



Abergavenny and District Civic Society

*Preserving the best, improving the rest
A great place to live, work and visit*

www.abercivsoc.com

Dear friends,

our year started well at the September 2019 meeting with Mike Powell and Mark Lloyd of MCC giving us a run-down on the range of EU-funded rural development initiatives, including a rural transport feasibility study that has led to a UK GovTech pilot project using the latest technology to integrate transport options on a daily basis to meet peoples' needs. Jack Thurston of the Abergavenny Cycle Group then gave us a spirited talk encouraging cycling and walking rather than using the car. The following month, Cheryll Haskell, Hub Manager, provided an update on the refurbishment of the Town Hall followed by a lively Q and A session.



In November, a packed audience welcomed Julian Hayman, Programming Manager of The Grange University Hospital. This was a presentation of great interest to members and was followed by many challenging questions. Where Mr Hayman was unable to provide an answer on the evening a subsequent email was sent to members.

For our Christmas social, we welcomed back Don Balkwill who fascinated and teased members with a selection of his 'Forgotten Gadgets' whilst members enjoyed some of our famous non-alcoholic punch and some nibbles and a chance to chat with each other.

The new year 2020 was kicked off with our usual lunch, this time at Monmouthshire Golf Club, where we filled the place and enjoyed a tasty meal in convivial surroundings.

In February, Dame Claire Clancy, DCB DL, High Sheriff of Gwent enlightened us as to the role of High Sheriff and gave some background information about her life prior to becoming Sheriff. She arrived in ghastly weather laden down with a large hat box, her court dress with silver buttons and lace jabot, shoes with silver buckles and documentation of when she was appointed Dame Commander of the Order of the Bath in the Queen's 2017 birthday honours. It was illuminating and fascinating in equal part and even our youngest attendee, aged 8, was thrilled to meet Dame Claire.



Following a specific request, society member Dr Gill Wakley researched Abergavenny place and street names and shared her findings with us in March. Although an interesting and informative meeting, it was not as well attended as usual with members understandably becoming anxious about the Covid-19 virus that was spreading and about to change all our lives. All further meetings were cancelled.

Grateful thanks go to all our speakers who give so generously of their time to provide us with such a fantastic programme and thanks to Kath and Clive Bransom for providing tea and coffee at meetings.

Our Society wants and needs members with new ideas to keep Abergavenny a bustling and vibrant town, people who want to get actively involved. The executive committee welcomes suggestions, fresh ideas for projects and new members to stop us from getting stale. Tell us of any project consistent with our objectives that you think we might carry out or support, especially if you fancy taking a lead to help make it happen. We are especially anxious to get enthusiastic younger people engaged in our activities, whether still at school, in mid-life with some spare time, or recently retired. The present committee re-booted the Society over ten years ago and are of course all now ten+ years older! Want to get involved? Please get in touch at abercivsoc@gmail.com.

Keeping in Touch

It is now over four months since the Society had to cancel its programme of meetings at the Methodist Church Hall and scale down its other activities although the 100 Club draw completed its season over Zoom thanks to Ian and Judith Vicary so many congratulations to the winners.

With the wonders of Zoom, your Committee (or most of them) recently met again to consider how we might resume anything like normal service. Our most obvious conclusion was that we wanted and needed to keep in touch with our membership, most of whom we can reach by email as well as through our usual annual newsletter. We also agreed to postpone our AGM until at least April 2021 and not to seek subscriptions before then. We do not intend to hold any Church Hall meetings before the end of 2020 at the earliest, but will keep the possibility of starting a new programme under review, having regard to the views of the hall managers, social distancing requirements, etc. We anticipate that it will be many months before a lot of our older or more vulnerable members will want to come together in this way. However, if you need support in any way, do get in touch and if we can, we will help and if we can't, we may be able to put you in touch with someone who can.

As we aim to send news updates periodically in the coming months, we need your contributions to do this. Please let us have news of what is happening on projects such as the Gunter Mansion or Bailey Park or other green spaces like Linda Vista. We would particularly welcome hearing from our business affiliates and finding out how they have managed to weather the Covid challenges.

