



Abergavenny and District Civic Society

Preserving the best, improving the rest

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Newsletter - September 2022

Dear friends

Welcome back to a new year of interesting and thought-provoking presentations, all connected to our wonderful town. I would like, firstly, to pass on our commiserations to Sue after her terrible accident whilst on holiday, and on behalf of all our members, wish her a complete recovery very soon.

We are looking forward to a year of meetings where we can finally see our members in the flesh, to converse and socialise in a way that has been impossible in recent times.

In last year's Newsletter, Sue defined the word **Zoom**, and its diverse meaning, so I decided to look a bit further into the man who founded it, as I suspect few across the world have wondered about his identity and origins. The people I have asked, including a senior computer engineer, had no idea of his name.

Eric Juan was born in China fifty two years ago, and was the son of geology engineers. While he was in University, he had a girlfriend who lived ten hours away by train. He therefore decided to create a video conferencing software so that he could talk to her face to face more easily.

Eventually gaining a Masters degree in Geology Engineering, he dreamed of living in Silicon Valley, having been inspired by a talk given by Bill Gates. However, it took him nine attempts to acquire a visa in order to go and live and work in America, and he was finally successful when he got a job with a company called WebEx. His Zoom creation was not initially of interest to the company, so he developed his own, Zoom Communications. In 2013, Zoom had one million users. After Covid interrupted our lives, it became billions, and in 2020, Eric's personal wealth was deemed to be over four billion dollars. He married his girlfriend of student days, and they share three children.

So, what did we do to try preserve some normality in our lives during the past year? In September, we were confident enough for the Committee to meet in the Melville Theatre, and I for one felt quite strange talking to other Committee members who had simply been faces on a screen for the past two years. However, the threat of Covid was looming large again, as the winter approached, so we agreed it would be wiser to Zoom our AGM in October.

Mike Foden resigned as Membership Secretary, after many years of dedication to the service of the Civic Society, and we thank him and wish him, and Judy, well in his long overdue retirement and in their new apartment overlooking Linda Vista gardens! Tony Konieczny was proposed by Dick to take over as Chair from Phil Bowyer, to whom we also say thank you for being in charge during a particularly harrowing time. Peter John agreed to remain as Secretary for another year.

At Christmas, Rosemary Parkhouse from Bee Friendly Monmouthshire gave a short talk on pollinators and how we can help them through the winter. This was followed by the Chairman's Xmas quiz once the 100 club draw had taken place. Mince pies and mulled wine once more needed to be imagined or hastily put together at home.

After some glitches over Zoom, MCC's Carl Touhig, gave a presentation on waste management and recycling, but reflecting his wider job remit, he also talked about the department's climate and emergency work that is being done in waste and grounds maintenance.

In March, Patrick Hannay, architect and environmental champion, gave a thought-provoking talk about how climate change will impact on our use of transport in the future.

In May, the Civic Society was finally able to return a "real world" meeting at the Methodist Church Hall to hear an alarming talk by Kim Waters, of Welsh Rivers Union, about the poor state of the River Usk. Since then, I have become aware of low water levels cutting off parts of the river, preventing fish from travelling upstream, and water temperatures threatening their very existence.



In June, Amelia Pannett, Cadw's Field Monument Warden, gave a fascinating talk about The Graig, which survives as a complete post Medieval hillside village near Llanfoist Fawr, and was occupied as late as the 18th to early 20th century.

Ian and I had fun pulling out all the counters for the 100 Club in our conservatory while we Zoomed, and I was relieved when we never actually won anything!

Six of our Civic Society members, with other Friends, are still striving to keep the gardens in Bailey Park looking colourful, although the past few weeks have been a real challenge with watering, and we are just thankful that our perennials are well established and have valiantly struggled on, even if they do look a bit tired and have lost their colour rather early. We are seriously thinking about planting palm trees and cacti next year, and we fear that the days of summer bedding may be numbered! Fortunately, the Wales in Bloom judge had visited us before the demise of the bedding plants, and the Town has fingers crossed for another top Award this year.



May I just once more pay tribute to two of our members who sadly passed away this year. John Wilson was a founder member of Abergavenny Civic Society, and we owe much to his dedication over many years. John served the Society with commitment and passion and was the Chair a number of times over the years. He was instrumental in the movement to modernise the Society in 2010 when it very nearly voted to wind up, with dwindling membership and difficulty in electing the officers of the Society. John continued to support our meetings as a regular attendee for the rest of his life.

Bill Craze, whom I remember from his bookshop days, also sadly left us earlier this year.

When we meet again on September 12th, we will all be bracing ourselves for new challenges facing us this winter but let us hope that we can look forward to a Zoomless Civic Society, where we can enjoy the simple pleasure of socialising with old friends. Sorry, Eric Juan. A few more dollars lost to you as we leave Zoom.

With very best wishes to you all,
Judith, Communications Secretary.

