



# THE FRIENDS OF ABINGDON

## Abingdon's Civic Society

Caring for our Past, Present and Future

### Newsletter – Summer 2009

Welcome to our new-style newsletter. We aim to publish it 3 times a year and to cover not only our own activities but also other topics which fall within our founding aim: "To arouse in all the people of Abingdon and neighbourhood a lively and practical interest in the town and its setting". Do please let us know what you think of it and give us your suggestions for future content.

#### Chairman's remarks

As reported in the last newsletter, Dorothy Rockall has stood down as Chair after 14 years in that role and 25 years overall. Our heartfelt thanks go out to her - she will be a hard act to follow. Thanks also to Sylvia Bird for her 8 years hard work as Secretary and also for agreeing to remain active as our Vice Chair.

These are difficult times for market towns such as Abingdon and as you will see from elsewhere in this newsletter they are also difficult for Civic Societies such as ours. The Friends' members have a wealth of experience and energy: during the coming year we will be seeking to expand the ways in which we harness this to conserve what we love about the town, but also to help others who are working to revitalise it.

#### AGM report

The AGM on 9<sup>th</sup> June heard fulsome tributes to our outgoing Chair, Dorothy Rockall and to Pauline Burren who after 30 years of almost single-handedly running the annual Craft Fair has handed it over to a new group. The Craft Fair has brought thousands of visitors to the Abbey Buildings, and been a major source of revenue for the Friends.

John Burren reported that modernisation of the technical equipment in the Unicorn Theatre was now complete, with new house and stage lights and a data projector and screen which will make the Theatre an ideal venue for talks and films.

Income from hiring the Abbey Buildings had increased from £9300 in 2007 to £14700 in 2008.

After the formal business we had an impressive demonstration of the new projector then were entertained by the Abbey Brass Training Band and enjoyed a delicious buffet, prepared by our hardworking curator Jenny Berrell.



#### Friends News

*Outings:* This summer Pauline Burren organised two excellent outings for members.

On 12 May we went to the wonderful gardens at The Manor House at Bledlow which have been developed since 1969 by Lord and the late Lady Carrington. There are a number of formal gardens around the house separated by hedges and including a 2½ acre sculpture garden. Across the road from the Manor are a further 4 acres of water garden started in 1973 on the site of three old watercress beds. The steep valley sides are heavily planted with shrubs and herbaceous plants and thirteen springs emerge to create the headwaters of the River Lyde. It was a lovely late Spring Day and the immaculately maintained gardens a real joy to see.

On 24 June we went to Rycote Chapel and House near Thame. A full report is on page 3.

*Abbey Buildings:* Peter Clarke has joined the Council to advise on the structure and maintenance of the buildings – more on page 5.

The number of visitors to buildings in the first half year was higher than last year and numbers have remained steady in July and August. Bookings for the Unicorn and Long Gallery are very healthy throughout 2009.

*Picture:* The oil painting of St. Helen's Wharf after a watercolour by Waite which has languished in the Green Room from time immemorial has now been beautifully restored by Mr Rooth of Bradford on Avon and rehung to great effect. Do call in to see it.

## Abingdon news



*Abbey Gardens:* The Vale of White Horse District Council has been given Green Flag status for the restored Victorian gardens in Abingdon. Green Flag status is a national standard awarded to the best green spaces in the country. To qualify for the award, spaces must meet strict criteria which mean they are open to the public and free to use and must provide a clean, safe and a welcoming place in which to spend some time.

Abbey Gardens has been transformed into how it looked in its Victorian heyday thanks to a major restoration project which took almost five years to complete. It was funded by a £826,000 grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund and £390,000 from the Vale.

*Guildhall:* The Vale Council is continuing to look at various options for the future management of the Guildhall in Abingdon, and is consulting parties that have an interest in its future operation. The review is being led by Councillor Richard Webber and Strategic Director Matt Prosser and there will be a meeting in late September to consider the findings of the discussions to date. These comments will then be fed into a report to the Vale Executive later in the year. The Friends Council will shortly be discussing how they should contribute to the review.

*Abbey Shopping Centre:* The Vale Council has announced that this is to be the new name for the precinct: short term work to get new tenants into the centre is progressing well with a toyshop opening in September and WH Smiths before Christmas. The Vale are also working with Scottish Widows to develop longer term plans for the shopping centre.

