

# THE FRIENDS OF ABINGDON

## Abingdon's Civic Society



### Newsletter – Summer 2015

#### Chairman's Message

Introducing our new chairman, Bryan Brown



I am very pleased to have been invited to chair the Friends. I believe that we have a vital role to play in Abingdon life as guardians of one of the town's most important assets, the beautiful remains of the great Abbey of Abingdon and also to fulfil our responsibility as Abingdon's Civic Society.

A word on my background; I was trained as a designer and educated as a businessman and my career has been to run my own design and marketing businesses. In the late 1980s I moved my company to Abingdon, I employed a professional staff of some 60 people and bought and converted the disused Congregational church in the Square, the front of the building is now an ASK restaurant.

Managing such a business is a significant commitment which left little time for community activities. However Abingdon is a place where I've lived with my family for 40 years and now I feel that I should give something back and use what skills and experience I have to help improve the life of the town.

When we arrived, the Oxfordshire County Plan of the time designated Abingdon as a dormitory town and in some ways that rather derogatory description has come to pass. Whilst the population has increased from about 12,000 people to now nearly 40,000, many of the residents commute to work and are little engaged with the life of the town. So I believe we need to engender a more vibrant civic and commercial life for a town with a remarkable history. It is a town with a beautiful geographic site on the river Thames, the oldest continuously inhabited town in England and the county town of Berkshire for hundreds of years which has resulted in over 300 wonderful listed buildings.

So we are developing some exciting plans for the future; maintaining our role as guardians of the Abbey Buildings and the Unicorn Theatre and encouraging the community to know and use them, running "FreeSpace" for the benefit of community groups, working with the Town Council to develop a Neighbourhood Plan, monitoring and commenting on planning and development proposals, reviewing our own strategy and organising a fascinating programme of events; talks, music and celebratory occasions.

I would like to help people feel a renewed sense of pride in our beautiful town and I look forward to working with members towards this end.

*Bryan Brown*

## Celebrating 150 years of Albert Park



The Albert Park Residents' Association has compiled a fascinating anthology of articles, photographs and illustrations to celebrate the Park from its origins to today. The articles cover the history of the park and its surrounding buildings, its landscape, flora and fauna and the social history of the area. There are contributions from over 30 people of all ages, including pupils of Carswell Primary School. The book was published in June and the original print run sold out but more have been printed: if you would like a copy and can't find one in a local bookshop, please email [albertparkra@gmail.com](mailto:albertparkra@gmail.com). All proceeds will go towards improvement of the Park, by arrangement with Christ's Hospital of Abingdon, the charity which owns it.

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## AGM and farewells

At a well-attended AGM on 3 June, we said goodbye to several long-standing Council members: between them they have given well over 100 years' service to the Friends.

Michael Matthews had been on the Council since 1986 and Chairman since 2009. As a member of one of Abingdon's longstanding families, Freeman of the Town, former Mayor and Master of Christ's Hospital he has a wealth of knowledge and an excellent network of contacts, which have been extremely valuable to the Friends. Fortunately he is still around so we can pick his brains and access his amazing stock of historical documents and memorabilia.

John Burren joined the Council in 1984 and over the following years took a leading role in the installation and maintenance of all the electrical works in the Buildings – and especially the Theatre. More recently he was responsible for the installation of lighting under the Chequer steps which makes an enormous difference at evening events. In 2006 he was "persuaded" also to take on the important role of Treasurer and we owe him a great debt of thanks for all his dedicated work in both roles.

Pauline Burren first became involved with the Friends in 1980 when she started to run Craft Fairs for us. She continued to do this for nearly 30 years, bringing in a total of over £300,000 for our funds. As if this wasn't enough, she also took on the roles of Membership Secretary and Events organizer – her outings and social events were always popular. Three years ago she introduced the concept of an annual "Founders Lunch" in May so it was fitting that this year's was the last event she organized for us. She will be a hard act to follow!

Sylvia Bird joined the Council in 1993 and has served as Secretary, Newsletter Editor and, since 2009 Vice-chairman. She provided invaluable support to the Curator and the other officers and could always be depended on to help out on rotas for craft fairs and other events.

Our grateful thanks go to all four – we hope they will enjoy their "retirement" and that we will see them at future Friends events.

