

Civic Pride – What Makes us Different?

*This article appeared in the Abingdon Herald's Civic Pride column on Wednesday June 20 2018, under the heading: **Our rich history and new celebrations to make town proud.***

Last Saturday was "Civic Day", designated as a day for people to say "I care about where I live". Sadly, we don't yet have a tradition of celebrating this in Abingdon, but it made me think about what our town has to be proud of.

We have a good claim to be the longest continually inhabited town in England and there is a wealth of reminders around the town of our medieval history and the prosperous borough which existed from the 16th to 20th centuries.

Less well-known is our long history of independent thought – even rebelliousness. In medieval times Abingdon citizens frequently stood up for their rights: in the 12th century there were fights with Wallingford and Oxford for the right to hold markets, in 1327 citizens rioted against the Abbey and later there were riots against grain price exploitation; a strong non-conformist movement developed in the 17th century and in the 18th century Abingdon dignitaries protested strongly against the government's treatment of "the colonies" (America).

We still celebrate our ancient, albeit quirky traditions: the annual election of the unofficial Mayor of Ock Street, with day-long festivities around the town centre; bun-throwing, for royal and other national celebrations; Swan-Upping – a few moments of pageantry on the river (on 20 July this year); and the Michaelmas Fair, the longest street-fair in Europe, dating back to medieval times, closely followed by the "Runaway Fair".

Then there are some more modern traditions: the Food Festival and "Great Get-together" are both coming up this weekend but we also have the Abingdon Airshow, Dragon-Boat Racing, Fun and Music in the Park, the ATOM Science Festival, the Christmas Extravaganza, the Cycling Festival, Heritage Weekend – and others.

A few of these events are organised by the Council or other public bodies, but the great majority are run by volunteers and this community spirit is itself something to be proud of. It is also demonstrated by the mass of community groups running everything from playgroups to classical concerts, sports clubs to good neighbour schemes and numerous interest-based clubs and societies.

We don't have big shops, night clubs and so forth, but you can easily find those in other nearby towns if you want. What we do, have on our doorstep, are the river, Radley Lakes, several beautiful parks, and the newly re-opened Open Air Swimming Pool beside the river. And, of course, a cinema showing 21st century films in a medieval building.

We should be proud to be different!

Hester Hand
Secretary, Friends of Abingdon
June 2018