

FRIENDS OF READING ABBEY ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING Saturday 24 October 2015

This year's AGM and Lecture drew a large audience which filled the Wroughton Room at the Berkshire Record Office.

Dr Peter Durrant, Chairman, welcomed everyone and gave the Secretary's Report outlining the Friends many activities during the past year. The report on Finance followed from the Treasurer, Iris Hunt.

Harriet Mahood from Reading University gave a fascinating and informative talk on Abbey Gatehouses, focussing on Reading's Abbey. Here is a reminder of the content:

Imagine yourself standing at the north end of the Market Place in Reading about 800 years ago. Look east, and you won't see a gap between the buildings and a distant view of the Forbury Gardens. Instead, rising up immediately in front of you will be the great bulk of the two-story Abbey gatehouse.

This was the entrance to the Abbey precinct, and through this gate passed all visitors to the Abbey, great and small. Substantial and imposing, it was built to impress. Once through it, you would be in the outer court of the Abbey, and straight ahead of you, some two hundred yards and more distant, would have stood the magnificent west front of King Henry's great Abbey.

This gatehouse was the starting point of Harriet Mahood's lecture at the Friends' AGM in October. Using examples from England and the continent, she showed how gatehouses played an important role in the relationship between the abbey and the outside world, acting both to separate the two worlds and to serve as a link between them. She described how gatehouses were often strategically placed, as at Reading, so that the visitor's first view through them was of the most striking elevation of the principal abbey buildings, usually the abbey church itself. She spoke about the role of the gatekeeper, not a mere lowly functionary but often a man of some standing in the abbey community (one even went on to become an abbot, though that *was* unusual).



Dr Peter Durrant, Harriet Mahood and Professor Brian Kemp

And she described how the gatehouse was (again as at Reading) often connected or closely linked to those abbey buildings that provided hospitality for visitors or accommodation for the poor. It was a fascinating introduction to an important feature of the medieval abbey that we often pass through in haste to reach the church and cloister. *Peter Durrant*