

## Rebuilding a civic society: Abergavenny and District Civic Society

In 2009 Abergavenny Civic Society was on the point of closing down due to dwindling membership, a decreasingly active committee and an events programme consisting only of talks. Local residents Tony and Sue Konieczny and architect Stefan Horowskyj were keen to turn the Civic Society back into a proactive working civic society and together created a new committee under the chairmanship of Alan Michie, a retired local businessman.

### First steps

#### 1 'The Good, Bad and Ugly' photographic competition

This event significantly, and quickly, raised the profile of the reformed Society. News of the photographic competition was spread by visiting all the local schools, articles in the paper and calling into Abergavenny shops who were also asked to donate prizes. These prizes were then raffled and the money used to provide prize money for the competition. Money was also donated by the town council. Entrants



**Abergavenny Civic Society  
Photo Competition!**

**Open to all**

We're keen to improve our town for the benefit of visitors as well as people who live and work here. We want to know what you think are the good, bad and ugly parts of town are so we can work towards making improvements – and we'd like you to do this by taking photos of these places.

Everyone who enters an eligible photo will have it displayed in town and online during June and July. At the end of the competition, entries will be judged by a special panel and prizes awarded!

Who can enter?	Prizes:
Everyone. Whether you work, live or visit Abergavenny, we want your photos	1st and 2nd prizes for a Good, Bad and Ugly entry in each age range
Age ranges:	When?
5 – 11, 12 – 15, 16 – 18 and 18+	6 June to 22 July 2011

**Who is running the competition?**  
Abergavenny Civic Society! We aim to generate pride in the town, its environment and its residents and celebrate Abergavenny as a great place to live, work and visit. We also aim to support local businesses, foster local traditions, protect the environment, welcome visitors and encourage active participation in community life.

**Abergavenny Civic Society  
Photo Competition!**

**How to enter?**

Just email [gbaabergavenny@gmail.com](mailto:gbaabergavenny@gmail.com) with the following information:

- Name
- Age (for adult write 18+)
- Address
- Email
- Phone number
- Your image – attached to the email. It must be 2MB or greater in resolution
- Please provide a caption for your photograph 15 words or less, a description of your photographs

**Please note:**

- We're looking for photos of places not people!
- You can submit up to three photographs – one good, one bad and one ugly.
- Any entries with abusive or personal derogatory language will be ruled ineligible.
- The copyright for all photographs submitted will be the property of the Abergavenny and District Civic Society.



## ABERGAVENNY & DISTRICT CIVIC SOCIETY



**"Preserving the best,  
improving the rest"**

### A great place to live, work & visit

Working in partnership with members,  
friends & organisations:

- MCC
- Abergavenny Town Council
- Keep Wales Tidy
- Keep Abergavenny Tidy
- Abergavenny Business Club
- 7 Corners  
aca

Contact: [abercivsoc@gmail.com](mailto:abercivsoc@gmail.com)



took their photos into a local photography shop, Shackleton Photographic, who undertook all the printing for free. The positive response to the competition surprised and delighted the reformed Civic Society, as did people's reactions to the exhibition of the photos in a vacant shop in the town. The exhibition saw visitors chatting to each other about the photos and their subject. Far more photographs were entered under the 'good' title. Although many photographs were also submitted under the

headings of 'bad' and 'ugly', this provided evidence of what needed doing around the town. The Society worked with other groups to make changes for example working with Keep Abergavenny Tidy to undertake litter clearing. The photographs named and shamed the council to improve rusty railings and mucky signs, and a young offenders group got involved in clearing up graffiti. The photos can be viewed on the Civic Society's Flickr page (<http://www.flickr.com/photos/abergavennygbu/sets/>).

## 2 Get support and help from the Civic Trust for Wales

One of the first meetings of the newly reformed society was with the Director of the Civic Trust for Wales, Matthew Griffiths. He gave a talk to the society about a sense of place and understanding place. The Civic Trust is at the end of the phone to provide support to societies.

## 3 Committee organisation

At the same time as the competition was in process, the new Chair reorganised the structure of the society. Active committee sub-groups were formed around the Society's volunteers interests. This has resulted in the following projects:

### 1 SMART TOWN

This project sub-committee focuses on parts of the town that are crying out for improvement and some TLC. Areas of need are identified and improvements are made for example one such area is a narrow strip of land between a car park and a residential street. The land contains a few elderly trees and little else except compacted rubble, various weeds and litter. The plan is to level up the ground surface, install a selection of colourful raised beds for planting, some trees, with the possible addition of some simple sculptural features alluding to Abergavenny's traditional fairground, part of the town's heritage. Due to council budget cuts the intention is to use recycled materials where possible, and make

