

# THE FRIENDS OF ABINGDON

## Abingdon's Civic Society



### Newsletter – August 2013

#### Chairman's Message

The current year is proving a busy one for The Friends. Since our last newsletter we have had a second, and very successful Commemoration Lunch at The Cosener's House with excellent food and service. This year we were delighted to welcome, after a long absence, our President the Earl of Abingdon who drove down with the Countess from his home in Scotland and tells me that they much enjoyed their visit. We were able to take them on a tour of the Buildings and show them our more recent developments. Unfortunately time prevented them staying for our great gala performance of "Semele" that evening. The too was an outstanding success and our thanks go to Glynne Butt and her team for all the effort that they put in to mount a very memorable performance.

Subsequently we have had a successful outing to Sissinghurst to see the lovely gardens there and we are looking forward to the trip to Dulwich Art Gallery and Eltham Palace which is in September.

Our AGM saw the departure of Tony Legge from the secretaryship. Tony put tremendous work into his office and we were very sorry when he decided to stand down - we owe him a big vote of thanks for all that he has done. However I am sure that Hester Hand who has taken up the burden will be able to maintain Tony's high standards and we wish her well. Barbara Beach joined the council as our new membership secretary. We also appointed, for the first time in many years, a new vice -president, David Clark, who has done so much interesting work on dating the buildings and uncovering their history, and a new Auditor in our old friend Kevin Senior. It is good to see new faces coming along and we welcome them all.

Planning continues to be an important part of our work and we have been active, but so far unsuccessful, in opposing the planned development along Drayton Road; we have condemned the design of the new development in Stert St. although we accept the development

concept. We have been in correspondence with Greene King over the loss of historic Pub Signs and have been able to save at least the concept of pictorial signs in the conservation areas. We are having active discussions with the Town Council over their plans to redevelop the Guildhall and are pleased that our comments are being well received. Heritage Weekend, ably organised by Alastair Fear, now comes under our banner and we shall be opening our buildings for the weekend. This is always an excellent time to discover many of Abingdon's hidden treasures.

Work on the buildings under the excellent charge of Peter Clarke continues steadily and Mike Ward is producing some new displays to celebrate the history of the Unicorn Theatre. Other plans for the buildings are progressing slowly and we hope soon to start work on the Undercroft.

I am pleased to report that use of the buildings is increasing steadily and Jenny is doing an excellent job juggling the needs of a widening variety of hirers. We now have a group looking at the best way of balancing public access and hirers' needs. Lettings are our main source of income and very necessary to the future care of the buildings.

We sadly lost one of our longest serving members with the death at the age of 95 of Harry Tout in May. Harry had been a staunch supporter for many years and had been a pillar of the Unicorn Theatre.

Later in this newsletter you will see more detailed reports of some of our activities from members of the Council and I do most sincerely thank them all for their work and support. Without Pauline organising our events, Bobbie and Alan watching the planning applications, Pat organising the walks and sourcing goods for sale – not to mention all the other jobs that get done - the Friends of Abingdon would be a far less significant organisation.

*Michael Matthews*

## **'Semele' at the Unicorn**

It all began with a chance encounter on a music course at 'Jackdaws' in Somerset. At tea one afternoon, my eye alighted on a poster advertising auditions for a week-long workshop on Handel's opera 'Semele'. This was to culminate in two performances involving local schoolchildren, with the lead roles played by advanced opera students from music colleges. The Friends, I knew, were wondering how to celebrate the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Unicorn and in a moment of serendipity, I rang the director.....

I think she was initially doubtful about our ability to deliver, but the Friends liked the idea and a small group of us was formed to translate it into reality. Opera is expensive and we realised that the only way it could possibly pay was to make it a high price Gala Performance and to secure considerable grant aid and sponsorship. The Friends kindly agreed to underwrite losses up to a certain sum, and while we hoped not to call on them, (and in fact did not need to) this was hugely reassuring. We designed posters, found sponsors and advertisers, gathered information for a Gala Programme, liaised with 'Jackdaws', put together an orchestra and chorus, sold tickets, organised accommodation, selected a caterer - and tasted several different bottles of Prosecco. We wanted everything to be right.

We were surprised how little was known in Abingdon about Alan and Frances Kitching and the Unicorn's unique role in the revival of Handel operas in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Those early performances were meticulously true to the original Handelian style both in music and staging - Alan would have had it no other way. While we wanted our venture to recognise and celebrate his achievements, Jackdaws offered quite a different production: Jupiter was a pop star and instead of a shower of gold, arrived in a helicopter. Handel's nymphs became his screaming fans and Semele admired her own reflection, not in a mirror but on an i-Pad.