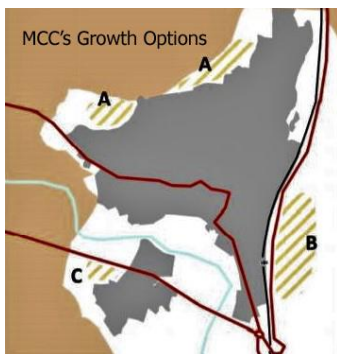
We would appreciate the views of members on the possibility of us arranging talks, quizzes, etc via Zoom, which we are happy to do but need to know if you have the capability or would even like to contribute in some way. We also need suggestions for topics or speakers that might feature in our programme, if and when, normal service resumes.

We decided to continue with the 100 Club as it provides income that allows us to carry out or support local improvement projects. However, if we do not reach a good number of takers, prizes may have to be proportionately reduced, though without reducing your chance of winning.

Both walking and cycling have increased during lockdown and we hope that townsfolk will continue to exercise in this way. Our well-illustrated £5 book '**Exploring Abergavenny**' can make slower moving around the town more interesting. If you don't yet have one, or want to make a gift of one, the best place to buy a copy at present is at Cable News on the corner of Frogmore Street and Baker Street.

Replacing the Local Development Plan (RLDP) – Dick Cole

The County Council started public consultation on their RLDP before Covid-19 lockdown and we were immediately concerned by the scale of market housing growth planned by 2033. The Chronicle



published our Vice Chairman's letter urging people to take an interest as it can be too late to object when the planning applications for particular fields are submitted. The pandemic caused consultation to be paused, but we prepared a lengthy draft response and sent this to all members in June for comment. A few positive comments were received, one reasonably suggesting that we make it clearer that we would welcome some growth, but only if the local jobs/housing balance is satisfactory. No adverse comments were received, and only minor amendments are envisaged if more recent developments result in little change of MCC policy.

Early in July the Welsh Government wrote to all planning authorities highlighting the fact that the climate and nature emergency plus the pandemic meant that we must give priority to tackling homelessness, the need for social housing and providing fair work to address social and economic inequalities. As a result of the pandemic and the resulting downturn in the economy, much of the evidence on which LDPs are based is considered likely to be out of date, and plans, like that for Monmouthshire, that are still being reviewed should be reassessed. That assessment must be submitted to Welsh Government along with a new Delivery Agreement (the

programme for delivering the new plan) which must be approved before a new six-week consultation can begin. MCC officers aim to report both matters to the Council in September. We hope that the huge post-pandemic uncertainties will cause MCC to adopt a more cautious approach to their strategy, while addressing the priorities described by Welsh Government.

Planning Applications

There have been few planning applications in the Abergavenny area since March, and none that have needed a Civic Society response. MCC's Planning Committee has rejected their officer's advice and refused an application for a small home in Fosterville Crescent that, last year, we considered poorly designed and substandard. Despite some improvements to the plans, we have restated our objection in principle to an application for housing on Hereford Road at Llantilio Pertholey.

Before lockdown we objected to the use of an employment site at Westgate, Llanfoist, for extra care bungalows as our area badly needs local jobs and such housing could be provided elsewhere. This application has not yet been decided. Going back to last December, we did not object to plans to extend the Aldi store but did object to the associated repositioning of the ATS premises which we felt would be overdevelopment of the site with insufficient improvement of this entrance to the town centre, especially with landscaping. This application is also undetermined – minor changes have been submitted that would not satisfy all our concerns. Another undetermined application is the controversial proposal for 18 apartments on the corner of Merthyr Road and Gypsy Lane at Llanfoist – again minor improvements have been submitted.

The Town Centre

In June we responded to MCC's welcome survey asking for residents' views and ideas on how town centres could be helped to recover from the lockdown. Some of our suggestions have materialised and others may yet happen as there are still restrictions to be eased. With Welsh Government help, confidence in shopping in the town has already been raised by County and Town Council measures and the hard work of traders. We have been pleased that the exclusion of traffic from Upper Cross Street in peak shopping hours has added to the pleasure of shopping there and in Market Street. The scheme may need some fine tuning if it becomes permanent, for example by allowing local bus services access. We have been impressed by the town's floral displays in a difficult year and we particularly look forward to the Town Council's plans for the replanting of old beds once they are able to do so. Helping such projects is one of the Society's priorities for using the revenue from subscriptions and the 100 Club.

