



Friends of Reading Abbey

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The Lord Lieutenant of Berkshire
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The Right Reverend the Bishop of Reading
The Abbot of Douai
The MP for Reading East
The MP for Reading West
The Vice-Chancellor, Reading University

President:
Prof. Brian Kemp

Vice Presidents:
Mrs Janet Bond; Leslie Cram esq

Christelle Beaupoux
Abbey Ruins Project Manager
Reading Borough Council

7 February 2014

Dear Christelle

Reading Abbey Revealed - Heritage Lottery Fund Bid

The Friends of Reading Abbey are pleased to support the Borough Council's application to the HLF for regional-level grant funding to restore and interpret the Reading Abbey ruins in the context of the Abbey Quarter vision in Reading.

The Friends of Reading Abbey was founded to promote awareness of the Abbey's importance, to encourage interest in and understanding of its history and architecture, and to support the preservation of its ruins. The Friends were actively involved in the last major conservation of the Abbey Ruins, in the late-1980s, and the promotion of the Ruins in the Reading heritage quarter and the Kennet Riverside walk, including holding the "Shakespeare in the Abbey Ruins" annual event until 2008. Following the Council's decision in 2008, in the light of public safety concerns arising from the structural deterioration of the Abbey Ruins, to stop public access to the Ruins and to close the heritage walk from the Forbury Gardens to Chestnut Walk along the Kennet riverside, the Friends have been actively working with the Council to raise funds to conserve the Ruins, to restore the Abbey Gateway, and allow public access to the site once more. We have been members of the Council's Abbey Quarter Board since 2009.

Reading Abbey was one of the six leading Benedictine (Cluniac) monastic foundations in England. It was founded on a lavish scale as a royal abbey by King Henry 1 in 1121, and continued to be richly endowed until its dissolution in 1539. Henry 1 was buried in his Abbey, in 1136, and over the years the Abbey became a royal mausoleum. The Abbey hosted a number of important royal and national events, including John of Gaunt's marriage, and two Parliaments in 1453 and 1464. The presence of the Abbey was integral to the growth and development of medieval Reading, which is still reflected in the street pattern of the town centre.

The Abbey - dedicated to St Mary, St John the Evangelist and St James the Great - held a relic hand of the St James the apostle, and became both a centre of pilgrimage in its own right and the starting point of one of the *caminos* to Santiago de Compostela. The pilgrim shell was featured in the Abbey crest, and continues in the crest of the University of Reading. This linked Reading into an international network of devotional travel and communication, to the commercial benefit of both town and Abbey.

The Abbey was also a major Romanesque building in its own right, comparable with Peterborough cathedral, and the Abbey church and buildings would have dominated the Reading townscape in a way which is nowadays very difficult to comprehend. Romanesque capitals and carvings from the Abbey, of national importance, are on display at Reading Museum. It was a significant centre of religious learning and a major centre of the pre-reformation Catholic church in England. The famous round, *Sumer is icumen in*, now held and displayed as one of the

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collection highlights by the British Library, was written down by monks of Reading in the thirteenth century.

This prominence was lost with the dissolution of the Abbey in 1539, and the subsequent mistreatment of the Abbey ruins. Nevertheless, Reading is a town that was made by the Abbey, in terms of shape, layout, municipal governance, prosperity and built environment.

The Friends want to secure the repair of the Abbey Gateway, and the consolidation to the remaining Abbey Ruins so that they can be opened again to local people to visit and enjoy as the centre of a heritage quarter which promotes the history of Reading, links the town centre through the recently-restored Forbury Gardens with the Kennet riverside, and can be used again as the venue for summer theatre in the Ruins, and events associated with the Forbury Gardens and the River Kennet (including the annual June Waterfest). This is of great importance in making Reading an attractive place to live, work or visit, and significant in terms of promoting civic pride in and awareness of the importance of Reading as a historic town of national and international significance.

As part of our commitment to the current Heritage Lottery Fund bid, the Chairman and Secretary of the Friends meet regularly with the Council's Project Team to help promote the bid and raise local awareness of the Abbey Quarter vision. In this regard we:

- have updated and re-printed our promotional leaflet - now available at the Town Hall and Museum, Central Library, Hexagon Theatre, Civic Offices, County Record Office, and St James's Church
- have set up a new promotional display on the Abbey which includes explanation boards and a children's heritage trail -and promoted in the annual Friends public garden party
- have developed an Abbey Quarter tour to let people see as much of the Ruins as possible
- are working with the Project Team to identify up to six dates each year when the Abbey Ruins can be opened for public visit, when we will join with the Council to host the inspections and to provide guided tours; these occasions may be linked to key dates in the Abbey's history (such as the arrival of the first monks, or the dissolution), as well as Council and national events such as Waterfest and the Heritage Open Days
- are updating our website, to establish links both to the Council's Abbey Quarter web page and to other key sites and sources of information
- are working with St James's Church, and with the two other local Friends Groups (for Reading Museum, and Caversham Court Gardens) to promote local awareness of the Abbey project and more generally the role of the Abbey in local history
- will be reviewing and updating the publications about the Abbey, and producing a new information leaflet and guide book
- will work with the Council on new interpretation panels, and provide text and illustrations

In summary, we believe that the Council's public survey undertaken in support of the current heritage lottery funding bid will demonstrate strongly that the people of Reading know, like and miss their Abbey, and there is an undercurrent of disquiet about its current state, and the restrictions of access to it. The Abbey - the historic centre of Reading - is one area of Reading that is constant in fast-changing town. It gives a sense of stability which is not always evident elsewhere in the town centre, and is important because of this. At present the Abbey Ruins are an inaccessible hole in the urban fabric of the town centre. This is a dereliction of duty to a heritage site of local, national and international importance.

The Friends are becoming increasingly concerned at the prospect of the Ruins still being inaccessible for its 900th anniversary, in 2021. We hope that the Heritage Lottery Fund will recognise and share our appreciation of the value of the Abbey and the significance of the project to the town, and acknowledge the importance of the bid by funding it in full.

Yours sincerely

Chairman

Secretary