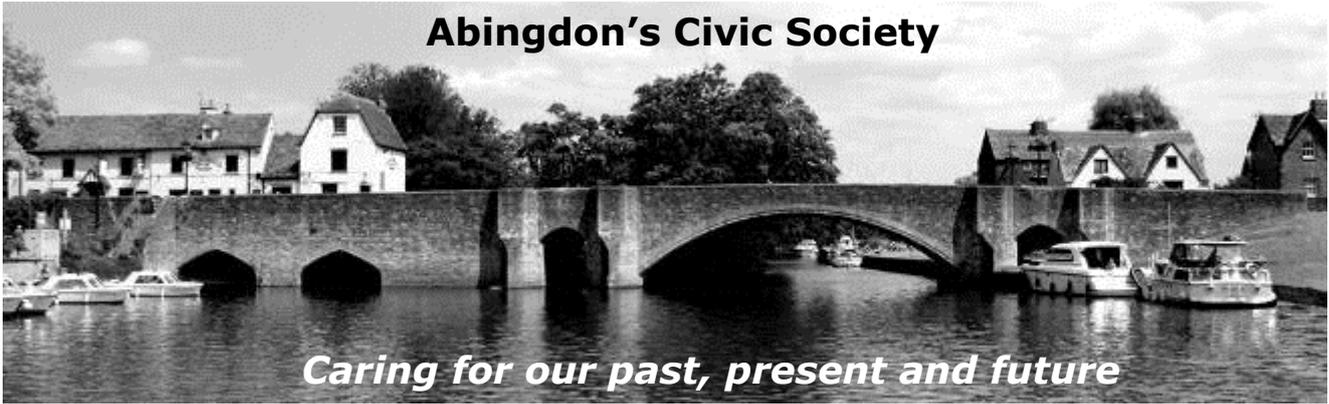


THE FRIENDS OF ABINGDON

Abingdon's Civic Society



Caring for our past, present and future

Newsletter – Spring 2014

Chairman's Message

We have survived one of the wettest winters and now brighter spring weather gives us hope for the year to come. Abingdon was fortunate to avoid flooding within the town and our thanks go to the various authorities for their protection works. We hope that they will remain vigilant and prevent future inundations.

The Council of the Friends continues to work hard in many directions. We continue to investigate improvements and upgrades in the Abbey Buildings, subject of course to affordability. We watch carefully the proposed developments in and around the town and make representations to the authorities when appropriate and are relieved that, at least for the time being, the Drayton Road housing development has been stopped. We have seen the restoration of several prominent buildings in the town and we very much welcome the work done in restoring the Crown & Thistle to an elegant hostelry and the rebirth of the Nags Head in its very prominent position. Abingdon may not be attracting many retailers at present but we certainly have a very good selection of restaurant, pubs and cafes.

We have welcomed a number of new members over the last few months and were pleased to see some of you at our "Welcome Evening" in April. It gave us a chance to talk to one another and for us to explain a bit more of what we are about and how our members can help to further our aims.

We are looking closely at our finances and are exploring ways of building on our income flow in order to secure our running costs and further our plans for improvements. The

buildings are a delightful venue for all sorts of parties and events in the summer months and I urge members to consider using them for their birthdays and anniversaries etc. Our charges are very competitive and the setting is hard to beat.

We are looking to step up our publicity and public profile and hope that we might find members with expertise in this area who would be willing to help with this.

As the town's Civic Society we have a duty to take a lead in looking at local planning applications and also at the strategic planning level. We should be working closely with the local authorities but it seems difficult to engage with them. The Government has put mechanisms in place for local community involvement but progress is very slow or even non-existent in the Abingdon area and we look rather enviously at the reports coming out from Civic Voice of the much greater successes in other places. We are particularly keen to get a listing scheme off the ground to identify buildings of local interest and give them some protection from inappropriate treatment or demolition.

You will see that there are a number of events planned for the rest of the year and I look forward to seeing you at them - but why not also consider trying your hands at actively helping us - even in a very small way? An hour spent on our stand at the Craft Fair, or helping with refreshments on walks days and other occasions is very helpful to us and usually an enjoyable experience - don't be shy!!

Michael Matthews

The Friends are 70!