The performance was a sell-out and the general consensus was that it had been a huge success. We, the working group, felt proud of a job well done and we hope that the Friends felt the Unicorn's 60<sup>th</sup> was celebrated in appropriate style. Writing in The Guardian in 2009, Nicholas Kenyon, Managing Director of the Barbican and former Director of the BBC Proms, said 'The pioneering activities of the Unicorn Theatre

in Abingdon from the 1950s on...are now part of operatic history.' I hope we have added a small historical postscript of our own.

*Glynnne Butt*

## **AGM**

There was a good turnout at this year's AGM on 12 June. The reports presented to the meeting and draft minutes are available on our website or on request from the Secretary. Following the formal business we had a very enjoyable talk from Jane Bowen, Curator of the County Hall Museum about its success in the year since it re-opened (over 30,000 visitors) and their ambitious plans for continuing improvements.

## **Sissinghurst Castle visit**

Sunday 23 June saw an early departure with everybody on time and we set off for Kent, arriving at Sissinghurst Castle just in time for coffee before the gardens opened.

The site is divided into 'garden rooms', each with its own theme or colour. The rose garden was at its best, as fortunately the roses were two weeks late due to the cold spring and Tower Lawn was impressive with an expansive lawn, colourful borders and wall displays. The cottage garden had great appeal with its scents and colours. By climbing the tower you could see the complete layout of the gardens and note those 'rooms' that you had not yet visited. A walk through the Nuttery, serene and peaceful in summer but full of flowering bulbs in spring, brought one to the Herb Garden.

A short stroll from the flower gardens was the vegetable garden with many neat plots providing vegetables for the restaurant. An appetising buffet lunch was included in our visit and this provided a welcome break and an opportunity to meet with our group in a reserved area of the restaurant and discuss various aspects of the gardens.

The current exhibition portrays the story of the purchase of the castle in 1932 by Vita Sackville-West and her husband Harold Nicholson. Together, they created the gardens which now are tended by eight gardeners and many National Trust volunteers.

A tiring but thoroughly enjoyable day.

*Sylvia Bird*

## May Bank Holiday Walks

It was a glorious day this spring bank holiday, so we were delighted to organise another event like the one enjoyed by about 150 people on Jubilee Monday last year.

The *Abingdon Waterways* walk to Sutton Courtenay and back via the Ock and the Thames was the longest at 8½ miles and was led by Pat Lonergan wearing his Ramblers hat. This walk is well known to Abingdon people, but look out in the local book shops for the illustrated guide produced by the Choose Abingdon Partnership.

*Radley Lakes* were saved by the Friends of Radley Lakes and many of them, including David Guyoncourt, are involved with caring for and preserving the wild area between Abingdon and the Lakes. David led a 5 mile nature walk through this area and FRL provided tea and cakes at the lakes.

The *Ock Valley* walk leads from St Helen's church, behind Ock Street, to the Drayton Road. This and other natural paths around the town need maintaining and Eleanor Dangerfield and her Green Gym colleagues keep fit by working hard on this. This time Eleanor led a 3½ mile walk along the Ock valley to New Cut Mill and back along the line of the old Wilts and Berks canal.

The shortest walk was a historical tour around *Abingdon Abbey* led by Judy White, one of the people responsible for the "Lost Abbey" trail. The nine boards start at St Nicolas Church and tell the story of the Abbey through the buildings which remain. There were several groups for this walk and other leaders were Patricia Toner, Anne Dodd, Ian Jardine and Angela Waterhouse from Abingdon and District Twin Towns Association. The tour ended at the Long Gallery in the Abbey Buildings where people could see the Timelines and enjoy the refreshments we provided.

For youngsters and those who wished to explore Abingdon at their leisure there were *Friends of Abingdon Photo Quiz* sheets which outline three walks with interesting and quirky bits of the town to spot ... that is until the wind came and scattered them and almost blew our gazebo away! However, all is not lost because the quiz sheets are available to download from our website where there is also lots of information about the places pictured.

Thanks to all our guides, to Hugh Bishop who opened St Nicolas Church and lent us tables and chairs and to Neil Hancox, Lindsey Hines, Laurel Symons and Alan Bryden who worked behind the scenes to make this a day to remember. Look out for more walks on Heritage Weekend 14-15 September.

*Pat Bryden*

## Planning

### Drayton Road development

As expected, Hallam Land Management appealed the decision by the Vale of White Horse District Council to refuse permission for the development of the Drayton Road site. The Public Enquiry was held over four days in May and was not a very edifying spectacle. Despite all the evidence presented about the traffic congestion, the Inspector accepted Hallam's argument that the development was necessary because of the shortfall in the five-year housing supply in the Vale, and upheld the appeal subject to the installation of a new pedestrian crossing in Ock Street and movement of the existing crossing in Marcham Road further west. This is supposed to produce breaks in the traffic flow along Ock Street and Marcham Road, thus allowing traffic to exit Drayton Road more easily! I fear that all it will do is result in longer queues back into the town centre.