As you will see from elsewhere in this newsletter, the AGM appointed Bryan Brown as our new Chairman and three other new Trustees, Rosemary Allan, Richard Charles and Kevin Senior. Bruce Hunt, who was already on the Council, was appointed as Treasurer. The post of Vice-Chairman remains vacant. The meeting also appointed a second Honorary Vice-president, Mrs Felicity Dick who is Deputy Lord-Lieutenant for Oxfordshire, with specific responsibility for Abingdon. The new Council is already hard at work and we will report on their plans for the future in the next newsletter.

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## The New Mousehole Café



If you have not tried the new Mousehole Café in the basement of the County Hall you really should. It is run by the Museum assisted by a team of volunteers.

If you are old enough to remember the 'old Mousehole' it is very different, so don't expect a juke box and noisy teenagers (only we weren't called teenagers then). It is a lovely quiet place to relax and have coffee/tea/hot chocolate etc, and a sandwich or piece of cake all freshly made and delicious as well as being reasonably priced. The new winter menu will include a range of lunchtime specials.

If you have a problem with the stairs (after all they are very old), there is a lift at the side of the County Hall and the only place it goes to is the café. While you are down there you might also like to see the old gas engines and pumping equipment, now more than 100 years old, which used to boost the pressure of the town's fresh water supply.

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## Bank Holiday Walks 2015

The fine weather we hoped for arrived for this year's May Bank Holiday. It was a little cold for swimming outdoors but ideal for walking. There were four walks in the morning: *1556 Boundary Walk, Wilts & Berks Canal, Abingdon Abbey, St Helen's Almshouses* and three in the afternoon: *Radley Lakes, The Ock Valley, Abingdon Abbey*.

Many thanks to members of The Guild of Town Criers, Wilts and Berks Canal Trust,

Friends of Radley Lakes, Abingdon Green Gym, Abingdon & District Twin Towns Society, Abingdon Area Archaeological and Historical Society, and our own members who gave their time to leading the walks. They were all very much appreciated by the 114 walkers who took part.



Amongst the walkers were people from as far afield as Washington, New York, Australia and Sweden; some from places nearer home such as Newbury, Aldershot and local villages, and 88 from Abingdon itself.

This event could not have happened without the help and cooperation of our friends who turned up trumps, kept the Abbey Buildings open from 10:30 to 4:30 with teas and cakes for visitors, put up our stall in the Market Place and booked in walkers. So a huge "thank you" to them all for making this a successful day.

Thanks to Alastair Fear for four of the photographs.

*Pat Bryden*

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## Neighbourhood Plan

We are at last seeing interest from some Town Councillors in the possibility of a Neighbourhood Plan (NP): if one was in place it would enable the Town Council to access a much higher proportion of the Community Infrastructure Levy, which will become available if the planned housing developments to the north of the town go ahead. Also, while a Neighbourhood Plan cannot conflict with the Local Plan (LP), it would enable the Town to establish some criteria for the implementation of the LP (e.g. protection for certain areas) and it could provide the basis for specific improvement projects (e.g. the riverside, public spaces

and facilities, walking/cycle routes etc). Drawing up a NP requires a high level of community engagement so we are hoping that lots of our members will get involved. Please get in touch if you would be interested in this. This is a great opportunity for Abingdon people to have a say in how they want the town to develop in the future.

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## Other Civic matters

### **Guildhall**

The Town Council announced in June that they have shelved their ambitious plans for the Guildhall redevelopment and are "re-scoping" the project on a simpler basis. The reasons given were partly cost and partly a view that the previous plans were moving too far towards a commercial operation and away from the provision of a community facility. A new working group has been set up to bring forward proposals which will include installing cinema projection facilities and retractable seating in the Abbey Hall and creating a ground-level entrance to it; improved access throughout the building; kitchen improvements and the installation of wi-fi and hearing loops throughout the building. No timescale has been announced, but the Friends have written to the Town Council, expressing disappointment at the further delay and asking to be consulted on the proposals as they emerge.