This newsletter should reach you almost exactly 70 years after the first meeting of the Society. The following is an extract from the

History pages on our website – and that in turn draws heavily on Dick Barnes excellent book “History of the Society 1944 - 1994” which contains more detail and is still available from the Abbey Buildings. The book records in some detail the foundation of the Society and its early years, and then follows the Friends’ activities during the next 50 years.

“In 1944, when the Friends of Abingdon was born, Abingdon was a small country town with many older properties showing the effects of neglect during two wars and the intervening years of economic depression. As in other similar towns, some buildings of architectural or historic interest had already been demolished or condemned. A survey in 1943 had listed many sites in Abingdon which had been cleared or were proposed for clearance, and so there was a real risk that inappropriate buildings might be erected on sensitive sites. Out of this situation grew the Friends of Abingdon, as a civic amenities society.

Two informal meetings in March 1944, chaired by the Mayor (Mr J L Etty), prepared a proposal for a society to be called The Friends of Abingdon, with the objects:

- To arouse in all people of Abingdon and neighbourhood a lively and practical interest in the town and its setting;
- To help preserve what is best worth retaining amongst its old buildings and to encourage new buildings worthy of its civic tradition and character.

An Inaugural Meeting was held on 4th May 1944, in the Great Council Chamber. The Chairman was the Mayor, and the Member of Parliament for the Abingdon Division of Berkshire, Sir Ralph Glyn, was among the 113 persons present. The first General Meeting was held on 13th July 1944.

It was agreed that the Society should be affiliated to the Central Council of Civic Societies. A lecture, exhibition and visit were proposed as future activities. Concern was expressed about the future of the burnt-out clothing factory in West St Helen Street, and

about the provision of ladders at St Helen’s church so that prompt action could be taken against incendiary bombs. The society had thus been launched with an Executive Committee of some standing and experience, and showed an immediate concern for practical matters in the town.

The informal meetings prior to the inauguration of the Society had rejected the alternative of forming a trust specifically to purchase threatened buildings, but the Mayor suggested the aim of purchasing one site and reconditioning the building on it as an example of what could be done, and mentioned the Abbey Cottages in Thames Street. Little could he have known what the consequences would be during the years to come.”

Dick’s book and the wealth of material in the Friends’ archives make fascinating reading. So much has changed, yet so many of the issues we face now are the same as then. The Friends’ major success has clearly been the saving and restoration of the Abbey Buildings and their ongoing maintenance as a vibrant attraction within the town. They were not so successful in their efforts to save some other important buildings, but as reported in this and other newsletters we remain vigilant and continue to make reasoned and responsible representations to planning applications and civic debates in order to achieve the objectives established by our predecessors in 1944.



Join us to celebrate at the Friends 70th Anniversary Lunch: Sunday 18 May, at Coseners House. Details and booking form enclosed.

The Abbey Buildings

The Abbey Buildings, and “all within the curtilage of the site” are categorised as a Scheduled Monument which imposes certain obligations on us and requires us to obtain approval from English Heritage for even quite minor alterations and for some maintenance work. Balancing this with the need to make the buildings attractive and safe for visitors – and especially hirers – poses challenges for us. We know that people love the “character” of our buildings, but they don’t always like the difficult access, cramped toilets - and the inevitable dust and cobwebs which go with a medieval building’s high wooden ceilings!

We are looking at a number of ideas for projects to improve the presentation of our Buildings: none is yet fully costed and agreed and we may have some hard choices to make, but possibilities include:

Upgrading the Ladies and Gents toilets in the Lower Hall.

This is the most pressing need and the one where our thinking is furthest advanced. We investigated the possibility of adding a disabled toilet in this area but physical constraints make this impractical and because of our listed status it is not a legal requirement; we do not rule out the possibility of building a freestanding disabled toilet and possibly additional ordinary facilities elsewhere on the site at some time in the future, but current plans just involve upgrading the fittings and décor in both toilets and enlarging the space available for the Ladies. We are preparing costings and hope to seek English Heritage approval fairly soon.

Access to the Undercroft

The present slope to the steps leading into the Undercroft can be slippery. We are exploring options including reconfiguring the steps, adding handrails and use of fixed planters to keep people away from the problem area. Visual impact and cost are both major considerations.