*Old Gaol:* Whilst there may not appear to be much work on the ground at present we are told that a huge amount of legal, planning and infrastructure work is in hand and significant progress is being made on the various permissions that are needed to enable the main development to go ahead.

*Kings Head & Bell:* planning permission has now been granted for renovation and extension and work is under way. The owners are a small company called Foundation Inns who appear to specialise in creating character pubs with good food in old buildings.

*Shop front grants:* Abingdon shops may be eligible for financial assistance with improvements to their appearance. Shops within the Abingdon Conservation area can request a grant through Abingdon's Joint Environmental Trust for minor works or major restoration projects to traditional and listed buildings. More information from the District Council or

[environmental.trust@whitehorsedc.gov.uk](mailto:environmental.trust@whitehorsedc.gov.uk)

*Posters and banners:* in response to queries from the Friends, the Vale have confirmed that the formal position is that their consent is required for posters and banners on public or highways property. However they have also said that they will not rigorously enforce breaches of this requirement where the advertising is on behalf of a community or not-for-profit event and where the advertising is not excessive, either in terms of numbers of posters or length of time for which they are displayed. This appears to be a green light for reasonable advertising by community groups.

*Note:* this is a selection of news about the town and the topics will vary from one issue to the next. Coverage of other topics including the Museum redevelopment can be found on the Town and Vale Council websites and in the Town Crier magazine. In the next issue we hope to be able to report news from the "Choose Abingdon" partnership, which was mentioned in our May newsletter.

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### Camino request

The owner of the Camino Restaurant in Bath Street is trying to compile a history of the building and has asked whether anyone can help with information or pictures of previous uses for the site (13-15 Bath Street). So far he knows it has been a TV shop, greengrocers, butchers and latterly a series of restaurants (Lamberts, Il Camino, Don Giovanni and now Camino). He has heard rumours of a hat shop but can't find anything on that. If anyone can help please contact Ryan Cox, Camino Restaurant, 13-15 Bath Street OX14 3QH, telephone 01235 532211 or e-mail [ryan@camino-restaurant.com](mailto:ryan@camino-restaurant.com)

## **The Civic Society Initiative by Michael Matthews**

As members may have seen, the Civic Trust, of which we have been subscribing members for many years, went into administration in April.

The Civic Society Initiative was launched on 1 June 2009 by Griff Rhys Jones and Tony Burton with the support of Campaign to Protect Rural England, The National Trust and several other well-known bodies. It has been established to address four main questions:

- What is the mission of the civic society movement in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?
- What is needed to achieve this mission by way of an effective network of local groups and a strong national and local presence?
- How is this organised and funded ?
- How can we best maintain the existing civic society network and promote its value to itself and externally in the meantime?

In essence the purpose of the Civic Society Initiative is simple: to establish the means within twelve months to ensure the provision of a national voice and support for the civic society movement.

John Burren and I attended an Open Forum for local groups at High Wycombe on 25<sup>th</sup> July. There was general agreement that a new umbrella organisation was very much needed and those present put forward their ideas of what they would like to receive from such an organisation. There will be a further conference at which I hope we shall be represented in late September to bring together the results of many more open forums.

I also hope that we shall be able to arrange for Tony Burton to come to the Unicorn next Spring to speak to us all and inspire us as he did the forum with his vision of what a good civic society can and should do.



## **Rycote Visit – 24 June by Dorothy Rockall**

“Flaming June” was an apt description of the day Pauline Burren took 30 of us to Rycote Park near Thame, the ancestral home of the Earls of Abingdon. The Domesday Book records the owner in 1086 as Geoffrey de Mandeville but in 1682 one of the then owners of Rycote Palace was created first Earl of Abingdon by King Charles II. It remained the seat of the Earls of Abingdon until 1745, when a fire killed the ten year old heir to the title in his bed and the family decamped to Wytham. The existing house is on the site of the former stable block.

We were welcomed at the barn which Bernard and Sarah Taylor have converted to a concert venue. Using money acquired in the banking world they deliberately looked for landed property in the Home Counties where their international contacts could continue their networking in an atmosphere reminiscent of English stately homes.

It was immediately obvious that the place exuded wealth: the craftsmanship involved in quarrying and laying large flagstones for the floor demands precision which does not come cheap.

