

THE FRIENDS OF ABINGDON

Abingdon's Civic Society



Newsletter – Spring 2013

Chairman's Message

Greetings to all our members for a prosperous and fruitful year. Last year we seemed to miss out on Summer, let us hope that this year will be more rewarding and that our beautiful buildings can be appreciated in their full glory.

Last Autumn we held a special evening for recently joined members so that they could meet informally with members of the Friends Council and hear and see in more detail what we are doing and attempting to do in the Abbey Buildings as well as in our wider sphere as Abingdon's Civic Society. The evening seemed to be appreciated by those attending and it is something we will consider repeating every few years.

You will see elsewhere in this Newsletter that your Executive Council continues to push forward in a number of areas. This year sees the 60th anniversary of the Unicorn Theatre and we hope that this will be marked in a number of ways including exciting plans for another production of a Handel Opera. Pauline Burren, indefatigable as ever, has been busy arranging a second Commemoration Lunch and some interesting excursions for members. Details of these and other events are elsewhere in this newsletter and I urge you to get your applications in as soon as possible to avoid disappointment.

On the civic side we are maintaining pressure on our local councils to include us in discussions over the creation of a local plan which we feel is vital to the protection of our historic town. We are very concerned about the proposals for a new estate on the Drayton Road – more on this later in the newsletter.

Last Summer saw a successful series of guided walks in and around the town and we hope that these will prove as popular again this summer and our thanks go to Pat Bryden for her work on this

Our web site, well managed by Ray Hand, remains one of our major ways of bringing the Friends and their activities to a wider audience and publishing details about the availability of our buildings.

Several members attended the recent Choose Abingdon workshop which was looking at ways to attract visitors to the town and we very much hope that we shall be able to play a part in this and demonstrate our historic inheritance to a wider audience.

As always my thanks go to the members of the Executive Council for all their hard work and support in so many ways and of course to our wonderful curator Jenny without whose help and enthusiasm life would disappear from the Abbey Buildings and their peaceful gardens.

The Abbey Buildings

The Unicorn Theatre has continued to be well used during the winter months, with the various drama groups putting on productions, a Creations Theatre workshop and the Folk at the Unicorn concerts which have proved an enormous success during their first year.

Preparations are now in hand for this year's events including the Spring and Autumn Craft Fairs and celebrations to mark the 60th Anniversary of the Unicorn Theatre (see

Events page. Looking ahead to 2014 we have an exciting opportunity to show the Buildings off to a new audience when we will be hosting some of the events for the Oxfordshire Science Festival.

Work to maintain the fabric of the buildings continues: the new, deeper, guttering has now been installed to the Unicorn Theatre and will cope more satisfactorily with heavy rain, thus reducing the unwelcome showers we risk when entering the theatre.

The decayed wall plate in Checker has been replaced and this now leaves the concern regarding the sixth truss to south side of the Long Gallery. Peter Clarke met our engineer and architect on site on Monday 28th January and we will be receiving proposals, to remedy the problem, for submission to English Heritage. It is hoped that formal approval (Scheduled Monument Consent - SMC) will be received for levelling the floor to the Vicar's Cellar, although verbal acceptance has been received. An application, has also been submitted for an SMC to raise the floor of the Undercroft to level through with entrance threshold including provision of ventilation, which will be very important for the improved and hopefully more regular use of this area.

John Mason School – Charter Day

On 22 November the Friends of Abingdon welcomed 180 year 7 pupils from John Mason School to the Abbey Buildings as part of their annual Charter Day Event, which also included visits to the Abingdon Museum and the Guildhall. The students were given a short talk on the history of Abingdon Abbey followed by a guided tour of the Buildings.

The aim of Charter Day is to introduce these young people to the history of our ancient town: the Friends are very pleased to be able to contribute to this and are happy to arrange visits or activities with other local schools. If any members have contacts with schools do please put them in touch either with Bobbie Nichols or Jenny Berrell

Abingdon News

County Hall Museum

The Town Council has recently won a prestigious award from the Oxford Preservation Trust for the conservation and restoration work on the County Hall and there have been record numbers of visitors since the Museum re-opened.

Guildhall

Following the successful improvement to the historic parts of the Guildhall earlier this year, the Town Council is now pressing on with its plans for the Stage 2 improvements which are focused on the Abbey Hall and the foyer area. Proposals should be available for public consultation around Easter, followed by the detailed planning and preparation, with the actual conversion work taking place in 2014. There are more details on the Town Council website.

