

Annual Town (Parish) Meeting – Wednesday 10th March 2021

Report from the Chair of Guildhall Committee

The Guildhall Committee is responsible for all aspects relating to the effective management and operation of the Guildhall complex. The Guildhall complex comprises of the historic Guildhall Rooms, which include the Abbey Room, the Bear Room, the Council Chamber, the Old Magistrates Court, and the Roysse Room. These have a capacity of approaching 300 persons and are available for hire for events and functions. These are attractive grade 2 listed rooms dating back to the fifteenth century and available for hire at very competitive prices. The complex also includes the Abbey Hall which, together with ancillary rooms, is leased to the Abbey Cinema and provides state of the art cinema which, during “normal times” has a capacity of over 170 persons.

My report last year was positive and upbeat. Our rooms were becoming more and more popular and cinema attendances were ever rising.

Then, Covid-19 struck and everything changed. Consequently our plans for 2020-21 had to alter and the service delivered from the building was severely restricted due to the government regulations. The Abbey Cinema has had to close for most of the year, being open only for a five-month period– with limitations on audience numbers- from August to December 2020. All events planned for the Guildhall were similarly affected, being cancelled or operating under severe restrictions during the August to December period.

However despite the problems caused by the pandemic our work has continued. We have taken the opportunity this year to continue with our improvements and updates to the building. A major project undertaken was to upgrade our boilers, replacing four boilers with two new high efficiency units. We have also installed a replacement platform lift which improves access into the Abbey Hall (cinema). Work in progress includes the fit-out of the Archive/Muniment room so all the town archives can be returned from Reading by the summer. Plans to replace the Abbey Hall doors with more environmentally friendly ones are being considered. Alongside the larger projects the day-to-day maintenance of this very substantial building continues with many small, some almost invisible but often essential, work taking place.

The Guildhall complex is large, we need to ensure that it is kept in a good state of repair and that we continue to improve the buildings. Further improvements to the building are planned and the Council has ensured we have sufficient budget to do this. This will ensure the building remains fit for purpose in the years ahead. Integral to our plan is that well-thought-out capital expenditure will not only make our building more efficient to run in energy and maintenance terms but will also save money in the future.

A major part of our work will be to decide how best we can cut carbon emissions and make the complex more environmentally friendly. A very in-depth energy survey is currently taking place, and this will be very important in helping us to set out priorities for the future. Amongst the matters to address are that the roof of the Abbey Hall has little or no insulation, many windows are single glazed and most of the lighting is old and not energy efficient. We have to decide what is the most important and will be most cost effective in the future. We cannot possibly afford to undertake everything we would wish to in one go. So we plan, hopefully, to be able to take on one major job each year over the next several years.

I am pleased to report that in December 2020 we appointed a Properties Officer. This is a new role and an essential one; it demonstrates the importance we place on looking after our very substantial council portfolio of historic buildings. We welcome her wholeheartedly and look forward to a productive future.

Looking to the future we have worked very productively over the last couple of years with our partners at the Abbey Cinema. The Cinema also manages and operates the Guildhall Historic Rooms on our behalf. We are currently talking with the Abbey Cinema regarding our longer-term arrangements in relation to the Guildhall Complex.

To finish as I did last year: I believe our Guildhall is part of Abingdon's inheritance and it is our duty to look after the building for future generations and also make sure that they give value for money to the Town.

Cllr Margaret Crick
Chair of Guildhall Committee 2020-21