### **Old Abbey House**

The sale process was re-started in June. In accordance with the procedure for an "Asset of Community Value", a 6 - week period was allowed in which community groups could express an interest in buying it. The Friends did not feel that we had the resources to make or lead a bid and no other groups have come forward so it has now been put on the open market. We are hopeful that it will be sold for a purpose which will have at least some community benefit and allow some degree of access - as opposed to a residential development - and will be keeping a watching brief. We are particularly determined to retain public access to the garden.

### **Upper Reaches**

This has been the subject of much speculation and rumour since its closure in June. We have discovered that the land is owned by the Vale of White Horse District Council, but is on a long lease to a hotel chain. We are concerned that once again,

one of the town's "gateway" sites is unattractive in the short term, and possibly at risk of inappropriate development in the longer term, and have lobbied the Vale to seek assurances that nothing will be done which will prejudice this important riverside site. Their initial response was broadly supportive of our concerns but they too were still trying to establish the situation so we will look for an update shortly.

### **Eyesores**

It is eight months since Orchard Developments (aka Cranbourne Homes) received planning permission for the redevelopment of 65 Oxford Road and it is still an empty plot covered in weeds and grass with an unsightly wire fence along the pavement side, not to mention the attractive portaloo. Friends of Abingdon have contacted Councillor Helen Pighills (the Vale DC ward councillor), asking her to request that the Vale Planning Department tell the site developers to tidy up the site (they cannot force them to start building). Unfortunately, the reply from the planning officer was that they couldn't force the developers to do anything, so it looks as if we are stuck with this eyesore until Cranbourne decide either to develop the site or sell it.

Another site which could go the same way is 55-59 Stert Street and Abbey Court, which received planning permission for redevelopment last December. So far, there is no evidence of anything being done, and the existing buildings are becoming increasingly shabby - another eyesore in the Conservation Area.

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## Community FreeSpace

For the last few years, the Friends of Abingdon have worked with the Choose Abingdon partnership to run the "Community Shop" in Bury Street. Choose Abingdon is now winding up, so the Friends have taken on full responsibility for it. We see this as a great opportunity not just to help promote the wide range of activities in the town, but also to increase awareness of the Friends and the Abbey Buildings.

The first step has been to re-name it "Community FreeSpace" - the word "shop" caused confusion as we are not actually allowed to use it to sell anything! The space is available free of charge to local community

groups, charities and not-for-profit organisations for periods of up to two weeks for small-scale activities such as raising membership awareness, displays, meetings and small celebrations. There is no charge for community groups and small local charities; larger charities and not-for-profit organisations are invited to make a donation towards running costs.

Autumn exhibitions in FreeSpace will include:

- Victorian Abingdon: 5–12 September
- Fitzharrys School Art: 16–19 September
- Carbon Cutters: 21 September – 3 Oct
- Oxon & Bucks Woodcarvers: 12–16 Oct
- Abingdon Flower Club: 17 – 24 October
- Abingdon Wargames Club: 31 October
- Didcot&District Woodturners: 16–21 Nov.
- "GO Active" drop-ins: 26 Oct and 30 Nov

If you would like to find out more, we are holding an Open Evening on Thursday 17 September – see p.8

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## The Abbey Buildings

The major projects mentioned in the last newsletter are now complete: the Long Gallery roof is restored to a sound condition, the Chimney has been cleared of its unwanted foliage (and various other minor repairs done, while the scaffolding was in place) and the refurbished toilets are generally seen as a great improvement. The riverside gardens have also been looking beautiful in recent weeks, thanks to the efforts of Jenny Berrell and her helpers.

Following a comprehensive electrical assessment earlier this year, we have a considerable package of work to undertake throughout the buildings, which will make further demands on our resources. This work will be done during the winter so as to minimise disruption to users.

For the longer-term we are considering further projects to make the Buildings more user-friendly, while of course respecting their heritage and abiding by the constraints of Historic England. While our aim is to cover our normal running costs by income from our activities, we will probably have to seek external funding for any major projects, eg from grants or legacies – both of which were important sources for the Friends in their early years.

## Links with Oxford

We are well aware that many people in Oxford have no idea how much Abingdon has to offer in terms of heritage and attractive sights, so are keen to establish closer links with like-minded societies and organisations there. We have therefore been delighted to host two recent groups of visitors from "up the road".

