

Next Step in Reading Abbey Quarter Project Unveiled

04/12/2014

Reading Borough Council Press Release

NEW educational activities for schools, public events and improved signage are all set to be developed as the next step in the Council's plans to breathe new life into Reading's historic Abbey Quarter is taken.

The work all forms part of the Council's 'Reading Abbey Revealed' project, which aims to open up access for residents and visitors alike to Reading's most historic and treasured heritage site.

Following a bidding process, the Council has now appointed independent specialists to develop educational activities and interpretation about the historic buildings in and around the Abbey Quarter.

It follows the announcement in June that the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) had given Reading Borough Council a "first round pass" to its 'Reading Abbey Revealed' project.

Paul Gittings, Lead Councillor for Culture, Sport and Consumer Protection said:

"It is fantastic to see that work is gathering pace to ensure the long-term future of Reading's historic Abbey.

"The generous development grant from the HLF of up to £61,400 means the Council can now finalise its plans to involve residents and interpret the site for visitors, so that we can apply for round two funding next year."

Tony Page, Lead Councillor for Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport, said:

"We are lucky to have a site of such historical significance right in the heart of Reading. As John Mullaney says in his very recent book about Reading's Abbey Quarter, 'The Abbey Quarter is a time capsule. Within its precinct there lies a thousand-year-old story of the town of Reading and its people. Its buildings and open spaces tell a tale of good times and bad times, of hope and despair, of war and peace.'

"Our plan is about opening up the Abbey Quarter so that residents, visitors and future generations can appreciate and enjoy it. It's good to see the project moving forward, and I look forward to the next landmark when we submit the full grant application to HLF in September and, hopefully, receive positive news on this bid.

"The progress with our bid only highlights the very regrettable and continuing delay by the Ministry of Justice in announcing any timetable for disposing of the prison. This delay is becoming quite intolerable and unacceptable."

The Council's successful 'first round pass' meant that in September, the Council received authorisation from the HLF to start work on developing more detailed plans for the project, including the site-wide interpretation of the Abbey Quarter and a programme of events and activities, as well as extensive conservation work on the Abbey Ruins and Gateway.

In addition, during October, work to install a temporary scaffolding roof on the Abbey Gateway was completed.

This followed a condition survey on the building last year, funded by a grant from English Heritage, which found that the current roof was no longer weather-tight.

The temporary roof sits on top of the current roof and is not visible from ground level. This will allow the building to dry out and prevent any further damage to the Abbey Gate until money is secured for permanent repairs.

These next steps build on the extremely successful public consultation held in January this year which received 1156 responses and showed overwhelming support for the project.

There will now be a wider consultation with stakeholders and the public to develop the plans for educational activities and sources of information and interpretation, which will form part of the round two application that will be submitted to the HLF in September 2015.

If the project wins final acceptance from the HLF, it could qualify for the full grant amount of around £1.7 million.

Many of the Abbey Quarter's historic features are recognised as having national and local importance, being designated as part of a Scheduled Ancient Monument and Listed Buildings. Reading Museum's significant collections relating to the Abbey are of international importance and both reflect Reading's long history of global links.

The main conservation priorities are the Abbey Ruins and the Abbey Gateway, both are Scheduled Ancient Monuments and on the English Heritage 'Heritage at Risk Register'. Separate funding has already improved Town Hall Square in 2013 and has been secured to restore St Laurence's churchyard wall during 2014-15.

The project to conserve the Abbey was initiated after public access to the Ruins was closed in summer 2009 after a condition survey highlighted the 'poor and rapidly deteriorating condition of the walls'.

Working with English Heritage, Reading Borough Council has already completed comprehensive condition surveys and investigations of the Abbey Ruins and Abbey Gate. The condition surveys have established a detailed schedule of repairs and a cost plan which is included in the Council's Heritage Lottery funding bid.

As part of creating a wider strategic framework for Reading's heritage, the Council has prepared a draft Heritage Statement. This will provide initial input in the development of the heritage section in the Cultural and Heritage Strategy that the Council will be publishing for consultation during 2015.

You can find out more about the Abbey Quarter project on the Reading Museum website, where you can also download the latest edition of the Abbey Quarter newsletter, at <http://www.readingmuseum.org.uk/get-involved/projects-consultation/abbey-quarter/>

and on the Abbey Quarter Facebook page www.facebook.com/ReadingAbbeyQuarter

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Notes for Editors:

The Abbey Quarter:

Reading's Abbey Quarter has been the traditional civic and ceremonial heart of the county town of Royal Berkshire since the 12th century. The Quarter is defined by the medieval streets and rivers that outline the precinct of Reading Abbey. This area contains the substantial standing remains and buried archaeology of Reading Abbey, telling its story from the foundation by Henry I in 1121 to its dissolution by Henry VIII in 1539.

The Quarter shows evidence of all periods since the Abbey's dissolution: a royal residence, civil war defences, Jane Austen's school, the impressive municipal buildings, Victorian public gardens and Oscar Wilde's infamous Reading Gaol. There are buildings by famous architects including Sir John Soane, A.W.N. Pugin, Alfred Waterhouse and Sir George Gilbert Scott. Significant public sculpture within the Quarter includes Simonds' Maiwand Lion and statue of Queen Victoria, and contemporary artworks such as the Oscar Wilde Memorial Walk.

Reading Museum is also located within the Quarter and has important collections relating to the heritage of Reading and the Quarter, particularly Reading Abbey and later Victorian industrial heritage.

The current Abbey precinct area has piecemeal protection under several local and national designations and policies. Key parts of the site are a Scheduled Ancient Monument, and as such are protected under the provisions of the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act 1979; the Abbey Ruins and the Abbey Gate are also Grade I listed.

HLF initial support, also known as a first-round pass, means the project meets HLF criteria for funding and HLF believes the project has potential to deliver high-quality benefits and value for Lottery money. The application was in competition with other supportable projects, so a first-round pass is an endorsement of outline proposals. Having been awarded a first-round pass, the project now has up to two years to submit fully developed proposals to compete for a firm award.

On occasion, an applicant with a first-round pass will also be awarded development funding towards the development of their scheme.

Using money raised through the National Lottery, the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) aims to make a lasting difference for heritage, people and communities across the UK and help build a resilient heritage economy. From museums, parks and historic places to archaeology, natural

environment and cultural traditions, it invests in every part of our diverse heritage. HLF has supported over 36,000 projects with more than £6bn across the UK. www.hlf.org.uk

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