



Abergavenny and District Civic Society

Preserving the best, improving the rest

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Newsletter - September 2023

Dear friends

Whilst we all know that Covid is still amongst us, this year saw us gathered in the Methodist church hall once again, enjoying the companionship of others and the presentations of our speakers. And what a variety of topics and talented speakers we welcomed, albeit with us having to juggle dates due to Monday Bank Holidays, including the extra one for the Coronation of King Charles III.

After our AGM we welcomed Cllr Paul Griffiths, deputy leader of Monmouthshire County Council, who came to give us his views on progressing the new 'Replacement Development Plan', accompanied by Mark Hand, Head of Placemaking. Jane Clarke, Green Infrastructure Project Officer for Monlife wider countryside team talked about 'green and blue corridors' across Monmouthshire and our very own member and chair of Abergavenny Transition Town, Patrick Hannay challenged us with his thought-provoking presentation about our horticultural past and what lessons could and perhaps should be learned.

Our December festivities were modest. Members enjoyed a social evening with a quiz, fuelled by our famous non-alcoholic punch made to Judith and Ian's secret recipe. Following our usual New Year get-together over a meal cooked by the ladies of Abergavenny Golf Club, we learned more about the Stump Up for Trees project from Robert Penn, bestselling author and broadcaster, whose initiative to plant a million trees and restore landscapes in the Brecon Beacons area is well underway. In March we had a chance to learn about artistic and creative developments in Abergavenny from Dave Baxter, Manager of the newly refurbished Borough Theatre and from Katherine McDermid-Smith, manager of the Melville Centre for the Arts, whose enthusiasm and passion for future events, workshops and other artistic endeavours was catching.



Unfortunately, due to circumstances beyond his control, Frank Olding was unable to come in April and enlighten us about The Lost Pubs of Abergavenny so John Crandon and Andrew Mason, Community Safety Officers for MCC came instead. Former Police Officers, before joining the Community Safety Team at MCC, they liaise with the local Police Team to monitor antisocial behaviour and respond to the concerns of residents and businesses to provide interventions to reduce nuisance.

In May, our presentation came from Abergavenny resident Fergus Collins, editor of Countryfile and producer of the much loved 'plod cast' which took off during Covid. Inspired by a recent visit to Knepp, near Horsham, Fergus spoke about this estate that turned failing farmland into a profitable site of wildlife abundance in West Sussex. For members keen to enjoy these gentle ambles around our great outdoors, click on the following link and enjoy his many podcasts <https://www.countryfile.com/author/ferguscollins>

Unfortunately, in June we were unable to hear from youngsters involved in the work of Monlife's Heritage, so at short notice Civic Society member Chris Jones, a local Town Regeneration consultant, came along. He spoke to us about some possible changes for our town over the next decade and examined strengths and weaknesses of the town, also looking at the opportunities and possible threats coming our way and how our communities to be involved in shaping the future.

Chairmans Report – Tony Konieczny

It has been a huge relief to be able to hold our monthly meetings in the Methodist Hall throughout the last year. Turnout has been very good and we have enjoyed some inspiring and informative presentations.

The Society Executive Committee has continued to meet on a monthly basis and was pleased to co-opt a new member, Rob Brittlebank. Rob expressed an interest in making sure our website and social media are up to date and regularly refreshed. This task had been undertaken by Ruth Coulthard, to whom we owe a huge debt of gratitude for her continuing support of the Society, even though she now lives in Usk. Ruth and Rob will continue to work together on the digital platforms of the Society.



The Executive Committee would like to thank Anna Petts for her work over many years tending our planters in the Fairfield Car Park. During the increasingly regular periods of drought, she has found it hard to continue to tend and water the beds. A decision was made to engage Greenfinch Nurseries to take over the planting and maintenance of our beds and the results are spectacular and very much in step with the planting regime within the town. Unfortunately, there has been some vandalism during the year; two of the coping stones around the beds were broken but have been repaired and re-cemented by the Town Council

maintenance team. Whilst the Fair was in the car park, one of our newly planted beds had all the plants removed and strewn across Park Avenue. Thankfully, Greenfinches were able to salvage most of the plants which were successfully replanted.

A great number of our members wear several hats and are involved in myriad volunteer groups that work to improve the town for all of us. Friends of Bailey Park have had enormous success in the improvements they have made in this much loved and popular park. Following the proposal to paint a butterfly mural in the park, the Exec decided to sponsor a second mural of a Bumble bee. It is hoped that we can inspire other groups to do likewise and contribute to the appearance of more wonderful public art for visitors and residents alike to enjoy. Murals also successfully cover up mindless graffiti that blight our public spaces.