We have sent a summary of the Drayton Road saga to Civic Voice who had asked for examples where the wishes of local people have been overridden by the drive for economic growth. Let us hope that they can use it when briefing MPs on the problems of localism versus planning.

### 57-59 Stert Street and Abbey Court

An application has been made to convert the offices on this site into housing. Although the Friends did not object to the proposal in principle, the design was ugly and completely out of character with its surroundings so we objected and requested that the applicants be asked to produce a design more in keeping with the area.

### Pub signs

Greene King have been replacing the picture signs on pubs outside the conservation area with a corporate logo on a garish maroon background. They have produced a better design for the Broad Face, incorporating the original picture sign on a dark green background. Following advice from CAMRA, we have written to Greene King and the

Vale's Chief Planning Officer expressing our concern, and requesting that the picture signs should be retained or, if they must be replaced, to use a similar approach to that adopted for the Broad Face. Greene King have replied, noting our concerns and stating that they are considering re-installing picture signs at some of their more historic pubs. This is encouraging, but we must be vigilant.

### **Proposed development off Radley Road**

Radley College have submitted an outline application for a development of about 50 houses on the triangle of land at the junction of Radley Road and Twelve Acre Drive. The Friends have not objected to this in principle. However, this site is designated Green Belt, although it is in rather an anomalous location as it is south of Twelve Acre Drive, whereas the rest of the Green Belt in this area is north of Twelve Acre Drive. We have submitted comments expressing concern that, should this development be given planning permission, it should not form a precedent for encroachment on the Green Belt and that every effort should be made to replace it with equivalent space elsewhere.

*Bobbie Nichols*

### **Guildhall redevelopment**

In April the Town Council published its long-awaited proposals for redeveloping the Abbey Hall area of the Guildhall. The Friends are examining these very closely and have already had one meeting with those leading the project. We welcome the intention to improve the current unsightly and impractical building but are still considering our views on how the proposal fits with the Conservation area. Members are encouraged to look at the plans and let us and the Council have their views.

### **Heritage Open Days 14- 15 September**

Abingdon Heritage Open days have been run for several years now by Alastair Fear, and before that by Audrey and Keith Hasnip. Originally they were run under the auspices of the Town Council but for the last few years the Friends have taken formal responsibility, with some financial support from the Town Council. On a national level the programme is managed by the Heritage Open Days National Partnership, with funding from English Heritage.

Alastair is supported by an informal group of volunteers, mainly from the Friends, AAAHS,

Museum Friends and Morris Dancers – and most importantly by the owners of historic properties in the town, many of which are not normally open to the public, and some of which are people's own homes.

This year's programme is enclosed: there is an eclectic range of properties and events. The Friends' main contributions are the Abbey Buildings and the Heritage Walks. Many of the open buildings will be very familiar, but look carefully – there are some hidden gems there! Look out also for the Heritage Walks on both days, the boat trips on Saturday to look at our historic riverside buildings, and the Heritage Photographs Display in the Community Shop which will run from the previous Saturday. (If you have any unusual old photographs which you could lend us for this, please get in touch).

If any readers would like to help in any way with the Heritage Open Days, either this year or in future, do please get in touch with Alastair Fear, Bobbie Nichols or me.

*Hester Hand*

### **Visit to Dulwich Picture Gallery and Eltham Palace and Garden - Sunday, 29th September**

#### **Dulwich Picture Gallery**

holds one of the world's most important collections of European old master paintings. A tour guide has been booked but we can make our own way around the gallery if we wish. As the Gallery cafe is quite small we are booked for our lunch nearby.

#### **Eltham Palace and Garden**

was in medieval times an important royal palace. In the 1930s the ruined remains of the palace site were bought by Stephen and Virginia Courtauld who restored the great hall and incorporated it into an ultra modern Art Deco style house.

The gardens also followed the 30s new style. We have not booked a tour guide, as it is very clearly signed to guide you round the building and gardens. This gives you the chance to wander at will for a given time before we board our coach for home.

