

## **Civic Pride column - September 2021**

**By Hester Hand, Friends of Abingdon Civic Society**

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.

They provide an excellent opportunity for towns to celebrate their heritage and Abingdon, as one of the oldest towns in England, has been an enthusiastic participant since 2003. The national Heritage Open Days organisation suggests a theme for each year’s events: the theme is not compulsory but provides useful prompts to look at the town’s heritage from different angles.

The 2021 theme is “Edible England” and this is a rich seam for Abingdon to explore: it is not long since much of what we now consider the town was fields and orchards; going much further back, the Vineyard gives a clue to what went on there; fishing was important to the monks of Abingdon Abbey, as was brewing – and that tradition has continued in many forms until the present day.

Many of the buildings in Abingdon town centre are several hundred years old, but their uses have changed frequently over time: 18<sup>th</sup> century coffee houses were replaced by pubs and now the pendulum has swung back to coffee shops; multiple butchers, fishmongers and greengrocers have been replaced by convenience stores and hairdressers. What changes will the future bring?

Then we have ceremonies: Abingdon’s bun-throwing is unique, but we also have records of celebratory dinners in the Corn Exchange, or later, the Guildhall, whether civic events or to mark some special occasion.

Not all of our heritage is to be celebrated: we also remember institutions such as the Union Workhouse which provided very basic food and sustenance for those who had fallen on hard times and, amazingly, continued to operate until less than 100 years ago.

This year’s Heritage Open Days events on 16-19 September will illustrate all of the above - and more - and remind us that we live in a town with a very rich and varied heritage. The events will also include a follow-up to the successful 2014 and 2019 events which commemorated the start and end of World War One: material collected in connection with those events has been used to create a fascinating new website with details of Abingdon people who served in the “Great War” and this will be launched at Heritage Weekend.

Heritage Open days will include events and activities for all ages, an exhibition, demonstrations, films, walks, talks, childrens’ craft activities etc. For more information see <https://www.abingdonheritage.org.uk/>, pick up a leaflet from the Information Centre, Library or Museum or just come along to our Market Place Information stall on the Saturday or Sunday.