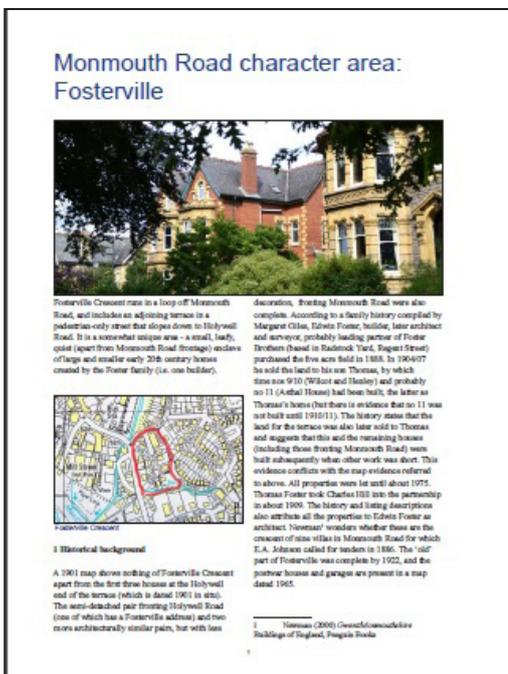
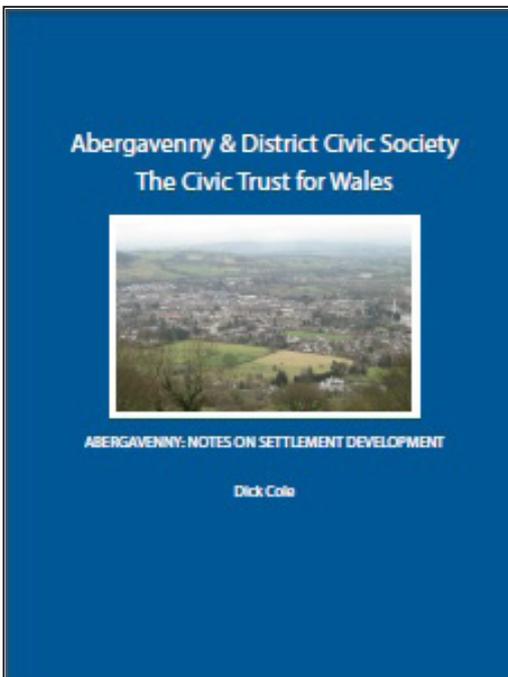
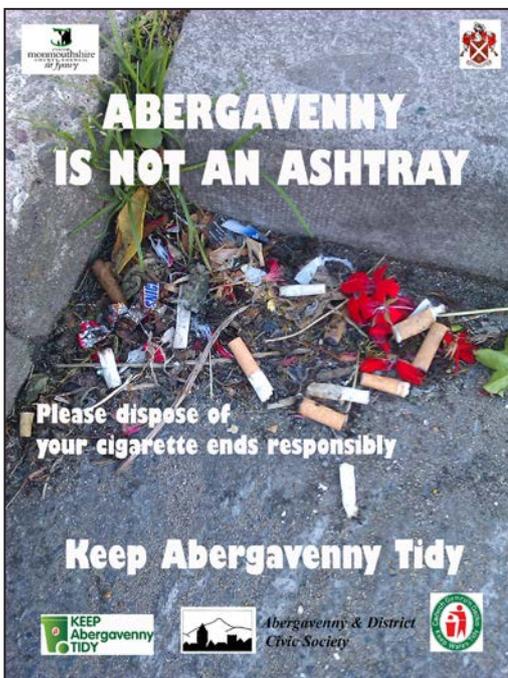
use of community labour and input. Originally care of green spaces was also a part of this group. The Society conducted an audit of Abergavenny's green spaces and a new group (Abergavenny Area Community Orchards and Gardens group) has taken over this aspect of the Civic Society's work.

### 2 PLANNING

The planning sub-group, which is currently an advisory group of eight members, has been involved in the Local Development Plan process and also provides observations on planning applications. Following a meeting of the county's civic societies a request was made to the council for a training session on planning procedures. Three members attended this. The group are currently in discussion with the council over their Development Control Customer Charter, as the local council has the worst performance in Wales in determining planning applications within eight weeks. Responses have been made by the group to the Welsh Government's Heritage and Planning Bills.

### 3 REGENERATION

This sub-group has worked closely with other town organisations and the County Council to develop strategies for the regeneration of Abergavenny. They fought a long fight against the closure of Abergavenny livestock market, and as part of this commissioned a conservation report on the Victorian abattoir buildings in a bid to have the buildings listed. The report was considered by



Cadw who also surveyed the site but who came to the conclusion that the buildings did not merit listing as they were of insufficient heritage significance and shortly afterwards the buildings were demolished.

In addition the sub-group has made a major contribution to a Council initiative, the Whole Place Plan. The group has also attended a seminar organised by Action for Market Towns (AMT) on building a Town Team. The CEO of AMT, Chris Wade, accepted an invitation to speak to Abergavenny Civic Society, and pointed out that the town had the ideas and enthusiasm to keep Abergavenny buoyant and vibrant it just needed ordering. The Civic Society consider that a Town Team and manager, independent of the County and Town Councils, could be the right vehicle to achieve this.

The Society are also working to develop a colour palette for the town, with the intention of using a discount from Dulux paint to colour the town buildings. It had been hoped that the Council's bid to the Welsh Government's Vibrant and Viable Places scheme might have helped realise the town team and town repaint. Unfortunately the Council was unsuccessful in their bid and other funding sources are now being investigated by the Society.