In the meantime, The Town Council has appointed a new manager for the Guildhall complex. She will be responsible for increasing usage of the building and for fundraising for the planned improvements. They have introduced new hiring rates, including special arrangements for local community groups. In addition, the Guildhall now has its own website and is advertising a range of new events catering to a variety of markets. www.abingdonguildhall.co.uk/



Abingdon Hydro

A local group has formed a community interest company to implement a project to generate hydroelectric power from the Thames at Abingdon, using two massive Archimedes screws, to be installed next to the weir.

The group wants the hydro to be an amenity, not just an electricity generator. As it is next to a public footpath it will provide an opportunity for people to get up close and there will be a big viewing platform over the screws and over the river.

They say that it will be a very visible advertisement for renewable energy, an educational resource, fascinating to watch, and a visitor attraction. There are other similar projects elsewhere on the Thames.

The project has received an Environment Agency licence; they submitted a planning application but following discussions with planning officers have withdrawn it in order to add more detailed information. It will be resubmitted later this year. Funding will be raised by selling shares: once up and running the hydro will sell its electricity to

the grid, creating a return for its investors. They hope that local people will invest in this very local project. To find out more, see www.abingdonhydro.org.uk/ or visit their roadshow on 20 February (see Events Page).



Oriel Window, Clock House

Following a report from one of our members that the oriel window on the Clock House in Ock Street was in a very poor state of repair, the Friends contacted Alison Blyth, the Vale

Conservation Officer, asking her to look into this. The responsible lease-holder turned out to be the NHS, who have now started a complete repair and refurbishment programme for the front of the building. After delays due to bad weather, the scaffolding went up in mid-January and we expect to see the results soon.

Planning Matters

Apart from the Drayton Road development, since the last Newsletter there have been no other planning applications to which the Friends felt it necessary to object. However, it is sad to report that Champion House (in Wootton Road) has now been demolished, as has 5 Northcourt Lane, despite strenuous efforts by ourselves and others to prevent this happening.

In the last newsletter the application by Hallam Land Management to build a development of 160 houses off Drayton Road (behind Virginia Way) was noted as a Stop Press item. The Friends of Abingdon submitted a detailed objection, citing traffic congestion on Drayton Road, lack of infrastructure generally in South Abingdon, flood risk, lack of public transport, sustainability issues, and effects on the natural environment as reasons why this application should be refused. We were not alone – over 150 objections were submitted from the Town Council, Oxfordshire County Council, Drayton Parish Council, and residents of all parts of Abingdon, and neighbouring villages. The Oxfordshire

County Council objection was particularly severe – it recommended outright refusal, and presented six pages of conditions which OCC would expect to be satisfied if the Vale of White Horse were to grant Hallam Land Management permission to develop the site.

The good news is that on 24 January 2013 permission was refused, not surprisingly in view of the weight of objection. The bad news is that this is not the end of the matter: Hallam have a reputation for appealing against adverse decisions, and winning on technicalities, and they have already submitted a very detailed appeal. The Friends of Abingdon are looking at it and will consider how to respond.

Abingdon, and the Vale generally, is in a weak position as neither the Vale District Council nor Abingdon Town Council has a current planning policy in place, and the Vale has a shortfall in the housing land supply (it should be 5 years, but currently is approximately 3.5). This makes our area a prime target for speculative developers.

This is a matter of extreme frustration for the Friends of Abingdon; with the help of briefing from our umbrella organisation, Civic Voice, we have been trying to engage with the Councils for about 18 months to see how we, as the Civic Society, can work with them to implement the opportunities created by the government's Localism agenda. So far we have had no success; the "top-down" approach still seems to prevail here. However, we are starting to see some movement; the Vale is in the process of producing a Local Plan and the first draft will be available for public consultation from 28 February. The Friends will, of course, be studying the proposals carefully and making a response. This document will lay down the criteria against which vital decisions will be made in the coming years, so we would encourage as many as possible of our members to take part in the consultation and either respond directly or let us know your views – or both.

