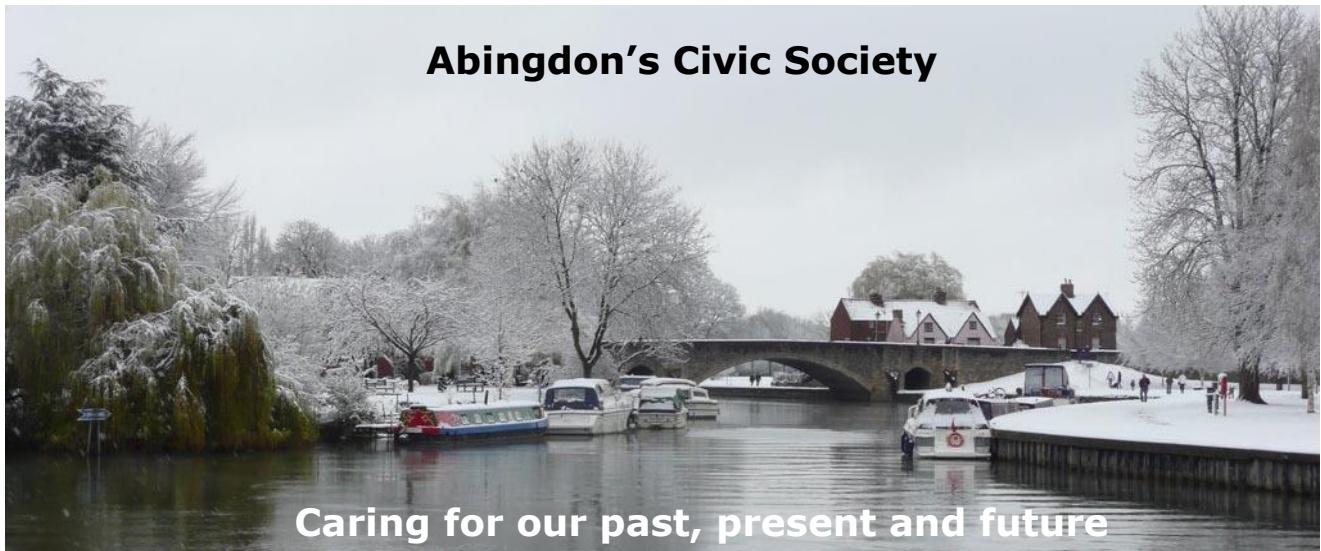


# THE FRIENDS OF ABINGDON

## Abingdon's Civic Society



Caring for our past, present and future



## Newsletter - Christmas 2014



### Chairman's Message

I am pleased to take the opportunity of this short newsletter to send Christmas Greetings to all of our members and wish you a prosperous, healthy and happy New Year.

As you will see from the rest of this newsletter, your officers and council along with input from other members, have remained active on many fronts during the last six months and we hope to see a number of projects come to fruition in the coming months. As ever our main constraints are firstly finance - and we now have a group actively looking at increasing our income - and secondly manpower. We are always looking for members who will assist in various activities. So please don't wait to be asked - volunteer!

*Michael Matthews*

### Note from the Editor

Due to pressure of other activities I was not able to put out the usual autumn newsletter so this is just a brief update to give you a summary

of what we have been doing since our AGM in June and a taster of what is to come next year. There will be a full newsletter early in the New Year and more information on our website <http://www.friendsofabingdon.org.uk/>

I have also been asked to remind all our members that subscriptions are due by 1 January. Please can those who pay by Standing Order check that it has gone through and please can others ensure that their payment (individual £8, couple £12) reaches Barbara Beach, our Membership Secretary, by that date. Her address is 21 Gardiner Close, Abingdon OX14 3YA. You might also like to consider taking this opportunity to convert to life membership (£55 individual, £85 couple).

*Hester Hand*

*Merry*  
*Christmas*

## **Events**

We had a wonderful "Music for a Summer Evening" concert in July. To provide a different ambience we used the Long Gallery rather than the Unicorn and it was a great success: tickets were sold out and the music from Abbey Strings and guest soloists was of the highest quality. Even the weather was kind to us so we could enjoy interval strawberries and Prosecco in the gardens. Last but not least the event raised over £1000 for our funds.

We had full houses for both our autumn talks: Dr Jon Whiteley told us about Turner's early work in Oxford and Abingdon and the Rev. Ian Browne talked about "Re-interpreting Abingdon's Lost Abbey". The latter was a joint event with Abingdon Museum Friends and we hope to do more in collaboration with other local heritage groups.

Heritage Weekend was a massive success this year. It is run by a group led by Alastair Fear, under the auspices of the Friends, but this year we were able to link up with the Museum who had funding for a World War 1 Commemoration event which enabled the overall event to be much bigger than usual. As usual The Friends opened the Abbey buildings to several hundred visitors and Pat Bryden organised a programme of walks – and, unlike last September and in May, the weather was kind to us.

