



Abergavenny and District Civic Society

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Newsletter - September 2024

Dear friends

Another year of interesting meetings at the Methodist Church Hall attracting new members who tell me how much they have enjoyed the meetings and getting to know new people. We upgraded our sound system to overcome the problem of interference from equipment in the Methodist church and that also seems to have helped some of us who have difficulty hearing.

One of the highlights last year was the Christmas social when some members from our wonderful Borough Band came to give us some background history to band before playing some festive tunes for us. It was a thoroughly enjoyable evening and, with people donating their 100 Club winnings and popping loose change in a collecting bucket, we raised a good amount of money for the Band.

Our programme started with Duncan Fisher, co-founder and Director of Our Food 1200, describing exciting initiatives taking place just across the border in Powys to provide small plots of land for modern, regenerative fruit and vegetable farming to supply local markets. Frank Olding, local historian, gave us a fascinating, illustrated insight into the role played by the 80+ pubs and beer houses in Abergavenny, a vital element in the social history of our town. Gunter Mansion, on Cross Street, has also played a very important part in the history of Abergavenny and Deb Holland gave us an update on this fascinating restoration project which was recently awarded a substantial development grant by the National Lottery Heritage Fund. The Civic Society has supported and been involved in this project from the start.

Patrick Hannay gave a fascinating presentation on Climate Change, looking at why many of us shy away from the truth of what is happening. Unfortunately, the talk was beset with technical IT problems, but the message came through strong and clear, and all those IT glitches have now been resolved. Alastair Laurence, a freelance documentary film maker, curates a series of monthly Conversations in the Chapel. In conversation with our chairman, Tony Konieczny, he filled us in on these fascinating and inspiring evenings which fit so well with the various performances and workshops offered at the Chapel Café.

Lucy Parkin the new CEO of Abergavenny Food Festival, shared her vision for the future of this annual festival, one of many that brings people to Abergavenny but possibly the biggest and best known. The festival is not without its local critics but Lucie's passion and enthusiasm for making this festival relevant to the local population was clear, including making it much easier to buy tickets without needing to go on-line. We wish her every success in her new position as well as her continuing and very popular annual Abergavenny Writing Festival.

Our final meeting was a jaunt down Memory Lane with local historian and family tree researcher George Beale. He shared his wealth of knowledge, stories and anecdotes with a plethora of pictures bringing these events to life. The more he looked down Abergavenny's Memory Lane, the more he found so we look forward to part two in the new programme for 2024 – 25. One small criticism raised – we moved on from each photo too quickly and need a minute or two more to wallow in the nostalgia.

We were unable to learn more about the wonderful Laurie Jones community orchard due to a mix up last year – mea culpa! We will be putting that right by including this in the new programme in October.

We have some sad news to share, as member and good friend to the society, Andy Taurins, the first Latvian Honorary Consul in Wales, recently died at home in Llanellen. He will be much missed by all, and our deepest sympathy and condolences go to his wife and family.

Chairman's Report – Tony Konieczny

Another year gone and time to write a chairman's report for the Newsletter seems to have come round very quickly. I am pleased to start by saying that it has been a successful year for the Society. We welcomed some new members to our fold and together enjoyed some excellent meetings and lunches.

The continuing interest in our Society is reassuring to the members of the Executive Committee who are the driving force of the Society, working quietly behind the scenes. This year we welcomed Julie Miles as a new member. The committee meets monthly to discuss the organisation of forthcoming meetings, and keep updated on planning issues, including the Replacement Local Development Plan and Place Making. We also discuss social event planning and suggestions for future projects as well as keeping an eye on the financial position and membership numbers.



I am proud that the society played a small but important part in Abergavenny's success in Britain in Bloom last year. The Fairfield planters and the commissioned mural in Bailey Park impressed the judges and at the national award ceremony in London, Abergavenny walked away with a coveted Gold award as well as a National award for Sustainable Gardening. This year Abergavenny is hosting the annual Wales in Bloom Awards on 13 September in the Angel Hotel and some of our members have already volunteered to help with the organisation and delivery of this prestigious event.



We have now commissioned local artist Dannielle Farrington to create 3 murals in Bailey Park and they have been very popular with the wider public and users of the park. Buoyed by our success we are now looking for other areas to develop public art in our town.



The Placemaking process has finally got underway for Abergavenny after many delays. The Civic Society has a representative on the steering group and we look forward to providing guidance and insight into the development of this local regeneration plan.

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

Planning – Dick Cole

Replacement Local Development Plan 2018–2033: Our 2023 newsletter reported at some length on the Society's response to the county council's most recent Preferred Strategy for the Replacement Local Development Plan (RLDP). In summary, we welcomed the countywide reduction in the housebuilding target (from nearly 8,400 to about 6,000) and provision for affordable housing but were concerned that the jobs target would not be achievable, leading to more unsustainable commuting to work outside the county. We proposed that 5,250 extra homes would be plenty. The strategy contained other policies, such as that for zero carbon energy new housing, that were welcome subject to detailing, but regrettably no mention of 'green wedges' between the town and the National Park boundary or in the Gavenny Valley.