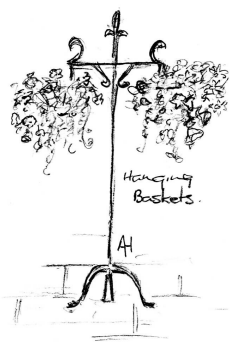
During the consultation, the Vale will be hosting a number of public exhibitions at which people will have the opportunity to study the document as well as an array of accompanying information to explain the Local Plan and what it means. Dates and locations of these exhibitions will be finalised and published soon. To register for regular e-mail updates on the progress of the Local

Plan and the consultation, send an email with the subject header of SUBSCRIBE to localplan@whitehorsedc.gov.uk

The Local Plan is only the top-level document; because it covers the whole of the Vale it will not go into much detail about particular areas of Abingdon. The 2012 Localism Act created new powers for communities to set detailed guidelines for how the Local Plan is to be applied in their area. This can include designating certain places (e.g green spaces or special buildings) to be protected from development, establishing measures to protect the character of an area, adding more detail about the type of housing to be built, and proposing new developments (e.g leisure or community facilities, local shops). This can be done either through a "Neighbourhood Plan" or one of a range of other approaches. It is a requirement that there is wide community involvement in such activities but they have to be spear-headed by the parish council – in our case the Town Council. We have approached the Town Council to start a dialogue on how this might work in Abingdon but await their reply. Informally they have told us that they are reluctant to start until they have seen the Local Plan, but since that is now imminent we hope to start discussions soon.

The "characterisation" project which we have reported on in previous newsletters would feed in to any Neighbourhood Plan or similar work but we have held back from investing too much effort into it until we have a clearer understanding of what would be useful and effective. We hope to be able to report progress in the next newsletter.

Planned visits for 2013



We are off to Sissinghurst Castle and gardens on Sunday 23 June and to Dulwich Picture Gallery and Eltham Palace on Sunday 29 September. We are travelling on both occasions with Plastow Coaches.

Sissinghurst Castle: Sunday 23 June. The castle is famous for its beautiful gardens designed in the 1930s by Vita Sackville West and Harold Nicholson and now in the hands

of the National Trust. Today there is also an organic fruit and vegetable garden and the produce is served in their restaurants and sold in their shop. We have booked lunch for us all in their Granary Restaurant and this is included in the cost of our trip. The cost for the trip is £29 per person, the booking form is available now and the deadline is First Come First served. We will not bank your cheque before 3rd June 2013 but we need to be able to confirm numbers to hold the booking. Entrance to the site is free to current members of the National Trust but we will need your membership details on your booking form. Those of you who are not members will be asked to pay the normal entrance fee on arrival.



Dulwich Picture Gallery and Eltham Palace and Garden - Sunday 29 September.

Dulwich Picture Gallery holds one of the world's most important collections of European old master paintings. These are housed in the first purpose built art gallery in England, designed by Sir John Soane in 1811. We have booked a tour guide to show us the permanent collection. Although the Gallery does have a cafe it is quite small and unable to take us all. We are advised that there are many restaurant and cafes nearby for us to get our lunch.

Eltham Palace was, in medieval times, an important royal palace. In the 1930s the site with the ruined remains of the palace was bought by Stephen and Virginia Courtauld. They restored the great hall and incorporated it into an ultra modern, Art Deco style house. Around the house, the Courtaulds also constructed new 30s-style gardens with a series of garden rooms. These incorporated parts of the original moat and the ruins of the palace.

We have not booked a guide for this visit as right from the entrance into the building there are tour signs to guide you round. Guide books are available to buy. There is a small cafe for tea and coffee. This visit is an opportunity for you to wander at will for a given time before we board our coach for home.

We need you to book early as we have to confirm our booking but we will not bank your cheque before 2nd September 2013.

Booking forms are available now.

Friends of Abingdon Events

Spring Craft Fair – Contemporary Arts, Crafts and Design. Thurs 11–Sun 14 April
Thurs to Sat 10.00-17.00, Sun 10.00-16.30
www.abingdoncraftfair.com/

Celebratory Lunch - Sunday 19 May
12.30 Cosener's House
A big success last year – a welcome chance to meet friends over excellent food in lovely surroundings. Book your place now.

Handel's Semele – 19.00 Sunday 19 May
Gala event from the Friends of Abingdon and Jackdaws Opera Plus to celebrate 60 years of the Unicorn Theatre. Tickets £30 including interval drinks and canapés: contact Barbara Beach 01235 888091 to register interest.