## **Looking after the Abbey Buildings**

It has been a challenging year, with major repairs/maintenance needed to the roof and the chimney and other major refurbishment work also planned: more of this in the next newsletter. In the meantime we have made some smaller improvements to

make the buildings look more attractive – clearing clutter from the gate so that people can see in even when the buildings are closed, repositioning notice boards, improving our display in the Checker etc – and the gardens have looked particularly good this year, thanks to Jenny and her helpers.

## **Unicorn Theatre**

The theatre is an important source of income for us and, after a few years with no change, we have decided to increase the charges to users. We will use some of the increased revenue to do some minor refurbishments, especially to the dressing-rooms. We also want to streamline the operation of the theatre so Mike Ward has agreed to become "Theatre Manager" to look after much of the technical support side. Jenny will continue to manage bookings.

## **Finances**

By far our biggest sources of income are weddings and the Craft Fair, but this makes us vulnerable to changes in demand; there is scope for more lettings for one-off events, parties, talks, concerts etc so a group of us are therefore working on plans to promote awareness of the buildings – both as a place to visit and as a venue to hire. We also need to broaden and refresh our membership base and are looking to find grants to help with our major building projects.

More on all of this next time, but if any of you would like to help us with any of these activities, do please get in touch.

## **Planning**

It has been a busy but frustrating time as we have tried to influence decisions and actions on the Drayton Road development, 65 Oxford Road,

the Old Gaol and New Abbey Court (in Stert Street). We have also responded to the two consultations on the Local Plan and one on the Abbey Gardens/Abbey Meadow and written letters to the Herald on various matters.

Like other civic groups we are finding that the much-vaunted "Localism" means little in practice, with the bottomless purses of developers able to override local wishes – even when those are supported by the relevant councils. We have raised our concerns with our MP and will return to this in the New Year.



### **Old Abbey House**

We have had a little more success here. On discovering at the beginning of the year that the District Council had put it on the market we started a two-pronged approach to try to ensure that the heritage of the building was protected and that it remained accessible to the community. We were particularly concerned that the garden would be separated from the rest of Abbey Gardens and closed to the public. We were successful in having the building classified as an "Asset of Community Value" which means that the Vale have to allow time for a community-based bid to be prepared and seriously consider it before they are allowed to sell to a commercial bidder. We expect a further announcement about their intentions imminently. We also understand that

it is now unlikely that the gardens will form part of the sale package.

We were less successful with our other approach, with English Heritage turning down our application for Heritage Listing. However in the process we gathered a lot of information about the building's history and features and will look for other ways to ensure that these are preserved.

### **Other civic matters**

We keep a watching brief on the Guildhall redevelopment plans and understand that more news is likely early in the new year.

There is a consultation under way on improvements to the Abbey Gardens and Abbey Meadow. The Friends expressed the view that little should be done to the Abbey Gardens since they had been successfully refurbished in 2007 and appeared to work well; we felt that other groups were probably better placed to comment on the facilities in Abbey Meadow, but that if the aim was to achieve year-round use, better toilet facilities and better footpaths were important.

Abingdon Hydro: after four years of research and planning, the £1 million scheme to generate electricity from the Thames is nearly under way. It will harness the sustainable, green power of the river without diverting it or enclosing it. The project was set up as a community enterprise to make the profits available to support environmental community projects in the town. Shares in the scheme are now on sale, with a closing date of 20 December. More information from [www.abingdonhydro.org.uk](http://www.abingdonhydro.org.uk) or collect a brochure from Added Ingredients.

## Looking ahead

Our first event is very early in the New Year – an outing to the Constable exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum on Thursday 8 January (see below for full details). Other dates for your diary:

- *Monday 25 May* – Bank Holiday walks and refreshments in the Abbey Buildings
- *Wednesday 3 June* – AGM with talk by Michael Liversidge, eminent art historian and grandson of Ursula Liversidge, one of our founding members.
- *Sunday 12 July* – concert by Abbey Strings (following success of this year's event)
- *Saturday 12 – Sunday 13 September* – Heritage Weekend

We will be organising more events and would particularly welcome members' suggestions for speakers and topics for talks: this year has shown that with the right topic and enough publicity these can be very successful.

## Constable Exhibition: Thursday 8 January

Our first visit in the New Year is to the Victoria and Albert Museum on Thursday 8 January to view the "Constable: The Making of a Master" exhibition. It closes on 11 January so this is the last chance to see it.

We are again using Tappins transport and leave Stratton Way at 09.00. The cost for the visit is £34.50 which includes entrance to the exhibition and transport. If you wish to come with us, please send your details and cheque (made out to The Friends of Abingdon) to Mrs P Burren, 18 Norman Avenue, OX14 2HQ. If you have any queries, please phone 01235 525556.

After visiting the exhibition we will have time to explore the rest of the museum, which is free, or of course, Harrods and other Knightsbridge shops are just down the road.

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