter. We are expecting more news shortly about the ideas being considered.



Bridge Street progress

One positive news story is the re-opening of the Nags Head pub. For the last year, visitors approaching from the Culham direction, or from the river, have been greeted by a boarded-up pub on one side and the building works at the Old Gaol on the other. The Nags Head now has a new tenant (who has successfully run the Broad Face for the last few years so knows the local market); refurbishment work is now under way and the pub should re-open in October. We have also just heard that the Crown and Thistle in Bridge Street has been bought by Oakman Inns who have a good track record in creating attractive pubs and restaurants in interesting buildings (for example the Old Post Office in Wallingford). These two developments should go a long way to improving this important area of the town even before the Old Gaol work is complete. As agreed at the AGM, the Friends are trying to find out more about Cranbourne's plans for public access to the ground floor of the Gaol, to the riverside gardens and through the new walkway to East St Helen Street. It seems likely that this will still be available,

but on a more restricted basis than we had been led to expect.

Shopping Centre

The refurbishment is on course to be completed and the scaffolding and hoardings down in time for Christmas shopping. The big new units which can now be seen taking shape will not be open till the New Year. There is no further news on Phase 2, the Charter redevelopment.

Choose Abingdon Partnership

We reported in May that Abingdon had submitted a bid for funding for revitalising the town centre under the "Portas Pilot" scheme. Our bid was not successful, but early feedback about those who did win suggests that success might have been a mixed blessing since the attendant media interest focussed heavily on the towns' problems, presenting a negative image. The Choose Abingdon Partnership is actively pursuing alternative funding for many of the projects proposed in its bid: there will be more information about this at their AGM on 17 October (see Events Diary). The meeting is open to all and will also see the launch of the Partnership's second illustrated walk leaflet and the results of a tourism survey undertaken this year which will help shape the Partnership's programme for the next 2-3 years.

2012 AGM

There was a good turnout for the Friends of Abingdon AGM in June. The officers were re-elected and the accounts accepted. Richard Grimdsdale-Yates has stood down from the Executive and the meeting elected Bruce Hunt to replace him.

There was a brief discussion under Any Other Business about concerns that the Old Gaol developers appeared to be renegeing on some of their commitments about public access into and around the Gaol. It was agreed that the Friends would seek to ensure that the developers honoured their commitments relating to access and to provide some form of recognition of the Gaol's heritage.

The Annual Report and draft minutes of the meeting are available on request from the Secretary.

Oxford Preservation Trust talk

After the formal business of the AGM there was an excellent presentation by Debbie Dance, Director of the Oxford Preservation Trust. Like the Friends of Abingdon, the Trust has a number of roles, albeit on a much bigger scale: it owns and manages properties (mainly in and around Oxford, but also including 26 East St Helen Street in Abingdon), it works to prevent inappropriate development, it runs "Oxford Unlocked" (their version of Heritage Open Days) and provides educational resources. Its best-known recent project was the development of the Oxford Castle/prison site.

A major challenge for the Trust – and one which we thankfully do not face – is the power of the University who of course own most of the land in the City Centre and elsewhere. The Trust has learned that since they clearly do not have the weight to make bodies such as the University or the City Council do anything, they have to find ways of working with these bodies and developers: a lot of their effort goes into building relationships so that they can be taken seriously even though they have no legal power. One example of a constructive collaboration is their work with English Heritage and the City Council to produce a "Heritage Plan" which can be used as a reference-point for decisions on applications for alterations such as solar panels.

She also commented on the importance of recording buildings – or parts of them – that are of historical interest: she quoted an example of a medieval painted room in the centre of Oxford, which while widely known about some years ago, had not been properly recorded and had effectively been forgotten until quite recently. She said it was not unusual for important sites to get lost in this way.

There was a great deal which we can learn from Debbie's talk and it could be useful to us to have such an experienced and well respected organisation so close at hand. However the process is two-way: Debbie finished her talk by telling us that Abingdon's Heritage Open Days had inspired her to follow a similar model for Oxford. Although their event is now massive (100 volunteers and 60,000 visitors last year) it is nice to think that its success was built on our more modest efforts.