Bank Holiday Walks - Monday 27 May
10.30 and 14.00 from Market Place. More details on page 6 and nearer the time

AGM: Tuesday 12 June
Details in May newsletter

Sissinghurst Castle Visit – Sunday 23 June
Dulwich Picture Gallery and Eltham Palace visits – Sunday 29 September
More information on page 4.

Unicorn Theatre events

For more details, tickets etc please contact the organisers or see the Unicorn website: www.abingdonabbeyunicorntheatre.org.uk/

"Equus" by Peter Shaffer - presented by Abingdon Drama Club
Wednesday 6 – Saturday 9 March

"Alice" by Laura Wade: presented by Gobo Theatre Foundation
Wednesday 20 – Saturday 23 February

"The Late Edwina Black" by William Dinner and William Morum – Breakaleg Productions
Wednesday 20 – Saturday 23 March

"The Admirable Crichton" by JM Barrie – presented by the Studio Theatre Club
Wednesday 24 – Saturday 27 April

Folk at the Unicorn
Concerts approximately once a month – see www.folkattheunicorn.co.uk/ or Whats On Diaries for programme.

Other Abingdon-on-Thames events

Abingdon Hydro Power Scheme Roadshow
Wednesday 20th February
19.30 – 21.30 Peachcroft Christian Centre
Organised by Abingdon Carbon Cutters

Annual Parish Meeting: Wednesday 13 March
19.00 Guildhall

Good Living ...Locally - Friday 22 March
19.00 – 21.00 Miele Experience Centre.
Choose Abingdon's "red-carpet" event to showcase the superb range of high class goods available locally. Tastings, displays, samples and music. More details and tickets from www.goodlivingevent.co.uk.

Abingdon Passion Play - Sunday 14 March
14.00 – 16.00 Abbey Gardens
The Passion Play will be performed by local musicians and actors in the Abbey Gardens, each scene taking place in a different location with the audience following the action as it moves around the Gardens. Free event – bring a fold-up chair and suitable clothing. More information on www.abingdonpassionplay.org.uk/ or from the Information Centre.

Town Council Annual Meeting and Mayor-making: Wednesday 8 May - 19.00 Guildhall

Christ's Hospital 460th Anniversary: Archive Exhibition - Saturday 18 May
10.00 – 16.00 The Hospital Hall, Long Alley Almshouses

Fun in the Park and Music in the Park
Saturday 1 June – Abbey Gardens
Free family fun in the daytime and a concert and fireworks in the evening. Book for evening event at the Information Centre.

Markets

Fairtrade Market: - Saturday 9 March
Local Excellence Market: Saturday 30 March.
French Market: Thursday 11 –Saturday 13 April.
Farmers' Market: Fridays 15 February, 15 March, 19 April and 17 May.

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/

Abingdon Walks

Following last year's successful walks we will be organising a programme of walks on Bank Holiday Monday May 27 and Heritage Weekend, Sunday September 14. Overall co-ordination will be by Friends of Abingdon, but some of the walks will be arranged and led by other groups and individuals, including the Green Gym, Friends of Radley Lakes, Twin Towns Society, Ramblers etc.

At present, possible walks are:

- The Ock Valley Walk extending to the mill and returning via Drayton
- Walk to Radley Lakes
- The Lost Abbey Walk
- Boundary Walk
- Abingdon Waterways
- Canal Walk
- Historic Pubs (past and present)
- Self-guided town photo quiz trails.

There will be teas at the Abbey Buildings and Radley Lakes. All walks will be free, but we will ask for donations as we did last year.

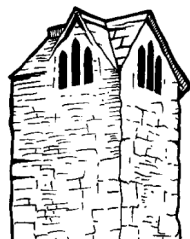
Other Walks

We would like to run other walks such as the Lost Abbey walk on summer Sunday afternoons – one per month. We have people who could lead them, but would need help with the general arrangements, booking people in, serving teas and "manning" the Abbey Buildings etc. If you would be willing to help us do this, or to help on the May or September dates, please get in touch with Pat Bryden or Hester Hand.

Membership Renewals

These were due from 1 December and new membership cards are enclosed. If you have not already paid, please send your cheque to Pauline Burren as soon as possible or set up a Standing Order, preferably with Gift Aid. If you already pay by Standing Order, please check that you are paying the correct amount: *rates are Single £8, Couple £12.* (Life membership is available for £55 single and £85 couple.)

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