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OLD ABBEY HOUSE – by Hester Hand, Friends of Abingdon Civic Society

Many towns have at least one much-loved historic building which has – for whatever reason – become a problem. In Abingdon, we have Old Abbey House. This imposing building, in a prominent central location, is owned by the Vale of White Horse District Council. It has lain empty since 2014, and its increasingly sorry state has become a matter of great concern. Now, at last, there are glimmers of hope for a brighter future.

Old Abbey House, within the site of Abingdon's great medieval abbey, was built in about 1780, with later extensions. Edwin Trendell, a wine merchant and mayor of Abingdon, lived here in the 1800s. He created the Abbey Gardens with their mock ruins. Later, it was home to the Bishop of Reading.

In 1923, the house and grounds were purchased by Abingdon Borough Council, as "*a historical site that ought to be in public hands".* When the Borough was abolished in 1974, the property was transferred to the newly created Vale of White Horse District Council.

The building was vacated in 2014. Attempts to sell it came to nothing, and subsequent expressions of interest were rebuffed, while the building's condition visibly deteriorated. Throughout this time, the Civic Society has been lobbying the Council about the situation.

Now, the Council is again considering selling Old Abbey House. However, they have also said that they wish to talk to local groups about whether a community use can be found for the building. This is very positive.

The scope is huge. Abingdon has a thriving cultural life, and many groups need space for meetings, classes, exhibitions and the like. A post-Covid world may also require new kinds of facilities, such as occasional hot-desks for otherwise home-based workers. Old Abbey House is very well-suited to multi-function use. Some parts could be brought into service quite quickly; others will need more work. The setting and gardens also make this an ideal location for a café, perhaps combined with a small gallery.

Putting new uses into historic buildings brings vitality to town centres, as numerous successful examples across the country show. Typically, a dedicated trust works in partnership with the local authorities to restore the building and then run it as a community facility. Old Abbey House, together with the Guildhall, Abbey Buildings, St Nicolas Church and the Abbey Gardens, could help to create a superb 'Heritage and Arts Quarter' for Abingdon.

One thing is clear, though: if the community wants this to happen, we will need to do a lot of hard work and raise substantial funds. The Vale Council simply doesn't have the resources to do it for us. There are plenty of ideas around – we now need to harness energy, skills and commitment and turn enthusiasm into a workable plan. Fund-raising, business planning and project management will be especially important. If you think you could help, please contact the Civic Society. You could help to give Old Abbey House a new future.