We pride ourselves on being a project-based society and we welcome suggestions from our members of any suitable projects we might consider. Joining forces with others in line with our aims and objectives will enable us to make a bigger contribution to the wellbeing of our town.

Finally, Abergavenny was chosen to represent Wales in the town category of Britain in Bloom this year, and it was with great pride that the route for the judges included our Fairfield beds and the new Bee mural in Bailey Park. I hope they were impressed by the efforts that have been made by so many volunteers to make our town beautiful. The results for Wales in Bloom will be announced on 8 September and the Britain in Bloom results on 23 October - fingers crossed!

Members, thank you all for your continuing support of the Society and on behalf of you all, I would like to thank the Executive Committee members for keeping us on track.

Planning – Dick Cole

Replacement Local Development Plan 2018–2033: In 2021 the Civic Society was strongly critical of Monmouthshire County Council's preferred development plan strategy. The plan aimed for nearly 8,400 extra homes across the county, a large increase in recent building rates, and over 7,000 new jobs. We believed that most of the new houses would be taken up by newcomers to the county, who would be commuting to jobs well outside the county as we saw no evidence that many of the new jobs were likely in Monmouthshire.

The Welsh Government, defending their new Future Wales plan, objected even more strongly, and the County Council's new administration after the May 2022 elections reduced council ambitions to about 6,000

new homes and over 6,000 new jobs. We welcomed the reduction, but for a number of reasons, believe that both numbers remain too high. We still believe that the necessary local new jobs will not materialise and fear that by the time the plan is finalised the number of new homes will have crept up to a higher figure. We suggested that at this stage 5,250 homes are plenty, but there are already signs that the plan may propose 6,200. This would mean allocating new sites for over 1,500 houses (half intended to be much-needed affordable housing) instead of the 2021 proposal for well over 3,500 on new sites. Annual building rates would continue much as in recent years.

The Welsh Government broadly accepted MCC's new strategy, while making it clear that the Council must do much more to show that it will work. We hope to hear more from MCC in September this year, though there will not be another consultation until the Spring of 2024. A draft MCC countywide Local Transport Plan may also be available in September this year.

The new MCC proposals for Abergavenny (together with Mardy and Llanfoist) proposed a need for new sites for about 600 homes (about 800 have been built since 2018 or can be provided within the current development plan) and proposed that about 500 of them should be east of the railway and A465. While we feel that there are still some acceptable sites on the edge of the present settlement, we accept that the time has come to consider development on the lower slopes of the Little Skirrid as the long-term direction of Abergavenny growth. We are therefore happy to work with the County Council to explore whether the East Abergavenny mixed-use zero carbon-ready project can be financially viable with public sector support, well-designed with the necessary infrastructure, and acceptably integrated with the rest of the town and its services, notably with a crossing of the railway and A465 for pedestrians and cyclists that will be popular in all weathers. We have our doubts about viability and will call for a major strategy re-think if we are not satisfied.

There is much in the MCC strategy that suggests that final policies will address the Climate and Wildlife Emergencies, but to what extent? The basic need for a better balance of local homes and jobs, and less travel by car (congesting and polluting even if powered by renewable electricity), underlie our concerns above. Apart from the emphasis on affordable housing, policies for zero carbon energy building are welcome but yet to be detailed. We want 'green wedges' on the National Park boundary and in the Gavenny valley protected; we want phosphate pollution of the Usk strictly controlled; and we want allotments and smallholdings producing local food for local people. We have also submitted suggestions for improving the building design policy of the present development plan.

For most people the details of the plan are more interesting than the overall number of new homes or jobs. The Civic Society wants constructive dialogue with the County Council while the flesh is added to the bones of the strategy; in that way we hope to avoid undue delay in the adoption of an acceptable new plan.

Planning Applications: With two main exceptions, it has been a quiet year for local planning applications to which the Society has needed to respond. The lack of treatment capacity to prevent the phosphate content of sewage passing through the Llanfoist treatment works into the River Usk has prevented approvals and deterred applications, but MCC are now proposing to approve acceptable development subject to a condition preventing commencement of the development until 31st March 2025, when treatment is expected to be available.