#### 4 'ABERGAVENNY IS NOT AN ASH TRAY'

Smoking related litter featured a lot in the Good, Bad & Ugly competition. Working with a number of partners a poster was circulated around the

town. Keep Wales Tidy provided free Stubbies and Ashcans which were available in many of the outlets displaying the poster. The campaign was launched during Keep Wales Tidy week with help from MCC, Abergavenny Town Council, Keep Wales Tidy, Community Police Team and the NHS Public Health team.

#### 5 EXPLORE ABERGAVENNY'S CHARACTER

When Abergavenny Civic Society was revitalised it was apparent that it needed a much better understanding of the distinctive character of the town against which planning proposals can be measured. The County Council had commissioned an appraisal of the central Conservation Area, (but it hadn't published it), but the character of the rest of the town remained unsurveyed. Sub-group members met with the Civic Trust of Wales to launch the urban characterisation project to develop a methodology for looking at and recording the character of towns in Wales. Urban characterisation aims to identify the historic and physical character of settlements that is fundamental to local distinctiveness and pride of place. The Civic Trust for Wales successfully obtained funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund to develop a toolkit to assist community groups conduct 'urban characterisation' studies similar to those prepared by Cadw experts at Aberdare, Denbigh and elsewhere. Abergavenny Civic Society, together with Newtown and Rhiwbina Civic Societies

have pioneered a methodology that is now available for use by other towns.

Suburban housing estates, byelaw terraces and the leafy residences of the better-off have features that give them individuality – the age and scale of the buildings, their arrangement and architectural details, materials used, trees and green spaces, walls and fences, focal points, outward views, and much more. Recording these characteristics, street-by-street, is not only useful for assessing proposals for change, suggesting features to be protected or echoed in sympathetic new development; the involvement of local residents as surveyors and informants opens eyes to what is good and bad about our surroundings and encourages civic pride and engagement. Explaining the differences between one part of the town and another also means studying old maps and other records; the scope for ongoing research is extensive. Opportunities for environmental improvement can also be pinpointed.

A pilot study of one Abergavenny road showed that within its half mile length three or four quite different 'character areas' could be described, ranging from the village-like mid 19th century housing to the low-density homes on the edge of the National Park. A public meeting attracted an audience of about sixty and recruited nearly twenty volunteers.

Since the first survey last year they have been reviewing and simplifying the methodology, and have continued to survey and characterise Abergavenny. Links to the project can be found on the Civic Trust for Wales website <http://www.civictrustwales.org>.

The Civic Trust's involvement has largely ended but the group continues with the aim of surveying the whole town and its neighbouring built-up areas. The County Council is assisting the study and the Abergavenny and District Civic Society hopes that official design guidance will be another outcome. This work is already increasing our expertise and helping us to respond to planning applications.

#### **6 RIVER GAVENNY AND 'GREEN CORRIDOR' PROJECT**

This project aims to improve the quality of the Gavenny as a tributary of the River Usk to allow salmon and seatrout migration. This will entail working with other partners to monitor the ecology of the river and to provide suitable fish passes at the existing weirs on the river. The group also has the ambitious vision of a green corridor linking the meadows (Castle Meadows with Swan Meadow, Gavenny Meadow) around Abergavenny and the river valley in the nearby community of Llantilio Pertholey.

#### **7 WELL-BEING**

This group focused on the well-being of visitors, residents and general issues that affected the town culture and wider being, for example they got involved in the campaign to save the funding for the local theatre.

#### **Additional work**

In addition to the project group, the society also runs regular monthly meetings and social events. They undertake regular fundraising ventures (they have got businesses to affiliate to the Civic Society for £20 a year and hold regular table top sales as part of the local community market). Information about the Society is regularly sent to the local paper who run their stories as they write draft articles for them. The Society have upgraded their paperwork such as membership forms, and got members using emails which makes running the Society simpler and cheaper. In addition they have gathered a panel of experts who are not necessarily members but who are willing to provide advice as and when necessary.

#### **Lessons learnt**

- Working collaboratively with groups means the council are generally more supportive. Additionally together there is more money to achieve projects. Abergavenny Civic Society have worked with: their local council Monmouthshire County Council, Abergavenny Town Council, Abergavenny Business Club, Keep Abergavenny Tidy, Abergavenny in Bloom, Friends of Bailey Park, Keep Wales Tidy, Wye & Usk Foundation, Transition Town, Community Policing Team, Civic Trust for Wales, Abergavenny Museum, 7 Corners.

- Taking the approach of being an 'honest broker' (rather than just being argumentative all the time) is far more successful. This has been achieved by being supportive of ideas, projects and schemes when things are good and providing well researched responses when needing to be critical.

- The reformed society has achieved things by being project driven rather than only a talking shop or a lecture society.

- Part of the society's success was due to serendipity. The reformed Civic Society took off at a time when the town needed a push. Interest in the Chamber of Trade was waning (although this has now been replaced) and there was a gap in the town and a number of active and enthusiastic people stepped into the gap. The Civic Society became the conduit for moving things along.

Further information:  
<http://www.monmouthshiregreenweb.co.uk/abergavennycivicsoc/index.html>

