



THE FRIENDS OF
ABINGDON
CIVIC SOCIETY

WORKING WITH OTHERS TO CARE FOR OUR PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

The Friends of Abingdon Civic Society was set up over 80 years ago at a meeting called by the then Mayor. Since then we, like other Civic Societies, have seen ourselves as “critical friends” – or complementary - to the Council, helping them deliver projects which fit with our objectives, but not afraid to challenge them when we disagree with their plans, or think more action is needed.

Our charitable aims are a bit of a mouthful:

“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 second of these is what we are best known for: as well as saving the Abbey Buildings (now looked after by our sister organisation, the Abbey Buildings Trust), the Friends have contributed over the years to numerous other heritage conservation projects around the town. The Civic Society continues to do so - two current areas of interest are the Upper Reaches site and Our Lady’s.

We also monitor planning applications and comment on any which we think have an adverse impact on heritage assets or on the town’s character. Possibly more importantly though, we try to encourage the wider community to contribute to discussions and consultations at an early stage rather than waiting till it is too late.

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. I have reported on these to this meeting in previous years, but this year I want to highlight the emerging theme of collaboration. We are increasingly working with others to achieve this objective. For example:

Community Space

Thanks to the generosity of the shopping centre landlords – and financial contributions from the Town Council (although currently Unit 25 is self-financing), we have been providing this for nearly 15 years now, using a series of empty units in the shopping centre.

The range of uses since we moved to our current home has been enormous – as well as providing facilities for numerous art and craft displays, we have been particularly proud to have been able to help groups and organisations working to support disadvantaged people. This is a great way to support our community groups and promote co-operation between them.

Heritage Open Days

This is a very popular annual event, many hundreds of people visit our exhibitions and the various buildings that are open specially for the event and feedback is excellent.

It has always been a joint effort between us and AAAHS but 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 to be providing more activities for children and young people, making it a true community project.

As always we thank the Town Council for their financial support, without which this event would not happen.

Walks

Our self-guided walks leaflets (funded by other sources) highlighting various aspects of the town's heritage are available online or from the Information Centre and the Library.

We also put on guided walks programmes twice a year and provide bespoke walks for visiting groups. Some of the walks are led by other groups (Naturalists, Carbon Cutters, Historical Society etc).

Young people

We have recently recruited a new committee member who will be focusing on how we can develop our offering for young people, possibly working in partnership with the Abingdon Bridge and other youth organisations, and with the Abbey Buildings Trust.

Communications and promoting the town

After many years of pressing for them, we are delighted to see the new Town Council noticeboards in the Market Place and at bus stops. We have provided volunteers to manage the latter and would be happy to do the same if more boards can be set up in the edge of town areas.

We are pleased be working with the Town Council on plans for new "Welcome to Abingdon" installations and look forward also to contributing to their "Discover Abingdon" project.

We are also happy to be helping the Town Council with the new-style Clubs and Societies Day – both at the planning stage and by providing Unit 25 as a venue.

Conclusion

We are extremely grateful to the Town Council for their support – financial and otherwise – with Heritage Open Days and, when required, our other projects.

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.

Hester Hand
Chair, Friends of Abingdon Civic Society
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