

**Civic Pride Column for Abingdon Herald 4 November
by Roger Thomas of Friends of Abingdon Civic Society**

There's a big debate going on just now about the future of Abingdon's Old Abbey House - a fine historic building, owned by the Vale council, in a superb location. The arguments for it staying in community use are strong and only councillors appear unable to see them. They simply want to sell off this community asset to plug a gap in their budget.

It's worth remembering here the sorry story of the Old Gaol. Readers who have been in Abingdon a while may remember this well. Newcomers may wonder how such a monstrous block of flats came to be sited next to the listed Gaol, in a Conservation Area.

The Gaol was built in 1805. It closed in 1868, and was then used as a corn store. In 1973, Abingdon Borough Council started to convert it into a sports and leisure centre. By the time this opened in 1974, the Borough Council had been abolished, its properties transferred to the newly-created Vale District Council. The new facility included an indoor swimming pool and various other spaces. It was a popular venue, well-liked by townspeople.

In 2002, the Audlett Drive Leisure centre opened, and the Old Gaol was declared surplus to requirements. An energetic community campaign for it to become an arts centre, possibly including a relocated public library, came to nothing, because the money apparently couldn't be found.

The Vale then decided to sell the Old Gaol for development. Another public campaign raised 4,500 signatures in support of some community use, but the sale was shrouded in secrecy; the outcome was that the Council sold the property to Cranbourne Homes, a local company who had done various other conversions, including the former Railway Inn.

Cranbourne, who already owned the adjacent Twickenham House, offered a large sum to the Council. As well as flats, they promised riverside shops/ restaurants, and public access through the site and into a riverside garden. It was to be a vibrant area. The plans involved huge modern blocks, completely out of keeping with their setting but the Planning Committee approved them anyway, needless to say.

What happened next is very salutary. First, after the financial crash of 2008, Cranbourne said they couldn't now pay the agreed price. The Vale accepted this, so much less money was raised than expected. Then the promised public benefits began to fall away. Only one "restaurant", Costa, ever opened. Others became flats and now a dental surgery, and two remain vacant, despite later promises to open a wine bar. Even getting the developers to honour the public access has been a struggle, and they certainly don't publicise it. No vibrant riverside area – just a rather lifeless development of 'luxury' flats, from which the public feels excluded.

Will this story be repeated by the Vale over Old Abbey House? Or will our councillors learn from past experience, and recognise that selling off heritage assets is not the way to bring life, activity and people into our beautiful and historic town centre?