

Abingdon Heritage Open Days

Abingdon's heritage is one of our proudest assets so we have for many years been happy to participate in the annual "Heritage Open Days".

European Heritage Days were set up in 1991 – the principle was to throw open the doors to historic monuments and buildings, in particular those normally closed to the public, in order to raise appreciation of Europe's rich and diverse cultural assets and the need to care for them. Heritage Days are now held annually in September in 50 European states.

England joined the Heritage Days scheme in 1991 and it is now the biggest community heritage festival in the country. Similar events take place in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. There is a national organisation providing ideas and guidance, the familiar pink branding and the opportunity to advertise events nationwide, but all events and activities are organised by local volunteers and a key principle is that all are free of charge.

Abingdon's first big Heritage Open Day was in 2003. Interestingly this was some time before Oxford Preservation Trust ran their first "Open Doors" which their Director often tells us was inspired by Abingdon's example. At first, Town Councillors organised the events, but since 2007 they have been run by volunteers, mainly from the town's heritage organisations, but with financial support from the Town Council.

During those early years Abingdon Heritage Open Days (HODs) mainly involved giving people the opportunity to see inside buildings not normally open to the public – in some cases private householders bravely opened up their homes to visitors. Gradually the programme was expanded to include heritage-themed guided walks and then talks and a week-long exhibition.

In some years Heritage Open Days have been expanded into a mini-festival with family activities as well as the regular elements: in 2014 we had an "Abingdon at War" event in the Market Place educating and entertaining all generations; 2015 had a Victorian theme and 2016 saw the Market Place return to medieval times, albeit marred by dreadful weather. In 2019 there was a very successful festival based around the 1919 film of Abingdon's WW1 "Homecoming Parade".

This year's event on 19-20 September will of course be very different. Most of the town's regular summer events have had to be cancelled, but we are fortunate that ours comes as restrictions are easing (at least at the time of writing). The national HODs organisation has encouraged local groups to think creatively about what can be done and, like many others, we plan a combination of virtual events and outdoor activities which can be done subject to social distancing. The detailed programme is subject to change as the situation evolves, but can be found on our website <https://www.abingdonheritage.org.uk/> We hope that people will welcome the opportunity to take a new look at our town's heritage.