An outline application to replace The Beeches on the upper section of Pen y Pound with a care home has attracted local opposition. It was accompanied by illustrative detailed drawings for which approval is not sought but which indicate the applicants' objective. The Society objected to the demolition of an attractive Victorian house, to the proposal for a care home some way from local services and with no bus service, and to the loss of trees to create an access. We also made clear our concerns about the scale of the illustrated building in relation to its surroundings, overlooking of nearby homes, inadequate parking and servicing arrangements, a risk of flooding, and the additional demands likely to be made on primary health care services. No decision has been taken.



The other exception has been the controversial MCC 'active travel' (walking, cycling and disabled access) improvement proposals for Castle Meadows. A summary of the objections and alternative proposals is not possible here, but, while we appreciated community concern that felt that this special asset of the town would be spoiled, we disagreed and broadly supported the proposals. As widely accepted, better quality walking and cycling routes across the Meadows are needed to access the forthcoming new bridge over the Usk, and we supported the slight widening (for shared use) and resurfacing of the existing routes, which have been used by walkers and cyclists for many years. Alternative routes did not seem to offer advantages or might add to costs. We did not comment on the design of entrances to the Meadows. That application also awaits a decision.

We have also been represented at discussions about active travel improvements on the road through Llanfoist, also vital to encourage use of the new bridge over the Usk. This will not be a planning application but a public consultation is expected soon.

We supported an application for the long-delayed footbridge with lifts at Abergavenny rail station, which will greatly assist the less able to cross the tracks. We are also seeking a better design of a small housing proposal at the rear of 24-26 Brecon Road.

A Placemaking Plan: As we approach the autumn of 2023, we look forward to participating in the preparation of a plan that will focus on the future needs and priorities for our town centre. Required by the Welsh Government to support bids for grants, the plan will be jointly led by the County and Town Councils with help from consultants and the community. 'Placemaking' is a relatively new term used by town planners; it has been defined as 'ensuring that each new development or intervention contributes positively to creating or enhancing environments within which people, communities, businesses and nature can thrive. It places people at the heart of the process and results in places that are vibrant, have a clear identity and where people can develop a sense of belonging'. Placemaking 'considers the context, function and relationships between a development site and its wider surroundings'. Abergavenny has had several plans over the past twenty years, and whether this one will produce some powerful new proposals to strengthen the resilience of the town remains to be seen. At least it should review and prioritise some of the projects that have been around for a few years.

Communication Secretary's Report – Judith Vicary

After our extremely successful Post Christmas meal at Monmouthshire Golf Club in January, it was suggested that we create a Lunch Club, enabling Civic Society members to become better acquainted with each other in an agreeable and relaxing setting. We also wanted to support Julie and her team in the kitchen, as the business has inevitably struggled somewhat during the Covid years.

It was agreed that dates would be set at three monthly intervals, and numbers attending indicate that this has turned out to be a popular and successful venture which we hope will continue in the future. Details of the October Lunch will be circulated in due time.

Sue has already mentioned that a significant number of the Friends of Bailey Park Volunteers are also Civic Society members. We are only ten volunteers, and six belong to Civic Society. As an insider, I would just like to reiterate how very dedicated and incredibly hard-working our small team has continued to be during recent months, in wind, rain and bitter cold, as well as during episodes of merciless heat, which created challenging watering situations, as we prepared for Abergavenny's entry into both Wales and Britain in Bloom. I want to thank them all as true heroes of Abergavenny for the endless hours they have given. Thanks too, to Abergavenny Garden Centre for providing and planting free of charge our NHS 75 years floral display.

This is just part of the proof that Abergavenny Civic Society in 2023 is alive, active and very well.

Membership - Sue Konieczny, Membership Secretary

Our general membership increased this year from 85 to 93 paid up members. For the first time, members were asked either to pay their subscription by bank transfer or to bring a cheque or cash to any meeting in an envelope clearly marked with their name(s). This worked well and we will continue with this system.

As always, we are hugely grateful for all the support given to us by our business members. We know how difficult the past few years have been for small and large businesses alike and to help keep Abergavenny vibrant and viable, we must all try to support local businesses whenever we can.

The Angel Hotel, Celtic Computer Systems, Emmeline's Tearoom, Jaybee Soft Furnishing, Judd Brothers, The Kings Arms, Owen Davies Consulting, Smiles Better Dentists and the Wool Croft.

