



THE FRIENDS OF ABINGDON – CARING FOR OUR PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

In May 1944 – despite the fact that Britain was at a crucial stage of World War II, with bombers taking off from nearby airfields - over 100 Abingdon people including the MP, the Lord Lieutenant, the Mayor and leading local historians, architects and lawyers attended a meeting called by the then Mayor which set up The Friends of Abingdon Civic Society “To arouse in all people of Abingdon a lively and practical interest in the town and its setting and to help preserve what is best worth retaining amongst its old buildings and encourage new buildings worthy of its civic tradition and character”.

The background to the meeting was that at that time Abingdon’s historic buildings – and those in many other small towns – were suffering from neglect during the two world wars and the intervening depression. Some had already been demolished and there were concerns that others would follow and that replacements might not be sensitively designed.

The Friends are best known for their work in acquiring and restoring the domestic buildings of the Abbey, but less recognised is the part they played in preserving other Abingdon landmarks such as the Roysse Archway, Fitzharris Motte and 35 Ock Street. They were also instrumental in the erection of the memorial to St Edmund on St Nicholas’ Church and the creation of the murals in the Stratton Way underpass and the alleyway by R&R.

In some ways the 21st century challenges facing the town are much as they were 80 years ago and in 2019 the original charity divided into two so that each could better focus on facing those challenges in their own area. The Abbey Buildings Trust runs the medieval buildings, including the Unicorn Theatre, and has ambitious plans to make them fit for use for the next 80 years. The Friends of Abingdon Civic Society still works to preserve the town’s best historic buildings and to ensure that new developments are appropriate: this includes making an informed contribution to consultations and pressing the authorities on matters of concern, but also encouraging a wider range of local people to take an interest in development proposals and to contribute to consultations before it is too late. In recent years we lobbied for action to be taken to deal with the then decaying Old Abbey House and an important current campaign is to end the stalemate over the derelict Upper Reaches Hotel site.

But it is not all about planning and buildings. The other part of our mission is to help make Abingdon a great place to live, work and visit so we have various projects associated with that. These include:

- For over 10 years now, thanks to the generosity of the shopping centre landlords – and financial contributions from the Town Council, we have managed a community

space in one of the empty units in the shopping centre, which local groups can use for exhibitions, displays etc – or for running activities. The range of uses since we moved to our current home in Unit 24 has been enormous – from sewing repairs to seated exercise, Woodcarvers to “Grim Dark Gamers”, Girl Guides to the Antedeluvian order of Buffalos, apple pressing to book exchanges. The list is endless and it is a great way to support and promote co-operation between our community groups.

- We organise the annual Heritage Open Days in September: there is a different theme each year and many hundreds of people visit our exhibitions and the various buildings that are open specially for the event. “Wow, I never knew that” – is a phrase heard all over town on those days. In recent years more and more different groups have been contributing to the event and we are particularly pleased to have had input from some of the schools and colleges, and more activities for children, making it a true community project.
- We have produced an attractive series of self-guided walks trails highlighting various aspects of the town’s heritage – these are available online or from the Information Centre and the Library and have become very popular . We also put on guided walks programmes twice a year.
- We ran a joint project last year with the OX14 Partnership (of Abingdon’s secondary schools) and are looking to build on this with further projects.

We are extremely grateful to the Town Council for their support – financial and otherwise – with Unit 24 and with Heritage Open Days. We continue to look for ways to work in partnership with them to help deliver our shared objectives, particularly in areas such as improving communications in order to enhance town vitality. However we are a membership organisation and rely on our volunteers to deliver the projects: we need new people to come forward to pick up the baton - and to bring new ideas - to ensure that the town remains a lively and beautiful place to live, balancing the value of our heritage with the concerns for the environment and sustainability.

So, to end with, I would like to return to what the then Mayor, Mr Etty said at that meeting 81 years ago:

“while it might seem out of place to consider the preservation of a few old buildings in one small town during a time of world-wide destruction, it is necessary to plan so that the children of the future might grow up amongst beautiful things.”

I can’t think of a better reason for us to do what we do please come and help us do it.

Hester Hand (Chair)

March 2025