

Annual Parish Meeting, 14th March 2018 – Guildhall Committee, Report

My previous annual reports for this parish meeting have been a combination of optimism and disappointment. I am pleased to report this year that disappointment has been replaced by achievement.

Abbey hall is now a thriving cinema. A very different kind of cinema. It has the feel and atmosphere of a community space; somewhere to meet up with friends for an evening out. An opportunity to watch not just contemporary and classic films, but cultural and sporting events.

Our historic rooms have been refurbished to a very high standard, with much improved facilities. Our re-sited muniment room will soon house the town's historic records, and the new commercial kitchen will allow us to offer a wide range of event options with confidence

During the reconstruction period it became clear that very little had been done for many years to maintain and upgrade the utilities and fabric of the building. Much of the work that has been done to rectify this earlier neglect cannot be seen, but council took the view that if the work was completed now, it would save future generations from much greater expense.

Council were also determined to set the rates for hiring the rooms at an affordable level, particularly for local groups, societies, and individuals. Following the very well attended open weekend there has been an encouraging level of interest

Improving accessibility is always an important element in our decision making. We now have inclusive access to the old magistrates court, and we have regular and positive discussions with Historic England, with particular emphasis on how we can improve access to the council chamber.

The day to day operation of the whole building has been outsourced to the cinema management group. This arrangement ensures that the historic rooms are in operation from early morning to late evening seven days a week. The overall financial implication is that council is saving enough money to maintain the building in good order, provide some additional much welcomed public services for the town, and make a significant contribution towards council's ability this year to freeze its council tax

I have received unwavering support from our mayor, our council leader, and members of my working group. I thank them all, and last but certainly not least I thank the town clerk and his officers for their outstanding work and commitment throughout the last busy and challenging twelve months.