The adjacent formal garden is in front of the house which has about 30 bedrooms with Georgian sash windows. Its stone walls have been recently reconstructed with a chevron pattern in brick which will look better after several decades of weathering. This aggressive neatness was evident throughout, not least in the vegetable garden which belied the statement that there are only three outdoor staff.

At first sight the chapel looks to be a Victorian construction but it was originally established in 1449 as a chantry chapel with accommodation for 3 priests. The yew tree to the south of the chapel is claimed to have been planted for the coronation of King Stephen in 1135.

Among the box pews in the nave the most notable feature is a pair of canopied pews forming a chancel screen. One has a ceiling representing the sky with gold stars and a tiny stairway leading to a minstrels gallery above. The other has a domed roof with remains of religious paintings and carvings. At the west end another minstrel’s gallery has an underside with a painted sky and gold stars.

Before leaving we saw the latest modification to the floor between the canopied pews – a pair of doors leading to the crypt in readiness for when the Taylors arrange the present Earl’s funeral.

## Forthcoming Friends events

### The Medieval Banquet - 10th September

The Long Gallery, the Abbey Buildings.

Come and enjoy a fun occasion plus a four course meal with wine. Plenty of fun and action with Abingdon Drama Club's chance to dress up and be entertained.

£29.50pp. Proceeds to two charities (all explained on the enclosed flyer) or talk to Pauline on 521873 or Jenny on 553701

### The all new Abingdon Craft Fair 2009 15<sup>th</sup> - 18th October & 22nd -25th October

Open daily 10am to 5pm but with both Sundays closing at 4pm.

Please support the fair, a major source of income for the Friends.

### It'll do him more good than going to school Thursday, 5th November 2009 7.30pm (doors open at 7pm)

A talk in the Unicorn Theatre by Liz Woolley on Child labour in 19th century. Oxfordshire.

Tickets: £3 to members £5 to guests to include refreshments, more details: 01235 521873

### Friends Christmas Party Thursday 10th December 2009

Christmas music and refreshments in the Abbey Buildings. Put it in your diary now – details nearer the time.

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## Unicorn Theatre events

### Drama

Dr Faustus by Christopher Marlowe  
16 – 19 September: Abingdon Drama Club

Lady Windermere's Fan by Oscar Wilde  
23 – 26 September: Breakaleg Productions

Unseen Academicals by Terry Pratchett  
17 – 21 November: Studio Theatre Club

### Music at the Unicorn

11 September – Reg Meuross

1 October – Show of Hands – sold out

6 November – Spiers and Boden

11 December – Dylan Project

## Other events in Abingdon

### Abingdon Revealed – Heritage Weekend 10–13 September

The main Open Day is on Saturday 12 September with free entry to many of the town's historic buildings, some of which are not normally open to the public. There will also be activities in the County Hall and Guildhall and displays and entertainment in the Market Place.

Other events over this weekend include:

- The Abbey Buildings will be open from 10.00 – 16.00 on all four days.
- Coseners House Grotto will be open (times to be advised).
- The "Lost Abbey of Abingdon" Project will be conducting two geophysical surveys during the weekend, one over the buried ruins of the Abbey, and one near the ruins of Barton Court.
- Walk round the 1556 Chartered Bounds – 11.30 Sunday, meet in Market Place
- Fun in the Parks – family event in the Abbey Grounds. 14.00 – 16.00 Sunday

More details are in the enclosed leaflet and the latest updates can be found at [www.abingdonheritage.co.uk](http://www.abingdonheritage.co.uk) or by calling at the Abingdon Information Centre, Old Abbey House.

### 11th September - 10th January 2010

### "The History and Future of the County Hall - Courtroom, Venue, Museum, Icon"

New exhibition at the Abingdon Museum, celebrating the 300-year history of the building and displaying the plans for its future.

### 20 November - Mayor's Charity Quiz

Entry forms available from the Information Centre

### 26 November – Charter Day

History and heritage events – mainly for schoolchildren. Organised by Abingdon Town Council – details from the Information Centre.

### 17 December – Mayor's Christmas Party

For the over-70s. Organised by Abingdon Town Council- details from the Information Centre.

For up to date information on a wider range of events in Abingdon see the "What's on in Abingdon" Diary at <http://www.abingdondiary.co.uk/> or the Town Council website <http://www.abingdon.gov.uk/>

For an informative but light-hearted online commentary on events in the town – and lovely pictures – see "This Abingdon" at <http://www.abingdonblog.co.uk/>

## "Who's Who" in the Friends of Abingdon

A series of occasional pen portraits of those who are active in our Society

### **Michael Matthews - Chair**

Michael is our new Chair, but by no means new to civic life in Abingdon or to the Friends.