Frontage to the Mill Stream

The bank is crumbly and we want to discourage people from going too close but the gardens are particularly important for weddings so we need to do it without obstructing the view of the stream and Coseners House – and without installing intrusive signage. We are looking at options involving planting schemes and possibly boarding part of the bank. English Heritage approval will be needed for anything involving digging below 30cm.

Long Gallery Domestic Area

This needs an uplift – refurbishing the old units, work surface, sink and fridge as they are used by parties. This should not require English Heritage approval so, provided we think it is affordable and a good use of our funds, we should be able to move more quickly on this.

Undercroft

The Undercroft, with its stunning ceiling, is currently our least usable space, largely because of its uneven floor and susceptibility

to damp. Various proposals have been made for addressing this but they would be extremely costly and we will have to consider them further in the light of the other projects.

Once we have an idea of costs for these projects we will prioritise them and consider how they might be funded. We do have substantial reserves and would consider using some of these, but we will also pursue the possibility of grants, especially from English Heritage or the Heritage Lottery Fund.

Maintenance

The application of copper strip to the ridges of the Unicorn and Long Gallery roofs is now complete. It is heartening to see the lack of moss on the Unicorn roof: it was cleaned off when the copper was fixed and does not seem to be returning. The moss cleaning on the Long Gallery was left due to the fragile condition of the roof, particularly at the East end: this area will require serious attention in the foreseeable future, but the remaining moss should slowly fall from the roof.

The perspex screens by the stairs at the west end of the Long Gallery were replaced as a matter of urgency after one of the storms last Autumn.

The black mould in the Undercroft has been satisfactorily removed but will probably return in due course because of the poor ventilation in there.

The clearing of ivy from the car park wall has been carried out but, regrettably, has, as anticipated, exposed the need for extensive pointing and masonry repairs resulting from the intrusion of the plant.

We are due to have a quinquennial inspection by English Heritage later this year and this will certainly highlight requirements for an ongoing maintenance programme.



Displays

If you have visited the Buildings over the winter you will have seen new display boards in the West Checker and the Unicorn Theatre. These are the work of Mike Ward of Abingdon Drama Club, with financial and joinery support from the Friends. There are displays on the history of the theatre and on

Alan Kitching's Handel Operas and one celebrating the first 60 years of Abingdon Drama Club productions.

If you have not yet seen them, do call in and have a look – and bring family and friends: together with the two timelines in the East Checker, we now have plenty for our visitors to look at – as well as the buildings themselves of course. Elizabeth Drury and David Clark have also been working on some information sheets about the Long Gallery which visitors will be able to read as they look around.

Opening Times

The Buildings will re-open for the summer at the beginning of May and we have decided to simplify our opening arrangements in order to make it easier for the public to know when they will be open. The new times will be Wednesdays, Thursdays, Fridays and Sundays, 2.00 – 4.30pm. However our curator, Jenny Berrell, is happy to arrange visits outside these times subject to reasonable notice.

Friends of Abingdon visits



The British Museum

Early on Sunday 23 March a party of the Friends set off for London and as the traffic was light arrived at the British Museum just as it was opening. Most of us had already booked for "The Vikings Life and Legend" exhibition and had timed tickets for the

early afternoon. Everyone was free to explore the many galleries and exhibits in the museum before gathering for an early lunch in the very attractive new restaurant on top of the old Reading Room - a very good setting for an excellent and well-presented meal.

The timed entry system to the Vikings did not seem to operate very successfully and we all found ourselves in a slow moving mass of visitors as we worked our way along the corridor of very interesting exhibits . After about three quarters of an hour struggling along we reached the great new exhibition hall where there was space to wander at will and gaze at the enormity of the great reconstructed Viking longship. There were many other fascinating exhibits

around but after another hour or so it was time to retrace our steps to our awaiting coach for the homeward journey

A most memorable and informative day, even if somewhat exhausting. Our grateful thanks have to go to Pauline Burren for her hard work in making it all run so smoothly



Lacock Abbey 8 June

Our second visit this year is to Lacock Abbey and Village on Sunday 8th June. We

will have lunch in the George Inn in the village. The abbey and village date from the 13th century and the village is often used as background for film and TV period dramas (Pride and Prejudice etc). The Abbey was converted into a country house in the 16th century and was the home of William Fox-Talbot. He was a pioneer of photography, inventing the negative/positive print system, and the site houses the Fox-Talbot Museum of photography. There is also a botanic garden and Victorian wooded grounds. Like many Victorians, Fox-Talbot was also interested in plant and tree collecting so this visit should provide something of interest to everyone. *A booking form is enclosed.*