If any business or other members wish to lapse their membership for whatever reason, please let me know by email at abercivsoc@gmail.com and I will update the records accordingly so you will not receive unwanted emails. Otherwise please bring your cash or cheques to any meeting, or send them either to me at 125 Park Crescent, Abergavenny, NP7 5TN or to our Treasurer, Ian Vicary at 17 Lansdown Drive, Abergavenny, NP7. Or set up a standing order or pay by bank transfer into our bank account (giving your name as reference):

NatWest account

sort code 51-61-02

account number 01523430

Under 65 - £10	Over 65 - £8	Student - £1
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Finances – Ian Vicary, Treasurer

The financial position of the Society continues on a sound footing and we ended the year with a 5% increase in funds. This was helped by increases in membership subscriptions which are recovering well post Covid, and by our 100 Club.

Major expenditure this year included the replanting and upkeep of the Society flower beds at the bottom of the Fairfield car park, opposite Cibi Walk, which was contracted out to local organisation Greenfinch Plants, and funding for a bee mural in Bailey Park by local artist Danielle Farrington. Both of these were completed in time to be seen by the Britain in Bloom judges. The Society also continues to support the Friends of Bailey Park by co-funding the cost of plants in the sunken garden.

We are always on the lookout for suitable projects to support financially and which sit within our objectives of making Abergavenny a great place to live, work and play so if you have any ideas or suggestions, do please let us know.

100 Club

Over the year 2022/23, we sold 90 numbers which was a splendid achievement bearing in mind all the difficulties with covid the previous year. We paid out £850 to thirty lucky winners, ranging from £10 to £100. That gave supporters a whopping thirty three percent chance of being a winner, whilst managing to bolster the Society's coffers by £1290 - thank you.

This year we are aiming to sell all one hundred numbers with your help and continued support. Numbers are £24 each and you can have as many as you like. The ticket hotline is now open – just email ianvicary@outlook.com or abercivsoc@gmail.com to reserve your number and pay by bank transfer to 51-61-02 account 01523430 quoting your name and 100 Club as the reference. Again, a big thank you for your support.

Programme of meetings to run up until June 2024

Venue – Methodist Church Hall, Castle Street, unless otherwise stated, starting at 7.30 pm

*Please note that the AGM is on the third Monday of October
as is our June meeting in 2024*

16 October - AGM at 7pm followed at 7.30 by "What happens when Europe can't supply us with fruit and veg anymore?" – Duncan Fisher

Crickhowell resident Duncan Fisher is a co-founder and director of **Our Food 1200**. The aim of this project is to secure 1200 acres of land in 3-10 acre plots across Bannau Brycheiniog and Powys for modern, regenerative fruit and vegetable farming for local markets. Food for thought?!

13 November - The Lost Pubs of Abergavenny – Frank Olding

Public houses have played an important and multi-faceted role in the social life of our towns and villages. At one time, Abergavenny boasted over eighty pubs and beer-houses. The talk looks at this important aspect of the social history of the town.

11 December - All About Abergavenny Borough Band

Lana Tingay, musical director of the Borough Band, and colleagues will tell us about the history and successes of the band and the scheme to support young players, some of whom will attend and perform for us. Non-alcoholic punch and mince pies will be served as usual.

18 January 2024 – A chance to socialise over a meal – venue tbc

12 February – News about Plas Gunter Mansion

Owen Davies is the Chair of Plas Gunter Mansion. He will be providing an update presentation on one of the key heritage projects for the town and the outcome of their £3m Heritage Fund application.

11 March – How do we talk to each other about climate change?

We need to build a collective shared understanding on how to radically decarbonise our lifestyles by at least 40% by 2030, but does this potentially apocalyptic thought just freeze us with fear, into silence. We need to see how much of a shared view we actually have, through talking to each other, in as many forums as possible. Patrick Hannay, will set out some varying future perspectives to test how much we share common views, that might lead to concerted action.

8 April - The Art Shop and Chapel

Pauline Griffiths, proprietor of the Art Shop and Chapel, will share with us how this highly successful café and event venue came into being and explain the extent and variety of workshops, exhibitions and activities held there. Alistair Laurence will also speak about 'Conversations at the Chapel'.

13 May – Abergavenny Food Festival

CEO Lucie Parkin will share her vision for the future of this highly successful Festival which celebrated its 25th anniversary last year. She will also continue to run the Abergavenny Writing Festival in April 2024.

17 June - Abergavenny, An Adventure Down Memory Lane

George Beale, life-long Abergavenny resident, local historian and family tree researcher, will lead us on an adventure into the history of Abergavenny with photos, newspaper cuttings and stories of some of the town's famous and infamous people.