

A tour of Reading's Abbey Quarter



Compiled by



**Friends
of
Reading
Abbey**

Reading's Abbey Quarter is the area originally occupied by Reading Abbey, bounded by Blagrove Street in the West, Forbury Road in the North and East, and towards Kings Road in the South.

The principal area of the present day Abbey Ruins is currently closed to the public because of the poor condition of the structure.

Despite the closure of the Abbey Ruins however, it is possible to follow a route through various pathways which enable you to see much of the closed area. In addition to the Ruins themselves, there are several other Abbey buildings and structures within the Abbey Quarter, along with other items of interest from more recent times. This leaflet outlines a tour through the Abbey Quarter, which includes viewpoints for the Ruins and those other Abbey related structures and items of interest.

The tour will take about three quarters of an hour to complete. It can of course be joined at any point, and be walked in either direction.

So, join the tour now, and enjoy a stroll through the grounds of Reading's ancient Abbey.

THE ABBEY QUARTER

1. Start outside Reading Museum and Art Gallery in Blagrove Street. Go left, past the Town Hall building, whose facade, including the clock tower, was designed by Alfred Waterhouse during the 1870s. On the right you can see the statue of Queen Victoria, sculpted by George Blackall Simonds. Just before St Laurence's Church, turn left along a path which leads through to the churchyard. Immediately along this path, on the left, is the new memorial stone for the victims of a Second World War bombing raid. The **church of St Laurence** itself was founded in 1121 at the decision of the Abbot of Reading, as a church for the people of the town.
2. Halfway along the churchyard path, turn left to view the **Hospitium** (building for accommodating pilgrims and other guests) of **St John**, founded in 1189. At the other side of the Hospitium you can see the work "Adam, Libby and Karen" sculpted by Liz Mulchinock.
3. Return to the main churchyard path. Continuing along it, note the out-of-place looking structure in the churchyard to the right. The inscription on the tablet in front of it explains: "This tracery formed part of the west window of St Laurence's Church. It was dislodged during enemy action on February 10th 1943." Also, shortly before the end of the path to the right, see the memorial to Henry West, killed by a whirlwind at Reading Station on 24 March 1840.
4. Descend the steps at the end of the path, cross The Forbury and continue through the gateway into Forbury Gardens. Make your way to view the **Maiwand Lion**, sculpted by George Blackall Simonds in 1886, commemorating the war-dead of the Afghan Campaign 1879 – 1880.
5. Turn back towards the obelisk on The Forbury, exiting the Gardens via Victoria Gate. The obelisk is a memorial to those killed during the Great Wars of 1914–1918 and 1939–1945.
6. Cross the road (Abbots Walk) and then cross Forbury Square. Pass through the passage by Carluccio's Cafe, down several sets of steps to Abbey Square (though it is a road rather than a Square). Cross the road and small car-park, and go down some steep steps to the Holy Brook (NB Do not read this leaflet while descending the steps!). You are here at the back of Reading Central library. The Holy Brook flows under Central Reading, and is also open to view from the other side of the Central Library, and from just outside the Oracle Shopping Centre on Gun St. When the Abbey was in use, the Holy Brook powered the Abbey's Mill and acted as a means of drainage for the complex. Cross the bridge over the Holy Brook and follow the path to the left. It goes under one of the three arches of the **Abbey Mill Arches**. Pause to view this structure. The Abbey Mill continued in use after the Dissolution, up to 1959.



Tracery in St Laurence Churchyard



Abbey Mill Arches



Inner Gateway of Reading Abbey



St James's Church and Forbury Gardens



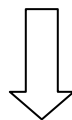
Robed Figure by Elisabeth Frink



Detail from the Inner Gateway

7. Follow the path back across the Holy Brook and up a slope (by The Blade office block) to reach Abbey Street. Turn left and up the hill, past Abbots House, to the **Inner Gateway** of Reading Abbey. The Inner Gateway formed part of the boundary between the parts of the Abbey open to the public (on the Forbury Gardens side), and the monks' residential areas. During the 18th century the Abbey School for Girls was set up in the Gateway, where the novelist Jane Austen was a pupil. The Gateway suffered a partial collapse during a storm in 1861 and was rebuilt by Sir George Gilbert Scott.
8. Go through the gateway and turn right into Abbots Walk. After 20 metres you will reach the site of the west front of the Abbey Church. From here on you will be walking along the former south aisle of the church, towards the south transept. At the end of the path you can see the remains of **the transept's two eastern chapels**.
9. The **church of St James** is to your left. To visit it, turn back a few steps, and turn right along the path. It was designed by A.W.N.Pugin in 1840. St James's presbytery and school occupy part of the North Transept and crossing of the original Abbey Church. The church's baptismal font is formed from a capital of one of the Abbey's pillars, dug up during excavations at the time of the church's construction. There are exposed remains from the transept on the site. The church has an interpretation board outside, and a history of the Abbey inside.
10. Returning to Abbots Walk, turn right, then left after 10m, between some townhouses and an office block (going past a "Private" sign) onto a footpath. Enter a small garden/square from where you can view the **central parts of the Abbey Ruins** (though partly obscured by a yew tree), primarily the Chapter House (the Abbey's meeting room). On the grass you can see a sculpture, "**Robed Figure**" by Elisabeth Frink. This sculpture originated as part of a three-piece set of statuary called "the Martyrs at Dorchester", where the original is still on display.
11. Continue to the other end of the square and descend the steep flight of steps (NB Do not read this leaflet while descending the steps!). On the left of the steps is the wall of the Abbey refectory, covered thickly by the foliage of climbing plants. At the bottom, on the grass mound to the left is a work (un-named) by Danish sculptor Jens-Flemming Sørensen. Continue along the path to Chestnut Walk and view the **south parts of the Ruins**, where the Abbey's Dormitory and *necessarium* were located.
12. The River Kennet runs on the south side of Chestnut Walk, and the Holy Brook joins it in this area. The Abbey's main wharf was located here. On the north side is the now closed Reading Gaol, the subject of the famous **Ballad by Oscar Wilde**, who was imprisoned here from 1895 – 1897. There is a series of memorials to Oscar Wilde along Chestnut Walk, including the east entrance gates, the text "Oh beautiful world" set into the railings, red love seats and a prison style bench.

END OF THE ABBEY QUARTER TOUR



**Please note, you can see some of the magnificent cloister capitals
on display in Reading Museum in Blagrove Street.**

Refreshments: There is a cafe in the Museum at the start of the tour. In Forbury Gardens, close to the Inner Gateway, a kiosk serves light refreshments. There are many other cafes and restaurants close by in the centre of Reading.

Wheelchair access: To avoid the steps from St Laurence churchyard path to The Forbury, return to Town Hall Square and go round St Laurence's church to reach The Forbury. To avoid the sets of steps from Forbury Square to Abbey Square and the Holy Brook, go along Abbots Walk, through the Inner Gateway, down Abbey Street, and turn right at the bottom of the hill, to visit the Abbey Mill. To avoid the steps from the 'Robed Figure' garden to Chestnut Walk, return to the Inner Gateway, then go down Abbey Street, after passing Abbots House, turn left into Chestnut Walk.

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Reading Abbey

Founded in 1121 by King Henry I

Dissolved in 1539 under King Henry VIII

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Produced by The Friends of Reading Abbey, whose aims are to promote awareness of its importance, and understanding of its history and architecture.

If you have enjoyed this tour, you may like to become a Friend of Reading Abbey – new Friends are very welcome.

Details for membership can be found on this website.