Challenges of getting the town buzzing again – Lucy Hwyl, from *That's Lovely That*, a representative of Y-Fenni Business Community (YBC)

Abergavenny town is slowly opening up, although a few shops are working on reduced hours, as are all the banks and building societies. The reason for shorter hours is due to trade dropping off quite dramatically from about 12 o'clock, some retailers still doing deliveries so needing the afternoon free and sales that take double work at the moment. It's not just a case of letting a customer walk into the shop - it's having to keep an eye on the numbers that come in, making sure that customers are comfortable as well as social distancing and cleansing of hands, etc. That said, most retailers are happy to take a cautious approach rather than to go full steam ahead and have to close down at a later date.

Y-Fenni Business Community (YBC) worked closely with Monmouthshire County Council in opening up the high street. Lower Cross Street is now closed to traffic during the day. Initially there was a negative reaction from retailers and customers alike, but now that the change has settled in, there seems to be a very positive reaction from everybody. This has been helped by additional free parking spaces including disabled spaces being made available in Tiverton Place car park. Bunting is due to be placed throughout the town over the next couple of weeks which will also add to the ambience. MCC is also actively encouraging restaurants and pubs to come out on to the street, creating a very European, cosmopolitan feel to the town, and with the dry weather the word on the street is that Abergavenny is open for business and looking lovely.

Sadly, but not unexpectedly, there have been some casualties. As I write I understand Coffee Number One has fallen through. The ladies' clothing shop Rodmel's in Lower Cross Street has now closed down. We are still waiting to find out if the Edinburgh Woollen Mill and Bon Marche will reopen. The Victorian Tearooms closed down during lockdown but the good news is that new owners have been found and are presently refurbishing the premises with a view to opening in September. The old Richards' site has been taken over by Timothy Oulton (also located in the old Homes of Elegance premises) and one of the vacant units in Cibi Walk has also become occupied, so some good news in these unusual times.

As the town started to come out of lockdown it was apparent that we are all part of one big jigsaw. The shops are very dependent on the cafés and restaurants as indeed they are on the shops. The lack of lavatories stood out in the first few weeks and it is interesting to realise that it is not just one age group that needs them, it is all age groups. The lack of lavatories definitely had an adverse impact on shoppers in the initial few weeks of opening. In early August restaurants and cafés are being allowed to have customers indoors which is also good news and the town is really starting to get its buzz back.

Each day we see regular customers coming back, gradually finding their feet, but we are under no illusion that there is a long haul ahead. That said Abergavenny has a better chance than most. We are a varied town with an amazing offering and that will carry us forward.

Horticultural lockdown fun and frolics – Judith Vicary, Communications Secretary

Abergavenny Town Council, and a small army of volunteers, have made every effort to create small corners of cheerfulness and welcome in and around the town in an attempt to portray an atmosphere of reassurance, hope and normality in very abnormal times. They are all to be heartily congratulated.



One delightful corner on the edge of town must surely be the displays in the stone planters, an Abergavenny Civic Society project, by the entrance to the Fairfield Car Park. They have been regularly watered by a truly dedicated and determined woman under the most extraordinary conditions. A member of Civic Society herself, Anna Petts sometimes had no access to a nearby tap, and so struggled to bring water in a shopping trolley from home

several times a week, to keep the plants alive. Since then an agreement has been made with Russell from Willows Garden Centre, Usk and he has now included these planters in his rounds thereby lightening her load. Many of the perennials were from her and another member's own garden, and this year, her floral combinations of pinks, blues and yellows have brought intense pleasure to shoppers as they return from town to the carpark.



Bailey Park boasts a number of gardens with varying themes, and the challenge of sustaining shrubs, perennials and herbaceous borders has proved to be almost insurmountable, particularly over the very dry weather. Watering cans filled from the Park stream to water upwards of ten flowerbeds and "chain gangs" of helpers called upon as needed to try and stop precious plants from dying. Fortunately, MCC has now installed a large tank with a tap so that water is more easily accessed. It is hoped that a pump may be made

available to make the job much easier for the ageing and diminishing team of volunteer gardeners.



The Civic Society continues to sponsor and maintain the Sunken Garden in Bailey Park, and this has matured since last Spring when it was first replanted after years of neglect. Its sunny situation has enabled plants such as pink and white gaura, and orange and yellow gaillardia to flourish quite freely. Most of the present gardeners in Bailey Park are also



members of the Civic Society, and this reflects their mutual aim to make Bailey Park a place of welcome, calm and beauty.



