

Herald Article – April 2019

Civic Pride – Old Abbey House

Abingdon can be justifiably proud of its refurbished Guildhall. People can watch a film in the Abbey Cinema, or maybe just have a coffee or a drink at the bar, while the beautiful historic Guildhall rooms are once again available for community use.

Sadly, just a few yards away, the equally historic Old Abbey House has lain empty and decaying for almost five years, in the heart of the town's Conservation Area.

The original house here was built in the 16th century for William Blacknall, a wealthy miller who bought much of the site of Abingdon Abbey after the abbey was closed in 1538. The house had several subsequent owners, was renamed Abbey House in the late 18th century, and was altered and enlarged several times.

In the mid-19th century, Abbey House was acquired by Edward [Edwin?] Trendell, an Abingdon wine merchant. He created a formal garden complete with mock Abbey ruins, all recently restored with help from the Heritage Lottery Fund.

The last private owner was the Bishop of Reading. He lived there from about 1900 until his death in 1922, when the house and grounds were bought by the Borough of Abingdon. The house became offices for the Borough Council, while *"on the aesthetic side the town [acquired] a historical site that ought to be in public hands"*.

In 1974, ownership passed to the newly-created Vale of White Horse District Council. The Vale occupied it until 2000, when their 'new' Abbey House offices were opened. Abbey House was then renamed 'Old Abbey House', and became Abingdon Town Council's offices again.

The Town Council used the building until 2014, when the Vale gave them notice to quit. Since then, apart from a short period of temporary use, Old Abbey House has stood empty and unused.

Two attempts by the Vale to sell Old Abbey House, in 2014 and 2015, resulted in bids for both residential development and community use - but, despite prolonged discussions, no deal was ever completed.

Since then, several potential buyers have expressed an interest, but the Vale has responded that Old Abbey House is no longer for sale. In 2017, the Vale announced that the building was to be used for social housing but, 18 months later, nothing has happened. Since 2014, the empty building has deteriorated alarmingly.

Old Abbey House is not currently listed, but Historic England says it is "of strong local interest given its date of origin and the quality and range of its surviving fittings". The Vale recognises its historical importance, and their own policy is to "ensure that vacant historic

buildings are appropriately re-used as soon as possible to prevent deterioration of condition”.

Old Abbey House could become an asset to Abingdon, complementing the adjacent Guildhall complex nearby (and maybe even the Upper Reaches Hotel). Unless something is done soon, though, it may be too late to save the building, and another piece of Abingdon’s rich history will be lost for ever.