We have a few places left – please complete and the enclosed application form and return it to: Mrs P. Burren, 18 Norman Avenue, Abingdon OX14 2HQ

## Friends of Abingdon Events

*Heritage Open Days: Saturday 14 – Sunday 15 September* –programme enclosed

*Dulwich Picture Gallery and Eltham Palace visits – Sunday 29 September*  
Booking now: for details see page 4

*Autumn Craft Fair – Contemporary Arts, Crafts and Design. Thurs 17–Sun 20 and Thurs 24 – Sun 27 October*  
Discount on entry price for FoA members on production of membership card.  
[www.abingdoncraftfair.com/](http://www.abingdoncraftfair.com/)

## 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/)

*"The Nightingales" a comedy by Peter Quilter presented by Breakaleg Productions*  
Wednesday 11 – Saturday 14 September

*"William Tell" based on the play by Peter Shaffer - presented by Abingdon Drama Club*  
Wednesday 25 – Saturday 28 September

*"The Rince Cycle" by Terry Pratchett – presented by the Studio Theatre Club*  
Tuesday 26– Saturday 30 November

### *Folk at the Unicorn*

Concerts approximately once a month – see [www.folkattheunicorn.co.uk/](http://www.folkattheunicorn.co.uk/) or Whats On Diaries for programme.

## Other Abingdon-on-Thames events

*Photographic Competition: Exhibition of winning entries* Mon 16 – Sat 28 September, Community Shop

*Charity Barbecue at the Abbey*  
Saturday 28 September – 12.30 – 15.30  
see below for details

*Community Apple Pressing* – free, bring your own apples. Community Shop Monday 30 September – Saturday 12 October

*Woodcarving Exhibition and Demonstrations*  
Mon 14 – Sat 19 October, Community Shop

*Abingdon Artists Autumn Exhibition*  
Mon 21 – Sat 26 October, St Nicolas Church

*Remembrance Day Parade, Service and Ceremony* Sunday 10 November from 10.00

*Christmas Extravaganza: Town Centre*  
Saturday 30 November 11.45 - 17.30

## Markets

- *Local Excellence Market:* Saturdays 31 August and 23 November
- *Local Business Showcases:* Saturdays 21 September and 19 October
- *French Market:* Thursday 26 – Saturday 28 September
- *Farmers' Market:* Fridays 16 August, 20 September, 18 October, 15 November and 19 December
- *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](http://www.abingdon.gov.uk/community-services/clubs-societies)

### **Charity Barbecue at the Abbey**

The Soroptimists of Oxford and District, fundraising in aid of The Abingdon Bridge (TAB), invite you to a Barbecue to be held in the grounds of The Abbey Buildings on Saturday, 28<sup>th</sup> September, 12.30 to 3.30pm.

The Abingdon Bridge (TAB) work with young people aged 13 to 25 providing advice, guidance and counselling to support their transition into adulthood.

Tickets: £10 for a good meal and one glass of wine or juice. Available from Jenny Berrell during opening times of the Abbey.

For more details and a wider range of events in Abingdon-on-Thames see the What's On in Abingdon leaflet, available late August, or the events calendar at [www.abingdon.gov.uk/events](http://www.abingdon.gov.uk/events)

## Gift Aid Appeal

I am very pleased to be the new Membership Secretary for "The Friends of Abingdon" and very grateful for all the help and advice that I have received from my predecessor, Pauline Burren.

As I am trying to get my head around this job I realise that we should really try to reclaim Gift Aid on our subscriptions so I am enclosing a new gift aid form with this newsletter.

We can claim up to four years retrospectively, so can I please ask you all, to return these new forms promptly. Even if you have already filled in a form please do it again. It will be really helpful if we can make a substantial claim.

Thank you in anticipation.

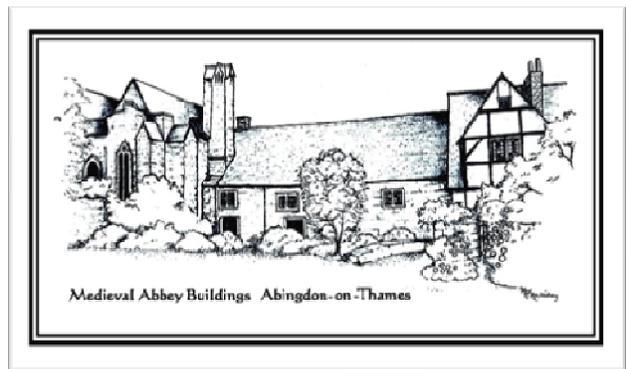
*Barbara Beach*

## New Merchandise

We now have some attractive gifts which we hope you will like including a bone china mug with coloured pictures of the Abbey Buildings which is extremely good value at £6.

There are also small fridge magnets and a new tea towel (see below). All will be on sale whenever the buildings are open, but they are also available at the Information Centre in Old Abbey House.

*Pat Bryden*



## Contact us by telephone or email

Chairman	Michael Matthews	01235 520027	chair@friendsofabingdon.org.uk
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