Heritage Open Days Saturday/Sunday 8-9 September

This is the first year that Friends of Abingdon has taken responsibility for organizing Heritage Open Days which allows free access to historical buildings in Abingdon. We are very pleased that Alastair Fear, who has done such a good job as organizer previously, is continuing in this role.

Sixteen properties, all within easy walking distance of the town centre, are taking part, some of which are open for the first time. Others, such as Christ's Hospital Hall and The Merchant's House, are old favourites. Among the new participants are Twickenham House and The Malthouse in West St Helen's Street. This will probably be the only opportunity to see the interior of Twickenham House, as by next year the conversion into private apartments is likely to be complete. Abingdon School Chapel is also open, which will allow visitors to see the new stained glass windows.

There will be tours of the Lost Abbey, the 1556 Abingdon Borough Boundary walk, the Wilts and Berks Canal walk, and a trail of Old Pubs. You can also find out about your own history with the Berkshire Family History Society in Abingdon Library.

Other events include exhibitions in the Guildhall, a talk about the water pump in the County Hall Museum basement, performances by the Abingdon Morris Dancers and the Vale Islanders in the Market Place, and a folk evening in the Old Anchor Inn. BBC Radio Oxford will be broadcasting from the Market Place on the Saturday morning.

For more details pick up a leaflet from the Library or the Museum, or see www.abingdonheritage.co.uk

Planning Matters

The Friends continue to monitor planning applications submitted to the Vale of White Horse District Council. Currently, we are particularly concerned about inappropriate conversion and demolition of existing properties, resulting in an increase in the density of housing in residential areas.

As reported in the May newsletter, several applications that have already been refused

or withdrawn, to which the Friends had submitted objections, have re-appeared. At the time of writing a decision has still not been made on Champion House, but permission has been granted for the two new houses in Northcourt Lane and the Tesco Express sign. We also mentioned our concern over the proposed conversion of a semi-detached house at 22 Appleford Drive to four self-contained flatlets. However, despite the objections of neighbours and the Friends, approval was granted by the Planning Committee, with only the Abingdon councillors voting against.

The overall feeling of the Friends' representative who attended the Planning Committee at which these decisions were made was that there is little consultation with local people, and what the developers want is very likely to be approved whether or not it fits into the character of the local area. The new National Planning Policy Framework has simplified the process for obtaining planning approval: from one perspective this is a welcome removal of obstacles, from another it is a dangerous removal of safeguards. The Framework, together with the Localism Act, does provide for the community to have input into decisions about development in the local area, but at the strategic planning stage, not at the time when specific proposals come through. So long as a development proposal does not conflict with the agreed plan, it is likely to be approved.

There is provision for the community – in our case co-ordinated by the Town Council – to ensure that the overall strategic plan is supplemented by provisions to protect areas of special interest, or to make detailed specifications about types of development, and the Friends have been trying for some time to establish a dialogue about this with the Town Council. It is important that this is under way before the Vale Council consults next year on its new Local Plan.

STOP PRESS: as this newsletter is being compiled, this issue has been thrown into focus by the announcement that a developer wants to build 170 houses on land off the Drayton Road. The Friends will be taking an active interest in this.

Abingdon Walks

On the Queen's Jubilee Monday June 4th we were prepared to be inundated, either by rain or people, but as it turned out the day was good for walking and a good number of people turned up. In all over 150 went on a choice of four different walks led by 9 volunteer leaders and others cajoled into acting as backstops. Over 80 enjoyed tours of St Nicolas Church and the Abbey Buildings, and the self-guided picture quizzes about Abingdon were very popular.

The day was organised by The Friends of Abingdon as part of the Abingdon-on-Thames Jubilee Celebrations and several local groups helped: Abingdon Green Gym, Abingdon & District Twin Towns Society, Friends of Radley Lakes and Abingdon Naturalists and the Vale Ramblers.

Members of The Abingdon Area Archaeological & Historical Society and the Friends of the Abbey Gardens were responsible for much of the background historical information.

We hope to be able to organise a similar programme for the late May Bank Holiday Monday next year. Meanwhile the "Lost Abbey" walk has been repeated on a monthly basis during the summer and this and the 1556 Boundary Walk are part of the Heritage Weekend programme, together with walks highlighting the route of the old Wilts and Berks Canal and the Old Pubs of Abingdon. Our self-guided quiz sheets will also be available on 9th September. If you would like to get involved with planning or leading future walks around Abingdon, or can help with teas or providing information in the Abbey Buildings, please contact Pat Bryden on 01235 524081.