The Welsh Government broadly accepted the council's strategy and in October 2023 it was adopted by the full Council. Elected members were provided with a summary of all representations received, but with no officer's response to those such as that of the Civic Society who still had fundamental criticisms of the

targets. Such representations are intended to be considered and responded to when the fully detailed plan (the Deposit Plan) is scrutinised by members before the final consultation. Responses to that consultation (now expected in the autumn of 2024) will be dealt with by the independent Inspector who examines the plan. This procedure, which does not appear to contravene Regulations, means that the council now has little opportunity to make substantial amendments to the plan - that will be a matter for the Inspector. The Society feels that the council has thereby avoided debate and decisions about fundamental issues, relying only on the supportive views of the Welsh Government.

In March 2024 members of our executive committee met Paul Griffiths, the council's Deputy Leader, and Craig O'Connor, Head of Planning, to discuss these issues. They reassured us on a number of matters and conceded that an earlier response would have been helpful, but no substantial amendment of the strategy by the council is likely. We await the draft Deposit Plan in the next few weeks and will then have to consider whether to maintain our objections. Our countywide concerns about targets may remain, but we are less concerned about the proposals for Abergavenny, having accepted the East Abergavenny strategic development site if a number of conditions are met.

In late April a small group of interested persons, convened by Dick Cole, met Cllr Griffiths, Craig O'Connor and a representative of Monmouthshire Housing Association (site promoters) to discuss progress on planning the East Abergavenny development. We were somewhat reassured by the extent of expertise being applied to the matter but had to emphasise our need to be satisfied on several important requirements, notably the need for the early provision of an effective active travel crossing of the railway and A465. The draft Deposit RLDP should answer these concerns.

Other Matters: There have been very few planning applications requiring a Society response since the summer of 2023. The active travel (walking and cycling) improvements at Castle Meadows, generally supported by the Society in 2023, have been approved (controversial cattle grids are not part of the approval) as has the outdoor cycle track at Llanfoist. The application for a care home on the site of 54 Pen y Pound remains undecided, as does a proposal for three dwellings at the rear of 20-26 Brecon Road; the Society objected to both last year. Preparatory works for the more accessible new bridge at the railway station have started.

A minor amendment to the plans for the new King Henry VIII School replaces brickwork with dark grey aluminium cladding at parapet level on a large part of the south side of the building. Some may feel that this will be a welcome improvement:



As Approved in 2022



As Amended in 2024

We have made cautiously supportive comments on two draft County Council plans. The Transport Plan is unrealistically ambitious for the next five years and short on details, but useful as a longer-term set of aims. It focuses on sustainable travel, with few road improvement proposals, and is clearly highly dependent on Welsh Government funding, which currently emphasises active travel rather than, say, bus service improvements. Interestingly the draft observes that this rural county's best chance of reducing its transport carbon emissions would be by assisting the transition to electric vehicles. There is a welcome reference to the pavement parking problem but also a questionable suggestion that new homes should have fewer parking spaces.

The draft Economy, Employment and Skills Strategy was generally welcome, if somewhat over-ambitious having regard to competition for new jobs with other parts of Wales and the UK and the limited resources of the council to compete. The Society had to record its regret that the strategy provided no convincing

reasoning that the RLDP job creation target is achievable. Economic strategies can be expected to be over-ambitious, but development plans must be deliverable.

The Society has contributed further comments on the developing plans for safer active travel links to the awaited new Usk bridge from the Llanfoist side of the river. We are generally content with the outcome, which we hope will be the subject of public consultation in the coming weeks.

Our 2023 newsletter also mentioned the prospect of a Placemaking Plan for Abergavenny looking at the future needs and priorities for our town centre. Welsh Government, County and Town Council funding is now in place, consultants have been appointed, and the first meeting of the steering group, on which the Society is represented, has recently taken place. The plan is to be finished by the end of March and we will be active contributors, encouraging wide engagement by the community.

We have recently been considering some issues arising from the generally welcome pavement café culture of the town centre. Some structures are unused, some are in a poor condition, some detract from street views in the Conservation Area. A review of the county council's policy is expected in the autumn.

Communication and Social Secretary – Judith Vicary

Staring out over the sea on a warm day in Falmouth, it is hard to remember what a very chilly day it was when fifty members and friends of Abergavenny Civic Society sat down in the Community Centre last January to enjoy a tasty Syrian meal, thanks to Rasha Rasa, who is co-owner of locally run Zenobia Syrian Home-cooked food.

We hope to continue arranging three social lunch gatherings throughout the year, in January, May and October, giving members a chance to socialise together. For those without transport we have successfully arranged lifts to the Golf Club.

We would welcome suggestions from members for other opportunities to get together.

Membership - Sue Konieczny, Membership Secretary

Our general membership increased once more this year to 104 paid up members. We are quietly gaining members from the Plas Elvyrch flats as well as others who have heard about our meetings.