He was born in Abingdon - at the old Warren Maternity Home - and has lived in the town nearly all his life. After National Service in the RAF and studying at the Royal Agricultural College at Cirencester, he spent some time at an agricultural company in Wiltshire before returning to Abingdon to join the family firm of Harris & Matthews, then operating from the Old Gaol.

He served on Abingdon Borough Council from 1964 till 1976 as councillor for Abbey Ward and in 1973 he was elected to the new Vale of White Horse District Council. He served there until 1991, with periods as chair of the Recreation and Amenities Committee and the Planning Committee.

He became a Governor of Christ's Hospital of Abingdon in 1988 and is now one of the senior governors, serving as Master of the Hospital from 1995-97. In 1998 he was appointed an Honorary Freeman of the Town of Abingdon. He has served many years on the Council of the Friends having been brought on board by the redoubtable Dr. Joan Harcourt Norris, a former Mayor of the Borough.

Michael continues to be involved in other organisations in the town including chairing the Abingdon Horticultural Society, with which his family has now been connected for over 100 years.

### **Glynne Butt - new Council member**

Glynne has lived in Abingdon for over 40 years. She had a career in teaching and until retirement in 2004, was Head of Our Lady's School.

Her closer involvement in Abingdon civic life began with her husband's election to the Town and District Councils and she was Mayoress of Abingdon in 1996-7. She is an accomplished musician and plays an active role in the musical life of the town. For two years from 2006, she chaired the *Community in the Old Gaol* Campaign, which sought to secure part of the Old Gaol as a community facility for the town.

She now feels that her keen interest in the welfare of Abingdon is best pursued through its Civic Society.

### **Peter Clarke - new Council member**

Peter is a retired professional builder and member of the 'Chartered Institute of building'. Through-out his career he was principally concerned with historic building maintenance, repair and additions.

He has always been a keen sportsman and can still be seen on the golf course trying to remember how the game should be played!

He is a past president of Abingdon Rotary Club, and is a current sub-committee chair. A life long member of various social organisations, he is active in most.

Having been elected to the Friends of Abingdon Council, he hopes to bring his experience to bear in the management and upgrading of the properties within our remit. The immediate aim is to implement a protective maintenance programme to the external fabric of the buildings, followed by a similar exercise for the internal spaces.

### **Bill Wivell**

We were sad to hear in July of the death of Bill Wivell, a former Mayor of Abingdon and longstanding member and supporter of the Friends. We have sent the Society's condolences to his widow Jill, and there will be a full tribute in the next newsletter.

## Message from the Editor

This newsletter is being sent by email to those who have told us they are happy to receive communications that way. If any other recipients would like to receive it electronically in future please email me at the address below.

Although primarily aimed at members of the Friends, please feel free to pass the newsletter on to anyone who is interested in the town or in the topics covered.

If you have any comments or suggestions for improvements or future content, or if you would like to help produce future issues, please get in touch.

*Hester Hand*

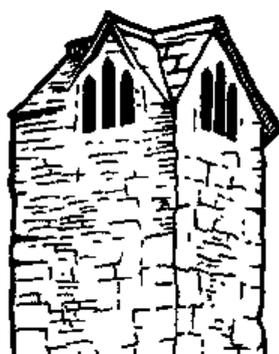
## Friends Council

Following the elections at the AGM, the full membership of the Friends of Abingdon Council is:

Chairman: Michael Matthews	01235 520027	mw.matthews@tiscali.co.uk
Vice-chair: Sylvia Bird	01235 521162	eric.bird4@tesco.net
Secretary: Tony Legge	01235 520768	tonylegge@btinternet.com
Treasurer: John Burren	01235 525556	johnburren@hotmail.com
Membership Secretary and Events Organiser: Pauline Burren	01235 521873	paulineburren@maryholland.co.uk
Newsletter Editor: Hester Hand	01235 529044	hester@hand-abingdon.net
Abbey Buildings Curator and Bookings: Jenny Berrell	01235 553701 01235 525339	

## Elected Members

Caroline Bullock	Glynne Butt	Peter Clarke	Elizabeth Drury
Richard Grimsdale-Yates		Audrey Hasnip	David Howard



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