Planning Matters

Drayton Road development

To satisfy the conditions laid down by the Planning Inspector for the development of the Drayton Road site, the County Council Highways Department proposed moving the pedestrian crossings in Ock Street and Marcham Road. FoA submitted an objection to this and suggested a trial period using temporary lights, which was reported on the front page of the Abingdon Herald. The proposals were rejected by the County Council on 27 March, so the development could not go ahead. In the meantime, the original developers have sold the site to Taylor Wimpey who now intend to present a revised plan, so the fight goes on.

57-59 Stert Street and Abbey Court

This application is in limbo following the December Planning Committee meeting when the Oxford Architectural and Historical Society made a detailed objection about procedural inadequacies in the handling of the application and no decision was made. The pub next door to the site is for sale, so it is possible that the owners of the site will

buy it and submit a completely new application. We await developments.

65 Oxford Road

The developers of this site (one of the many aliases of Cranbourne Holdings) have completely cleared it, in contravention of the conditions laid down in the planning consent, then applied for retrospective planning permission. We wrote to the responsible planning officer and got a very unsatisfactory reply, implying that this would just be accepted for 'cost reasons'. We sent copies of the correspondence to the Town and District Councillors for the Ward, and to the Chairs of the Town and District Council Planning Committees and the Vale Cabinet member responsible for planning enforcement. As a result, the matter is now in the hands of the Planning Enforcement Officer. Again, we await developments.

Old Gaol

We are still pursuing the problems of public access from East St Helen Street to Bridge Street, and pressing for the removal of the remaining 'Private No Admittance' notice and provision of signs indicating when the pathway is open to the public. Shaun Dominic of Cranbourne Homes has promised to remove the sign, but this has not yet been done.

Old Abbey House and a Local List for Abingdon

Old Abbey House has been put up for sale by the Vale District Council. Although in a Conservation area, the building is not listed, which is a cause for concern. Our Vice-President David Clark has been able to carry out a survey as part of the Oxfordshire Buildings Record, and it is clear that, to ensure its protection, Old Abbey House should be on a Local Heritage List - if only Abingdon had one. FoA has been in discussion with AAHS for some time about the possibility of producing a Local List, but we need support from the District Council which has not been forthcoming. We hope to do more work on this and would welcome help from interested members.

Local Plan

The Vale District Council is working on a Local Plan for development in the Vale up to 2031. The consultation document proposes that c.600 houses will be built in Abingdon along Dunmore road and Copenhagen Drive, either side of Tilsley Park. If this is done, provision of appropriate infrastructure, such

as improved access to the A34 at Lodge Hill and providing local shops and schools, will be essential. Friends of Abingdon recognize that a Local Plan is essential - where none exists, there is little to prevent developers building wherever they choose - so we are taking a close interest in this and contributing to the ongoing public consultations..

Neighbourhood Plan

Another project which relies on council support, this time Abingdon Town Council, is the development of a Neighbourhood Plan for Abingdon. This would underpin the Vale-wide Local Plan and could help to avoid some of the problems we continue to see with inappropriate planning applications. We have held meetings with individual councillors and the Vale Community Engagement Officers which were very helpful. We raised the subject at the annual Parish Meeting in March, but the question was slapped down by the chair of the Planning Committee. This is very disappointing as other towns and villages in the Vale and South Oxfordshire are pressing ahead with Neighbourhood Plans, and Abingdon is being left behind. We will continue to lobby for this, and to offer our help in preparing such a plan.

Civic Matters

The main focus for the Town Council remains the Guildhall redevelopment project. Their application for a Heritage Lottery Fund grant was unsuccessful, so they are looking at how their plans can be scaled back and at alternative funding sources. We should hear more very shortly.

Other Town Council news is that, about now, they are moving out of Old Abbey House and in to the corner of Roysse Court, above the Registry Office. The Information Centre and Reception will however move to the Guildhall Foyer (see above for more about Old Abbey House).

