

Civic Pride article – January 2020



How far we have come over the last decade and where we still need to go - by Hester Hand

At the start of 2010, work was about to start on conversion of the Old Gaol, the Heritage Lottery Fund had awarded funding for the Museum refurbishment and the Town Council had announced plans to set up an MG Park – including a sculpture of an MG. Proposals were under discussion for refurbishment of the precinct and Charter areas.

Loose Cannon were preparing to bring brewing back to Abingdon; the Choose Abingdon Partnership had been created to enable joint working between councils, businesses and the community; people were looking forward to the Arts Festival, but sad that it would be the last of its kind. The blogs and comment columns were discussing the problems of the traffic system, the need for Saturday markets and demands for free parking.

Ten years on, most of those refurbishment projects are complete – at least partially. The Museum has been a great success, but the Old Gaol lacks the shops and restaurants which would have brought vitality and linked the town to the river. The precinct refurbishment brought mixed responses, but the Charter redevelopment did not happen, leaving us with an inadequate car park and lamentable public toilets. The MG “Park” is a garden – and without its sculpture.

Loose Cannon has become one of Abingdon’s treasures, and has linked up with another, the Abbey Buildings, to create a popular addition to the town’s calendar – the Abingdon Beer Festival. The Choose Abingdon Partnership ran several successful projects – some of which still continue – but folded after 5 years when the County and District Councils withdrew funding. The traffic problems remain unresolved, but we now have two hours free parking and Saturday “Local Excellence” and craft markets.

So, mixed results for the 2010 aspirations, but there have been other successes. The refurbished Abbey Meadow play area and swimming pool are very popular with families. We haven’t (yet) replaced the Arts Festival, but new regular events, including the ATOM, Food, Jazz, and Cycling Festivals, Music in the Park, and Make Music, have been introduced. The Guildhall and Abbey Hall have been refurbished and we now have a thriving cinema.

Looking to the future, the most visible challenges are the empty and decaying Old Abbey House and Upper Reaches hotel, continuing traffic problems and the need to ensure that the new housing developments are made good places to live, integrated with the town and with the necessary infrastructure. Like many other market towns, we need to revitalise the town centre, given the decline of traditional shopping patterns (at 31 December there was actually one more town centre business than 10 years ago, but the mix has changed). All of this against the background of the need for higher environmental standards to combat the climate emergency.

Big challenges indeed, but the history of the last decade should encourage us to believe that joined-up working between public bodies, businesses and the community will enable them to be met.