Looking Ahead

The next newsletter will have a full programme of Friends' events for the first half of 2013, but we have two dates booked already so you can get them in your diaries:

- Founders Day Lunch: Sunday 19 May
Coseners House
-
- Visit to Sissinghurst Gardens: Sunday, 23 June

Friends of Abingdon Events

"The Neighbour's Pigs and Running Water" - a talk by Ruth Weinberg. Wednesday 26 September 7.30pm. Unicorn Theatre
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.
Free to members; non-members £2. The Buildings and pay bar will be open from 7pm.

Autumn Craft Fair – Contemporary Crafts for Christmas. Thurs 18–Sun 21 and Thurs 25–Sun 28 October
Thurs to Sat 10.00-17.00, Sun 10.00-16.00
Discount on entry for FoA members on production of membership card
www.acfcraftfairs.com/abingdon-autumn/

Unicorn Theatre events

Folk at the Unicorn

- Thursday 13 September: *Tyde*
- Thursday 2 October: *Gilmore and Roberts*
- Thursday 8 November: *Kathryn Roberts and Sean Lakeman*
- Thursday 13 December: *Pilgrims' Way*

Doors open 19.30 Tickets £10 from Remade Guitars, Coxeter House or
www.folkattheunicorn.co.uk/

The Importance of Being Earnest by Oscar Wilde. Presented by Breakaleg Productions
Wed 19 – Sat 22 September 7.30pm
info@BreakaLegProductions.co.uk
or telephone: 01235 821351

Seasons of the Heart - A Tribute to John Denver
Sat 29th September - 8:00pm
Tickets: £12.50 (£11 concessions) from The Bookstore, 15 Bury Street, and on the door.

Great Expectations – based on the novel by Charles Dickens
Presented by Abingdon Drama Club
Wed 21st - Sat 24th November 7:30pm
Tickets £8, concessions £7 from: The Bookstore, 15 Bury St

For more information and bookings contact the organisers or see www.abingdonabbey-unicorntheatre.org.uk

Other Abingdon-on-Thames events

Saturday 8 – Sunday 9 September
Abingdon Heritage Open Days
Heritage Open Weekend is an opportunity to visit some of Abingdon's historic buildings free of charge, and enjoy local heritage events and activities.
Start at the Market Place where our volunteers will welcome you and give you a leaflet and map. For more information see www.abingdonheritage.co.uk/

Sunday 9 September: Dragon Boat Racing and Balloon Release
Charity event - re-arranged from May. Fun and entertainment on the river – fundraiser organised by Abingdon Rotary Vesper.

The day will also include a Mass Balloon Release in aid of St Nicolas' Church Open Door project - "The Church in the Market Place".The release will take place mid-afternoon during the Dragon Boat Racing. Balloons will be on sale on the day from 10.30. £2.99 each or 4 for £10.

Wednesday 26 September: Community Forum. 19.30 Roysse Room
An opportunity for community groups to be updated on Choose Abingdon and Town Council projects and to raise issues of concern.

Wednesday 17 October: Choose Abingdon Partnership AGM and Tourism Presentation
19.00 Roysse Room

Tuesday 17 November: Homecoming Parade by 4 Logistic Support Regiment, Royal Logistic Corps. 10.30 – 11.00 Town Centre

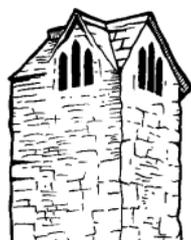
Christmas Extravaganza: 11.00 – 18.00
Saturday 1 December
Note new timing and format. From then till Christmas there will be events every Saturday in the Market Place.

Markets

Local Excellence Market: Saturday 29 September and Saturday 24 November.
French Market: Thursday 11 – Saturday 13 October.
Farmers' Market: Fridays 21 September, 19 October, 16 November, 21 December

For more details and a wider range of events in Abingdon-on-Thames see the What's On in Abingdon leaflet, or the online diaries at www.chooseabingdon.co.uk/ or www.abingdon.gov.uk/

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Newsletter published by: Friends of Abingdon, Abingdon's Civic Society,
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