In August we met several senior members of St. Edmund Hall and David Clark gave them a detailed guided tour of the buildings. They were very impressed and we plan a return visit shortly. We are considering with them whether we can run any joint activities to build on our shared links to St. Edmund. This month we hosted the first of two groups from our neighbours, the Oxford Civic Society. They enjoyed a talk, tour of the buildings and coffee, before heading off on a walking tour round the rest of the town's medieval sites. They too were surprised and impressed so we encouraged them to return for a longer visit - perhaps at Heritage Weekend.

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## Painted Ceiling in St Helen's Church

Our speaker after this year's AGM was Michael Liversidge, grandson of our first Vice-Chairman and himself an eminent art historian. He first became interested in the painted ceiling of Our Lady's Chapel in his early teens and at the age of 18 wrote a guidebook to it. He was also involved in major restoration work done on the ceiling in the 1990s.

He told us that the construction, joinery, tracery and delicacy of the ceiling is genuinely unique in Europe - most other such work was destroyed in the Reformation or other conflicts, whereas in this case 37 of the original 52 panels remain. Some of the remainder fell foul of "restoration" work in Victorian times.

There is a Latin inscription on the ceiling, crediting those who planned and paid for it and this enables it to be dated to the late 14th century. Much is known about the craftsmen working in this area at that time as William of Wykeham was having a lot of work done both at New College Oxford and

at Winchester College. Recent research indicates that the master carpenter was Hugh Herland, who also did work for Edward III and Richard II, including the roof of Westminster Hall; the painting was probably done by craftsmen from the workshop of Thomas Glazier, who is best known for his painting on glass.

The Chapel and its ceiling provided a useful source of income for St Helen's as Pope Boniface IX granted much sought-after "indulgences" (remissions of time spent in purgatory) to penitents giving alms there. We are very grateful to Michael for his fascinating talk and hope to welcome him back for a future talk on another aspect of Abingdon's rich art history.

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## Events

### Friends of Abingdon Events

*Victorian Abingdon Photographic Exhibition:* Community FreeSpace, Bury Street. Saturday 5 and Monday 7 – Saturday 12 September.

*Talks in St Nicolas Church:*

*Victorian Abingdon in Pictures:* by Ruth Weinberg 12.30 Thursday 10 September  
*Albert Park: the Development of a Victorian Suburb* by Jackie Smith 19.30 Friday 11 September.

*Heritage Open Days and Walks:* 12-13 September. Full details in enclosed leaflet or at <http://www.abingdonheritage.co.uk/>

*Community FreeSpace Open Evening* Thursday 17 September 17.30 – 20.30

*Craft Fair:* Thursday 15 – Sunday 18 and Thursday 22 – Sunday 25 October. 10.00 – 17.00 (16.00 Sundays), Abbey Buildings.

**Reduced price entry on production of FoA membership card.**

### Unicorn Theatre events

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

*Witness for the Prosecution* by Agatha Christie. Presented by Breakaleg Productions Wednesday 9 - Saturday 12 September.

*Another Man's Eden* by Tony Green. Presented by Abingdon Drama Club Wednesday 23 – Saturday 26 September.  
*Humbug!* by Dan Booth and Stephen Briggs A new musical version of A Christmas Carol. Presented by Studio Theatre Club Wednesday 25 – Saturday 28 November.

### Music at the Unicorn

Concerts approximately once a month – see <http://www.musicattheunicorn.org.uk/>

### Other Abingdon-on-Thames events

*Dragon Boat Festival:* Sunday 6 September from 10.00, Abingdon riverside.

*Splash of Pink Family Fun Day:* Saturday 26 September 10.00 – 15.30, Market Place. Charity event in support of Against Breast Cancer.

*Michaelmas Fair:* Monday 5 – Tuesday 6 October.

### County Hall Museum Exhibitions

*The Thames – Shifting Perspectives.* Saturday 12 September – Sunday 20 December. An exhibition created specially for the museum by HapticArt, a group of stitched textile artists.

*Dyslexia Matters: Opening DAWs.* Saturday 24 October – Sunday 1 November. A display created by The Unicorn School in support of National Dyslexia Awareness Week (DAW)

### Markets

*Local Excellence Market:* Saturday 31 October

*Farmers' Market:* Fridays 18 September, 16 October, 20 November and 18 December.

