

## **Civic Pride – Building on Heritage**

'Civic Pride' is important to communities: people need to feel good about the place in which they live or work, and to have pride in how the area looks and feels. When people are asked what they like most about Abingdon, they usually mention the river, the Abbey Meadow and gardens, the historic buildings and streets, and the County Hall Museum. Abingdon has a lot to be proud of.

The Great Abbey of Abingdon dominated the life of the town for over 500 years, until its destruction by Henry VIII in 1538. Responsibility for town government then passed to merchants and philanthropists, and the town prospered, becoming a borough in 1556 and county town of Berkshire until the 1860s. However, the failure to take advantage of the coming of the railways in the 19th century left Abingdon sidelined.

Many of the things we and our visitors enjoy now, such as the medieval houses along East St Helen Street, the Long Gallery and the Unicorn Theatre, the Guildhall complex, the 17th century County Hall (now the Museum), the Almshouses, and the 18th century merchants houses, are a legacy of those centuries of success. The parks and gardens created more than 100 years ago are as popular as ever with locals and visitors.

All of these contribute to what Abingdon is now: we enjoy them today because they have been cared for by previous generations over hundreds of years. Abingdon is not alone in having such a legacy, and in 1967 the government introduced Conservation Areas to help protect heritage in towns like ours. Local Authorities (in our case the District Council) have a responsibility to look after these areas, keeping them under review and preventing inappropriate development. Our town centre was one of the first designated Conservation Areas (in 1968) and was followed some 10 years later by the Albert Park area and the Northcourt area. The Friends of Abingdon Civic Society, who own and maintain the Abbey Buildings, have as a wider objective "to help preserve what is best worth retaining amongst [Abingdon's] old buildings and to encourage new building worthy of its civic tradition and character", and so are very concerned that three key buildings in the Town Centre Conservation Area are under threat.

Old Abbey House has been empty for three years and is visibly deteriorating. It belongs to the District Council so its future is within their control. They have had offers to lease or buy it, but now propose to develop it as affordable housing – it is not clear whether this will involve demolition or conversion.

Visitors arriving over the Thames bridge see the boarded-up Upper Reaches Hotel. It is a prime location for a riverside hotel, but there is a stand-off between the site owners (the Vale

of White Horse DC) and the leaseholders about the future of the building. Meanwhile the gateway to our beautiful town is blighted.

Civic pride is not just about old buildings; it is also about community life in the town. The third empty building is the Guildhall which has been closed for over two years. The Town Council plans to re-open the historic part this year, but not the modern Abbey Hall, so there will still be no large central community space in our growing town. The plans for the historic part include demolishing the beautiful 18th century staircase to make room for a lift to facilitate access for people with restricted mobility. This is a laudable aim, but alternative solutions that do not destroy our heritage should be considered.

The responsibility for ensuring that the legacy of a thousand years of Abingdon's history is conserved and protected lies with our town and district councils. The decisions that these councils take during this coming year must ensure that Abingdon people can continue to take pride in the legacy which they have inherited.

*Bryan Brown*

**Chairman, Friends of Abingdon  
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