Chairmans Report - Tony Konieczny

The Civic Society has managed to continue to meet throughout the restrictions of the pandemic over Zoom. There was a good attendance online, but many felt that it was not the same community experience of being together in the Methodist Church Hall.

In May and June, we felt able to hold our first face to face meetings after nearly two years of restrictions and it was pleasing to see a strong attendance from our members.

The Executive Committee members have been busy working on a programme for the forthcoming year and would welcome any suggestions from the membership for speakers and topics they would like us to include in our future programmes.

We are always looking for enthusiastic members to join the Executive Committee or take on some of the officer roles. Many of the Committee have served the Society for many years and if we are to have a vibrant future, we need to have members who are prepared to take over and take the Society forward.

Way back in 2010, the Society came close to winding up because the membership was dwindling, and nobody was prepared to take on the key roles to administer the Society. It would be a shame after all our efforts to make the Civic Society a vibrant, proactive community body to see it decline once again through a lack of support. If you would like to discuss how you can become more involved in shaping the future of the Society just get in touch with the Secretary or any of the Society's officers.

I look forward to seeing you all at our first meeting of the 2022/2023 season on 12th September.

Planning – Dick Cole

Replacement Local Development Plan: Our August 2021 Newsletter set out in summary the views that the Society was about to submit as its response to the County Council's consultation on its Preferred Strategy for a new Local Development Plan. While we sympathised with the Council's need to provide more local jobs and more affordable homes, for a number of reasons we rejected the proposal to plan for over 8,000 new homes in Monmouthshire 2018-33 (with about 1,900 at Abergavenny/Llanfoist), built at an average rate of over twice that of the last fifteen years. Over 3,600 would have to be on new sites, mostly greenfield (about 900 at Abergavenny/Llanfoist). One reason was that the strategy conflicted with, even undermined, the Welsh Government's national strategy of concentrating most of SE Wales's growth in Cardiff, Newport and the Valleys.

The Welsh Government response to the strategy was even more critical, saying that because of existing commitments there was no need to allocate any more land in the county for housing. This view did not seem to square easily with the Government's pressure to provide more affordable housing. A Council committee considered the Government views in January this year and the Society submitted a note questioning officers' implication that the Council should proceed with its strategy and suggesting that there was scope for compromise.

It was subsequently announced that council and government officials were liaising and that a report would be presented to full Council in late Summer 2022 seeking a decision on how to proceed. In May the local elections resulted in a minority administration by the Labour Party and we are aware that the report and decision may be slightly delayed. The new Deputy Leader is well aware of our past views on the matter and we hope for an outcome that is more acceptable to the Society. The need to resolve how and where development may proceed without adding to pollution concerns in the Usk and Wye rivers will be a major factor.

Planning Applications: In March 2022 the County Council approved a Velo Park at Llanfoist (generally supported by the Society in June 2021) but the Welsh Government intervened to stop the issuing of approval and this remains the position. Among the planning applications on which we have expressed views since last August are those for the new school on the King Henry VIII site (at length and including disappointment with a number of elements of the consultation process, building design, recreation provision, and off-site active travel provision); and development at Nevill Hall Hospital (supported apart from the need for better screening of the car park); a new police station at Llanfoist (some criticisms).



The new school was approved with little amendment; the others have yet to be decided. Positive and negative comments have been expressed on a number of more minor applications, sometimes reflected in the subsequent decisions.



Plas Elyrch, McCarthy Stone retirement housing

Opinions on this development were mixed!

Membership - Sue Konieczny, Membership Secretary

Subscriptions for 2021 -22 were started once again as we expected to make various payments over this year. We had 85 paid-up members and two new members who we welcomed at our 'live' May meeting.

A few of our wise elder statesmen and women have made the decision not to renew their membership as they felt unable to attend evening meetings and were not confident attempting to zoom. We thank them for their very many years of support for the Society and their local community and wish them good health.

As always, we are hugely grateful for all the support given to us by our business members over many years. We know how difficult the past few years have been for small and large businesses alike and to 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, 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 and the Wool Croft.

If any business or other members wish to lapse their membership for whatever reason, then please let me know by email at abercivsoc@gmail.com and I will update the records accordingly so you will not be inundated with unwanted emails. Otherwise please send your cheques to either me at 125 Park Crescent, Abergavenny, NP7 5TN or to 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

Finances and 100 Club – Ian Vicary, Treasurer

This last year we reintroduced membership subscriptions and this, together with the 100 Club, means that we have more than made good the previous years deficit with a healthy surplus. We donated £250 to help the Abergavenny Arts Festival and supported Friends of Bailey Park jointly with the Town Council, with the cost of Jubilee rose bushes in the sunken garden.

Because of the resurgence of Covid and the return to Zoom meetings, hall hire and speaker costs were greatly reduced.

We sold 93 numbers for the 100 Club and are hoping that, with your support and generosity, we can sell all 100 this time round. What we also want from you are ideas about how we can use the proceeds to further the aims of the Society – to make Abergavenny a great place to live, work and visit – projects small or large; please let us have your suggestions.