The District Council has also moved many of its staff - in this case right out of Abingdon, to Crowmarsh Gifford. They are retaining some presence in "new" Abbey House and those of us wanting to meet either a Councillor or an officer can still arrange to do so there. The District Council is also continuing to work with Scottish Widows, the leaseholders for the shopping centre (now rebranded as Bury Street, a reference of course to its pre-1960s origins) on Phase 2 of the redevelopment. This is likely to involve

demolition of the 1970s Charter area and its replacement with a superstore and new car park but has been delayed, pending completion of negotiations with a supermarket chain.

The Choose Abingdon Partnership continues to help promote town vitality for example by organising Local Excellence Markets and providing practical assistance for events such as the Christmas Extravaganza and the recent successful Science Festival. Its main focus this year however will be working with the town centre businesses to set up a "Business Improvement District". If the proposal is accepted it will enable business groups and individual businesses to develop and implement ideas for better management and promotion of the commercial life of the town. The advantage is that chain stores and supermarkets will also contribute to make these ideas become reality and it is not all left to the small independents to carry the burden of doing anything for the collective good.

Bank Holiday walks and tours – Monday 26 May

The Bank Holiday walks organised by The Friends of Abingdon and other groups in the town are now into their third year. There will be walks and tours to suit everyone highlighting Abingdon's History and Natural Environment. This year's walks are:

Morning (leaving at 10.30):

- The Waterways Walk to Sutton Courtenay with the Ramblers: 8½ miles. Take sandwiches or get a Pub Lunch.
- The 1556 Boundary Walk. Approximately 4 miles.
- The Ock Valley Nature Walk with Abingdon Green Gym: 3½ miles.
- The new St Helen's Tour.

Afternoon (leaving at 14.00)

- The Radley Lakes Walk with the Friends of Radley Lakes: 5 miles. Tea and cakes available at the Lakes.
- The Lost Abbey Tour: St Nicolas Church and the Lost Abbey. Teas in the Abbey Buildings.

You can also use our picture quiz sheets to explore Abingdon-on-Thames on your own. Pick them up from our stall in the market place or download them from our website.

All walks start at the Market Place. Book in from 10.00 on the day.

There will be another chance to explore Abingdon on foot as part of Heritage Weekend on Sunday September 14th.

PS We would like to hear from any members willing to help with these events, this time or in future – doing publicity, taking bookings, serving refreshments, or stewarding walks.

Music on a Summer Evening

Following the success of last year's Opera, the Friends of Abingdon, in association with Abbey Strings, are organising an evening of music in the Long Gallery – with Prosecco and strawberries and a chance to enjoy our buildings at their best. Abbey Strings will be joined by violin soloists Matthew Bain and John Haworth and tenor Peter Willis. The popular programme will include the Bach Double Concerto, a Mozart Divertimento and well known operatic arias by Handel, Mozart and others.

Tickets priced £15 will be on sale later in May, but numbers are limited and we expect them to sell quickly so Friends of Abingdon members can reserve tickets by telephoning Hester Hand on 01235 529044 or e-mailing secretary@friendsofabingdon.org.uk

Civic Voice–membership benefits

The Society is affiliated to Civic Voice, the umbrella organisation for Civic Societies which provides useful support and guidance for campaigns on civic and planning matters. They also provide benefits to individual members of our Society by way of a free day pass each year to a National Trust and an English Heritage property. (If you already belong to of one of these organisations you can still apply for a pass to give to a friend or family member.) If you plan to make use of this for the Lacock Abbey trip please discuss with Pauline Burren; otherwise contact our membership secretary, Barbara Beach for details of how to get a pass.

Farewells

Sadly, several notable Abingdon characters who were members of the Friends have passed away in the last 6 months: Les Argyle, Eileen Bagshaw, Beryl Bragg and Keith Hasnip all contributed in different ways and over many years to the life of the town and our sympathies go to their families and friends.

Friends of Abingdon Events

70th Anniversary Lunch – Sunday 18 May, Coseners House. Details and booking form enclosed.

Bank Holiday Walks and Tours – Monday 26 May – see page 6

Lacock Abbey Visit – Sunday 8 June – see page 4 and enclosed booking form

AGM – Wednesday 11 June, 19.30 Unicorn Theatre. Guest speaker, Roger Thomas of English Heritage.

"Music for a Summer Evening" with Abbey Strings Sunday 13 July 19.30 Unicorn Theatre. More details on page 6.

