

CIVIC PRIDE ARTICLE FOR ABINGDON HERALD – 2 FEBRUARY

UPPER REACHES HOTEL SITE – by Hester Hand

Abingdon people are rightly proud of our riverside, seeing it as one of the town's biggest assets. With most properties along the riverside in private ownership, it is vital that we make the most of what is publicly accessible. Sadly, it seems that our District Council doesn't share this view.

In the mid-1970s, the newly-formed Vale of White Horse District Council (VWHDC) took over two key riverside sites from the former Borough Council. The Old Gaol became a much-loved sports and leisure facility for the town. Opposite, the fashionable Upper Reaches Hotel and Restaurant provided a popular riverside venue for both visitors and local people. Together these formed an attractive gateway to the town, incorporating the Tourist Information Office and providing a good start-finish point for walks and other river-based activities.

VWHDC sold the Gaol site for housing in 2008. The promised vibrant restaurants have not materialised, leaving a lifeless site with no public access to this historic building. Contemporary Hotels, leaseholders of the Upper Reaches, closed the hotel in 2015. Since then the site – including the Grade 2 listed Abbey Mill - has been abandoned.

The Upper Reaches now looks very derelict, so it is little surprise that it has attracted increasingly serious vandalism and anti-social behaviour. Local residents' property has been damaged and their quality of life severely impacted, and costly police resources are being consumed trying to deal with this.

The leaseholder has obligations to keep the property secure and in good condition. VWHDC, as both freeholder and planning authority, has the power to enforce those obligations, but has failed to act. Requests from the local residents' association (ASTRA), from the Civic Society and from the Town Council for information about what is happening have been stonewalled, with the response always being "discussions with the leaseholder are ongoing and commercially confidential". After 6 ½ years that is starting to sound a bit thin.

This just isn't good enough. The Upper Reaches should be an asset and amenity for the town. Instead, it is an embarrassing eyesore at Abingdon's main entrance and a focus for anti-social behaviour. There are shades of Old Abbey House here – another Council property left to rot for years. VWHDC seems to lack the will to get a grip on the situation, allowing themselves to be strung along by leaseholders who seem to have no forward plan, while fobbing the ratepayers off with lame excuses for inaction.

We need swift and decisive action from VWHDC on two fronts:

- Immediate steps, whether via planning legislation or other legal routes, to require the leaseholders to deal with the dereliction on the site and prevent it from being a magnet for trouble-makers.

- Action to resolve the long-term position with the leaseholder so that the site is brought back into active use without further delay. The draft Neighbourhood Plan has some suggestions.

It is a disgrace that such a key site has been left in this state for so long. Abingdon deserves better than this.