As always, we are hugely grateful for all the support given to us by our business members. We know how much our small and large businesses alike contribute to keep Abergavenny vibrant and viable and would encourage everyone to use our local businesses and market stalls whenever possible

The Angel Hotel, Celtic Computer Systems, Emmeline's Tearoom, Jaybee Soft Furnishing, Judd Brothers, The Kings Arms, Owen Davies Consulting 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 in an envelope with your name on it, 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. Alternatively, please 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

sort code 51-61-02

account number 01523430

Under 65 - £10

Over 65 - £8

Student - £1

Financial Report – Ian Vicary, Treasurer

Our income, that's mainly membership subscriptions, donations, net 100 Club receipts, etc., increased by approx. £300 to £3,016 and our outgoings increased by approx. £800 to £2824, including new speaker and mic system and a new mural in Bailey Park. We also part funded a second mural. Thus, a surplus for the year of £192 which is fine as we are a non-profit making organisation.

We continued to fund the upkeep and watering of the flower beds opposite Cibi Walk and we also gave a donation to the Borough Band after they entertained us so well at our Christmas meeting.

The three lunches were well subscribed, especially the Syrian meal at the Community Centre in January when 50 members and guests enjoyed something a little different from turkey and stuffing. At the end of the meal, we had a collection which raised £140 for the Community Centre. Whilst we are always on the lookout for new venues nothing has matched the golf club for value for money, parking and quality of food.

With overall funds of £18,000 we continue to look for opportunities where we can help to make Abergavenny a better place 'to work, rest and play'. We have made a pledge of £5000 towards the purchase of the land at the rear of the Plas Gunter Mansion and await news of progress from the Plas Gunter Mansion Trust on their negotiations with the owners of the land.

Please let us have your suggestions for things we could do to improve the town, and venues for future lunches.

100 Club – Ian Vicary

This year we sold 93 numbers, slightly up on the previous year albeit two were sold after the first draw. Thirty prizes were paid out amounting to £850, and there was the usual £20 lottery licence fee. I am hoping that for 2024/25 we can sell all 100 numbers with your continued generosity.

Numbers are £24 each and you can have as many as you like. The more you have the greater chance of winning something; and your friends and family can buy numbers as well so please spread the word.

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 2025

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

Please note that the AGM is on the first Monday of October this year.

9 September – Creating a Placemaking Plan for Abergavenny Town Centre with Chris Jones, Regeneration and Owen Davies, Consulting

Monmouthshire County Council and Abergavenny Town Council are working together to develop a placemaking plan for Abergavenny. For a Placemaking Plan to be successful, it is vital that it is based on a clear understanding of the place and its people, identifying opportunities for positive change and providing coordination for proposed projects and activities. From the start, the consultants need to engage with a wide range of stakeholders and get creative input into shaping the future of the town. Chris and Owen want to listen to your views, so come along and have your say.

7 October - AGM at 7pm followed at 7.30 by a talk about Abergavenny Community Orchard

Susan Holder and Simon Bilsborough will give an illustrated talk showing how the Laurie Jones Community Orchard started up 11 years ago, highlighting the range of events and annual celebrations based in the orchard. This little-known gem is given as an exemplar by the Wales in Bloom judges

11 November – A Vision for Sustainable Town Planting with Sarah Price, Chelsea Gold Medal winner

Sarah, a resident of Abergavenny, will talk about her approach to town planting in 5 areas of the town centre as commissioned by the Town Council. Most will know her wonderful garden design for the Chapel and this year she opened her own garden to the public.

9 December – Xmas Social – details to be confirmed

18 January 2025 – A chance to socialise over a meal – venue tbc

10 February – Food Security and Regenerative Agriculture in our area – Sarah Dickins

Award-winning journalist and documentary maker who spent more than two decades honing her skills at the BBC, Sarah lives locally and, with her partner Nick Miller, jointly owns an organic Welsh hill farm where award-winning organic, purely pasture fed lambs are raised. They have started a regenerative agriculture project.

10 March - Will Davies, Cadw Inspector of Ancient Monuments & Archaeology, East Wales

An insight into the wide-ranging work of a Cadw inspector, touching on projects from Neolithic cairns to nuclear bunkers and everything in between.

14 April – Meeting topic and speakers tbc

12 May – The Gavenny Project- Kate Stinchcombe, Ecology Officer MCC

This project was started by the Civic Society in partnership with NRW and initially ran for 5 years with funding before the pandemic brought the project to a standstill. In July 2024 the project was resurrected as part of MCC's Green Infrastructure Plan

9 June - Nevill Hall Cancer Unit – (speakers tbc)

In the restructuring of services at Nevill Hall, a new expanded cancer treatment centre to replace the Windsor Suite has been commissioned. Additionally, a new £38 million radiotherapy 'satellite centre' is being built which should be open in early 2025. This will enable patients to have treatment locally rather than travel to Velindre.