"JMW Turner's association with Abingdon" – talk by Dr Jon Whiteley Wednesday 3 September 19.30 Unicorn Theatre

Heritage Weekend: 13-14 September. This year we are collaborating with the Museum to commemorate WW1. There will be themed events in the Market Square as well as the usual activities in and around the town.

"Reinterpreting Abingdon's Lost Abbey": Thursday 2 October. Talk by Rev. Ian Browne. Organised by Abingdon Museum Friends but hosted in the Unicorn Theatre by the Friends of Abingdon. (Details in next newsletter)

Unicorn Theatre events

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

Three Sisters by Anton Chekhov - presented by Studio Theatre Club
Wednesday 21 – Saturday 24 May

I do, I do, I do by Robin Hawdon - presented by Abingdon Drama Club
Wednesday 25 – Saturday 28 September

The Oxfordshire Drama Network annual Drama Festival
Unicorn Theatre Sunday 1 – Friday 6 June

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

Other Abingdon-on-Thames events

Oxfordshire Art Weeks (South Oxfordshire)- 3- 11 May

Abingdon Air and Country Show – Sunday 4 May

Annual Town Council Meeting and Mayor-making – Wednesday 7 May

Fun in the Park and Music in the Park – Saturday 7 June

Election of the Mayor of Ock Street – Saturday 21 June

Museum Exhibitions

MG 90: 90 Years of the MG Marque – till 20 July

High Dynamic Range Photos of Abingdon: an exhibition by David Buckland. May 2-Sept 16

Markets

Local Excellence Market: Saturdays 31 May and 30 August.

Farmers' Market: Fridays 16 May, 20 June, 18 July and 15 August.

Country Market: Friday mornings, Roysse Room

Regular talks

The following groups run regular monthly talks on subjects which may be of interest to FoA members. Contact them or see their websites for details.

- Museum Friends: first Thursday
- Astronomical Society: second Monday
- Abingdon Artists: second Thursday
- ADFAS: third Wednesday (afternoon)
- Naturalists: third Wednesday
- Twin Towns Society: third Wednesday
- AAHS: third Thursday

NB there are many other interest groups in the town – there is a full list, with contact details, on the town website at www.abingdon.gov.uk/community-services/clubs-societies

For more details and a wider range of events in Abingdon-on-Thames see the What's On in Abingdon leaflet, published twice a year, or the events calendar at www.abingdon.gov.uk/events

"Who's Who" in the Friends of Abingdon

Latest in our series of occasional pen portraits of members of the Executive Council

Barbara Beach – Membership Secretary

Barbara has lived in Abingdon since 1984. Her three children went to schools in Abingdon so she taught in Chipping Norton, hoping to not have to teach children she knew. Since retiring she has worked for various interests. She worships and is active at Peachcroft Community Church. Once a month she helps the Street Pastors who patrol the town from 10pm until 3.00am on Saturday evenings. This is a vital part of keeping people safe when they have been out celebrating or drowning their sorrows.

Barbara is also a keen member of North Abingdon W.I. and of Oxford and District Soroptimists. She likes living in Abingdon and wants it to remain a lively and interesting town.

Bruce Hunt

Bruce grew-up in Oxfordshire. He qualified as an accountant in industry and held senior financial positions in a number of companies. He then joined KPMG working on projects in the UK, the Middle East and Africa and running consulting practices for them in Egypt, Singapore and Russia. He has written many articles on business management topics and given papers in this area at conferences around the world.

He and his wife moved to Abingdon 15 years ago where they set-up a successful executive recruitment company (and are now retired). Bruce was a Governor of Abingdon & Witney College for eight years, chairing the Audit and then the Finance Committee. He has also been Chairman of the Oxfordshire Branch of the Institute of Directors and was on the fundraising team for the Abingdon County Hall Museum refurbishment. He is a trustee and treasurer of a charity supporting the Churchill Hospital and acts as a voluntary examiner for the annual accounts of various societies in Abingdon.

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Newsletter published by: Friends of Abingdon, Abingdon's Civic Society,
18 Thames Street, Abingdon, OX14 3HZ. <http://www.friendsofabingdon.org.uk/>

Unicorn Theatre sketch by Christopher Ellis of Radley College, designer of the Unicorn Theatre