Town planting has not been affected by the Pandemic, and there are pleasing railing displays of predominantly trailing begonias and geraniums in reds and oranges outside the Angel Hotel and by the entrance to Bailey Park amongst other places. The Town Hall and Cross Street boast a fine display of baskets attached to lamp posts, and there are other colourful planters around the town, including behind the Market Hall. A further feature are the planters of Sarah Price,

a local garden designer who has been commissioned by the Town Council to improve many areas of Abergavenny with new planting once the pandemic allows. Sarah's displays are more subtle, and her pollinator friendly plants include dark red dahlias, pale pink gaura, purple cerinthe and lemon achillea.



Cibi Walk, usually so vibrant with its hanging baskets, sadly has no floral displays this year. The flowers and watering would usually be the responsibility of the owners of the precinct. Similarly, there is a dearth of floral displays outside private shops and businesses. However, Parry's Estate Agents in Nevill Street, are proudly displaying several well-kept baskets with a riot of petunias and pink balcony geraniums. There are still red and white geraniums bravely flowering around Casa Bianca's external dining area. The Greyhound Vaults pub, which normally boasts one of the loveliest displays in the town,



has been closed for many months and sadly, reminds us that this year is far from normal, as there is no splash of colour outside. However, it is heartening to see the wonderful colours of the Legends Café display and a more subtle colour scheme outside the podiatrist next door

Membership - Mike Foden, Membership Secretary

This year individual membership remained fairly static. We lost 16 members over the year but in fact we made up these losses with 19 new members who were interested in joining to see what we get up to. We currently have 116 paid up members.

Some memberships were cancelled due to serious illness and it is with great sadness that we report the deaths of 3 longstanding and valued members who had contributed to the society and local community over many years – Vic Barratt, a town councillor for many years who had served Abergavenny as Mayor and upon whom had been bestowed the honour of being a Burgess of the town; Phyl Merton Jones, whose husband Dick had been a major supporter of the society and whose experience as an architect and builder was invaluable in assessing planning applications; Kath Bransom who had worked tirelessly for so many community organisations as well as acting as Social Secretary for the society for many years until her health deteriorated earlier this year. We remember them all with great fondness.

We are hugely grateful for all the support given to us by the following affiliated business members:

The Angel Hotel, Celtic Computer Systems, Emmeline's Tearoom, The Hardwick Restaurant, Homemakers Recycling, Jaybee Soft Furnishing, Judd Brothers, The Kings Arms, Owen Davies Consulting, Catherine Roberts and Steven Harris (Architecture & Energy), Smiles Better dentists, Taurins Taylor Associates and the Wool Croft.

The proceeds from their support over the years, together with help from the 100 club monies, has enabled the Civic Society to proceed with some of its more ambitious projects and there are more in the pipeline.

Subscriptions for 2020 – 21 are being waived as meetings had to be cancelled before the end of the programme and we have no real idea when we will be able to resume. However if you are not planning to remain in the Society for whatever reason then please let me know by email at mikejudy@talktalk.net and I can update the membership records accordingly so you will not be inundated with unwanted emails.

Finances and 100 Club – Ian Vicary, Treasurer

The finances of the Society remain on a solid footing thanks to a growing membership and to the successful 100 Club.

Since the publication of the 'Take a Look at Abergavenny' book and the completion of the Fairfield carpark scheme our expenses have been minimal so we can survive a year with no subscriptions as decided at the recent Zoom Committee meeting. However, we agreed to continue with the 100 Club, to bring a bit of quarterly excitement into people's lives whilst putting some money into the coffers – you can watch the actual draw which will take place over Zoom providing you with more excitement. Numbers cost just £24 each for the year and can be paid by bank transfer, cheque or even cash with non or minimal contact. If we fall far short of the 100, we may need to adjust the prize money accordingly but hopefully everyone will wish to continue supporting us in this way.

Please consider setting up a standing order for September or bank transfer your money, with a suitable reference like your name and 100 Club (eg Mr Winner 100 club), to:

Natwest account sort code 51-61-02 account number 01523430

Or you can send a cheque for the total amount to me or drop cash off in an envelope to **17 Lansdown Drive, Abergavenny, NP7 6AW**. Please call me on **854929** for any **more information** or to request a **standing order form or download one from our website** www.abercivsoc.com

We are very happy to look at suitable projects to sponsor which will improve our town; if you can suggest any area that needs a makeover, or have any other ideas for improving the town, please let us know. Whilst the 'In Bloom competition' was cancelled this year, some members are still trying hard to bring a splash of colour, for example the Sunken Garden in Bailey Park, which we have jointly funded with the Town Council.