### 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
- AAAHS: third Thursday

For more details and a wider range of events in Abingdon-on-Thames see the new-look Town Crier magazine, or the events calendar at [www.abingdon.gov.uk/events](http://www.abingdon.gov.uk/events)

## New Faces

### Rosemary Allan



Rosemary trained as a ballerina and had a scholarship at the Royal Academy of Dancing. She performed with international stars at two Gala performances for the Royal Family at Drury Lane and the London Coliseum. Damaging her foot caused her to change careers and whilst considering her options she re-trained as a secretary, rising to become PA to one of the Directors of Constructors John Brown Ltd. She was also the leading dancer for a semi-professional Czechoslovakian Dance Group and a Flamenco Group.

Following the birth of her children, she moved to Abingdon in 1988 and then re-entered the work-place, firstly teaching at St. Edmund's School where she ran the Drama Club with fifty pupils. There were no plays for fifty pupils so she wrote 29! She also ran Link Club – a youth group for pupils aged 11 – 13 and was a Eucharistic Minister for some years. She later became Manager and then Operations Director for a group of residential homes for people with learning disabilities and mental health problems. After gaining an MBA in management, she moved to work for the County Council and also became a Director for a legal advice service, rising to become Chairman. In her retirement she is now a Patient Representative for SWOLF (South West Oxfordshire Locality Forum) as well as being a Trustee for FoA.

### Richard Charles



Richard first moved to Abingdon in 1983 when he joined UKAEA at Culham Laboratory, having previously worked in the nuclear industry in the North East. As an engineer at AEA, subsequently privatised as AEA Technology plc, his creativity was exercised in the winning and delivering of a succession of technically challenging projects from directed energy to communication satellites to railways where the (almost) impossible became the norm. In 1991 he turned down a trip on the US Space Shuttle as mission specialist as the promised new kitchen at the Clifton Drive family home was unfinished!

AEA Technology's acquisition of BR Research in 1997 took Richard and wife away (from completed kitchen) to Derbyshire, but on his retirement from full time work they returned happily to Abingdon in 2013 and live in Fitzharrys Road at the back of the old house (and with an even better kitchen!). Richard still does engineering consultancy work for Balfour Beatty Rail.

A professional engineer, Richard also has always had a wider interest in architecture and structures, and in aesthetics and industrial design. He therefore hopes to combine practical help in maintaining and developing the Abbey Buildings with sensitivity to their visual appeal, and take a keen interest in the visual amenity of this beautiful town.

<b>Contact us by telephone or email</b>			
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September 5th -13th  2015  
**Abingdon Heritage open days**

## **Talks at St Nicolas Church**

Thursday 10th September at 12:30

Victorian Abingdon in Pictures by Ruth Weinberg

Friday 11th September at 19:30

Albert Park : The Development of a Victorian Suburb  
by Bryan Brown & Jackie Smith

Latest Events!



## **Walks from Abingdon Market Place**

Sunday 13th September

Booking on the day from 10:30 at the Market Place Stall

11:00 Abingdon 1556 Boundary Walk (2 hours and 4 miles)

11:00 Wilts and Berks Canal Walk (2 hours and 4 miles)

14:00 Lost Abbey Walk (1.5 hours and 1 mile)

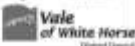
14:00 St Helen and the Almshouses (1 hour and 1 mile)

## **Exhibition in Community Shop**

Saturday 5th -Saturday 12th September

Organised by The Friends of Abingdon

supported by:



**The Friends of Abingdon Civic Society**  
invite you to our



Community FreeSpace Open Evening  
Thursday 17 September

5:30 - 8:30pm

Drop in at 18 Bury Street (opposite H Samuels) at any time to talk to us about what this space can offer your community group or voluntary sector organisation.

Enjoy a special viewing of the Fitzharrys School Art Exhibition which will be on display at FreeSpace at that time - our thanks to them for allowing us to share it.

For further information please email  
[freespace@friendsofabingdon.org.uk](mailto:freespace@friendsofabingdon.org.uk)

The Friends of Abingdon,  
caring for our past, present and future  
[www.friendsofabingdon.org.uk](http://www.friendsofabingdon.org.uk)



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